2. Post-Gender Comedy at the White House Correspondents’ Dinner

INTRODUCTION

Debates about how well gender and politics play together have appeared and continue to appear in the public discussion in the United States, and they are part of the history of the White House Correspondents’ Association (WHCA) as well. The Association’s dinner, its yearly networking event, started by hosting 50 men to honor new political correspondents in 1921. Although female political journalists were not unheard of, this male-dominated field was slow to open its doors. Women have been allowed to participate in the event only since 1962, after White House reporter Helen Thomas protested the exclusive attitude and allegedly asked John F. Kennedy to pressure the association. (Parsons & Condon, 2018; Waisanen, 2015, p. 342; Lightman, 2013, July 20; Lutes, 2006.)

Besides journalism, entertainment has been part of the event since the beginning. Although women have always been some of the performers, they have remained at the margins in this role as well. Since 1983, a comedian has typically hosted the dinner. So far, we have seen 22 male comedians, some of them appearing twice and Jay Leno four times, and 5 female comedians – Paula Poundstone, Elayne Boosler, Wanda Sykes, Cecily Strong, and Michelle Wolf. Due to these unbalanced numbers, an invitation for a woman host always seems political. Political impression is highlighted after Wolf’s controversial performance in 2018
resulted in WHCA’s breaking with tradition and inviting a (male) biographer instead of a comedian to host in 2019.

Margaret Talev, Senior White House Correspondent, who selected the entertainer for 2018, argued that she chose Michelle Wolf because she is a rising star and a woman, and the past couple of years have been important for women in the US (CNN, 2018, April 29). The choice was a reaction to the #MeToo movement against sexual harassment, which has dominated media and public discussions since 2017. Donald Trump’s presidency has also inspired gendered politics. Trump often uses disrespectful and sexist language about women and speaks for conservative gender roles and attitudes. Consequently, his presidency has been shadowed by problematic relationships with many women (voters). For example, the Women’s March (2017, 2018 and 2019) was created to criticize unequal gender politics and values.

At the same time, skeptical attitudes towards female politicians have prevailed. When Hillary Clinton ran against Trump, some opined that a woman cannot be the President of the United States, and thus assuming essential distinctions between female and male politicians. At the 2018 WHCA dinner, this assumption took another form. Several journalists and members of public criticized Michelle Wolf’s monologue for her aggressive style in discussing women in Trump’s administration. As a woman criticizing other women, she was considered too mean, unfair, and disloyal to her gender.

These responses show that Wolf’s performance challenged the cultural and gendered expectations related to politics and political comedy, which, due to their aggressive and critical nature, are often seen as male spaces. By adopting similar outspoken strategies, Wolf challenged the common understanding of what a female comedian and political satirist can and cannot do. This practice, according to Eric Shouse and Patrice Oppliger (2012), can introduce new possibilities of “post-gender” comedy. For them, strategies of being arrogant, vulgar, and aggressive (like many male comedians) break down the assumed ideals and marginalized category of “women’s comedy”. In this chapter, by looking at the gendered practices of the WHCA dinner hosting, I further explore the possibilities and limitations of post-gender comedy as a concept and a practice.
Post-gender, as a concept, is one of the so-called post-theories within critical theory. Ralina L. Joseph argues that many post-theories were intended to shift the focus of thought beyond typical analytical categories, such as gender or race. However, the use of the suffixed term merely emphasizes it, and sometimes, by focusing on the “post”, seeking to remove the topic from view, the discussion only manages to make it a more visible, operative and functional concept. (Joseph, 2009, pp. 239, 248.) By using the WHCA dinner as a case study I approach the dimensions of post-gender – what it could mean, and what role gender does or does not play in this context.

In this regard, the WHCA dinner is an interesting event because of its historical gendered practices, and because of its public use of stand-up comedy for the evening’s entertainment. Stand-up is a part of popular culture in which gender is imagined, performed, and represented. Michelle Wolf’s monologue at the 2018 WHCA dinner prompted varied responses, and has created an interesting window into our cultural attitudes about gender because all shifts in the popular culture make changing cultural dynamics visible. In order to discuss the dimensions of post-gender, I study Wolf’s comedy routine and Twitter reactions to this performance. In addition, I make some comparisons to other women hosts at the earlier WHCA dinners.

Within this study, Twitter represents the public responses to Wolf’s performance. I analyze the Twitter discussion that took place on the day of the event and the following 10 days (hashtags #WHCD and #CorrespondentsDinner from April 28 to May 8, 2018). During this time, there were thousands of tweets, but only a small portion of those tweets focused on the gender perspective. Most of the tweets discussed the role of comedy in the event, what is expected of the comedian, and on the bipartisan politics and bipartisan interpretations of her comedy. A minority of tweets had a gendered perspective, and in this study, the gendered material consists of 250 partially anonymized tweets (the analysis avoids usernames and links to the tweets, but contains quotes). Data was analyzed with content analysis. Based on the result that the overwhelming majority of tweets did not bring up gender as an important factor, it could be argued that we are, indeed, entering the age of post-gender comedy, in which the defining factor of a comedian is not their gender but what they say. However, after a closer look at the tweets that explicitly mention gender, post-gender as a cultural practice is also challenged. In my analysis, I bring forward three main themes visible in the tweets – arguments about “girl power”, the aggressive style of roasting, and debates on
whether a woman can criticize other women. Before turning to these themes, I discuss the context of the WHCA’s use of comedy.

CULTURAL ASSUMPTIONS ABOUT WOMEN IN POLITICAL COMEDY

The WHCA dinners celebrate (political) journalism and the freedom of the press, but the event has always included entertainment as well. In the early years, the entertainers were singers, variety show stars, and actors. Since the mid-1980s, the role of popular culture has increased and the entertainers tend to be stand-up comedians from late-night comedy, political impersonators, and sitcom stars. (Parsons & Condon, 2018; Rossing, 2017, pp. 169-170.) The contemporary entertainers represent American political comedy, which have shifted the event towards satire and even self-irony. This is visible in the President’s role as well. Even in the early years, Presidents used lighter tones in their speeches at the event, but since John F. Kennedy and Lyndon B. Johnson invested in humorous presentations, the comedic approaches have become expected even from the Presidents (Waisanen, 2015, pp. 336-343). With comedians, the event is a roast, which typically targets the President and his administration, other well-known political figures, media and journalists.

Roasting is an aggressive form of stand-up comedy. It is a performative event of public mockery of a well-known person. The insulting jokes offer criticism and ridicule, yet often the jokes are good-natured and not necessarily meant to harm the target, who is often present (Rossing, 2017, p. 168, Ritchie, 2014, pp. 34-39). Although roasting is its own performative genre, it has strong connections to satire where mockery and attack are present. Lisa Colletta writes that satire “exposes human vices and folly to scorn and ridicule, and its weapons are the comedic strategies of parody and burlesque: inversion, exaggeration, contradiction, incongruity, and juxtaposition.” She also adds irony to the list, because irony works on what is said versus what is meant. (Colletta, 2014, pp. 209, 214, 218.) Political satire thus mocks the absurdities of the political field, and it aims to problematize our perceptions by presenting well-known issues from a new perspective. Sean Zwagerman (2014, pp. 177-179) sees this potential for problematizing as a sign of transformative humor in which the audience is invited – through incongruity, word play, multiple meanings – to take a critical attitude through the distance created by the humor.
Thus, as part of the WHCA’s roasting, satire and irony aim to expose inconsistencies within politics and political journalism.

Because political comedy is an aggressive form of comedy, it has been assumed to suit male comedians better (e.g., Sherine, 2016, August 25). Within the American comedy industry women have been welcome to play comedic roles in romantic comedies or sitcoms, and after more women started to wrote their own material and make headlines in the later part of the 20th century, women were expected to joke about “women’s issues”. As female comedians have gained more visibility, they have started to step outside their expected roles. (Mizejewski, 2014, pp. 2, 19-21.) This includes satire, which, as Colletta argues, suits women well because they have a long tradition of wanting to destabilize existing (gendered) societal structures. Thus, their satire about “traditional and conventional ways of knowing and understanding the world” offer great possibilities for critical and comedic distance. (Colletta 2014, p. 209.)

Recent studies thus oppose the presumed masculine and feminine spheres of comedy. Contemporary scholars argue that while it is important to examine differences and similarities within comedic styles between comedians, gender is not a functional explanatory factor or category because it is not only part of patriarchal culture, but also an overgeneralizing, simplifying and essentializing category (Zwagerman, 2014, p. 173; Shouse & Oppinger, 2012, pp. 206-207; Gilbert, 2004, pp. 170-172). This attitude suggests that there might be room, or at least a desire, for post-gender comedy.

The possibility of post-gender comedy, however, is not only related to comedy practices, but to audiences, social values and attitudes. In stand-up comedy, and roasting in particular, the response of the live audience is a crucial part of the performance, but the WHCA dinner crowd is not a typical stand-up audience. Klaus Dodds and Philip Kirby (2013, pp. 46-56) argue, based on Stephen Colbert’s controversial roasting of the President Bush in 2006, that the WHCA dinner is prone to non-laughter, when laughter is expected but the performance fails to be funny due to the social context. Thus, when humor gets too pointed or critical at the WHCA dinner, the comedy fails to reach its live audience, because these people belong to Washington’s inner circle, and as such, targets of the roast.
In Michelle Wolf’s case, the C-SPAN recording reveals that part of the dinner crowd laughed but the other part did not (Wolf, 2018, April 28). These cases of non-laughter were reflected in media responses where several journalists and news outlets argued that the WHCA roasting is supposed to be gentle and good-natured, and Wolf’s aggressive style did a disservice to the dinner’s main goal to honor scholarship and advances in journalism (e.g. Geier, 2018, April 29; Griffiths & Calderone, 2018, April 29). This brings up how roasting and comedic tones in the WHCA dinner are always balancing between expectations and implementation, between mockery and respectful treatment (e.g. Rossing, 2017, pp. 175-176; Waisanen, 2015, p. 352).

The controversial reception caused the WHCA to release a statement, which further highlighted the interpretations of the roast as too mean and aggressive: “Last night’s program was meant to offer a unifying message about our common commitment to a vigorous and free press while honoring civility, great reporting and scholarship winners, not to divide people. Unfortunately, the entertainer’s monologue was not in the spirit of that mission.” (WHCA, 2018, April 29.) However, there is another audience, the American public, who can follow the event through media, and these audiences, too, had conflicting views on Wolf’s show. The following analysis focuses on the (post-)gender perspective of these responses.

**GENDER CATEGORIES AND POST-GENDER COMEDY**

In discussing post-gender, several scholars have included or hinted at a desire to deconstruct gender distinctions, even to the point where gender no longer matters. In these cases, the suffix refers to moving beyond existing sex/gender categories. For Lucy Nicholas (2014, 2-3), for example, post-gender is an imagined future where essential and oppositional gender binaries and hierarchies no longer define our experiences, but there are other ways of being, relating to others, and sharing norms. Possibilities for post-gender existence have been sought from unstable and non-binary gender categories, queer perspectives, androgynes, and post-human existence, such as cyborgs (e.g. Nicholas, 2014; Deutscher, 1997, p. 13; Haraway, 1991; Butler, 1990). As a desire to remove gender distinctions, post-gender comedy could eliminate gender as an important element within comedy, including the
gender of the comedians, their performances (style, and content), and reception of the comedy.

This is what some (female) comedians at the WHCA dinner have asked for. For example, Paula Poundstone, who was the first woman to host the dinner during the George H.W. Bush administration in 1992, refuses to see her monologue as part of gender politics. Instead, she argues she was performing comedy in what happened to be a male-dominated field. (Kahn, 2015, April 27.) There is no recording of her monologue, but her overall style supports her statement. Poundstone is known for satirical political and social commentary, delivered through a playful, mischievous, and gentle style. Her on-stage presence does not underline gender; instead, it includes some androgynous elements. (E.g. Gilbert, 2004, pp. 98-99; Lavin, 2004, pp. 87, 92-94.)

Poundstone, thus, actively uses post-gender strategies in her comedy – she desires to step outside gender categories. She is not alone in her emphasis on non-gender narratives. A year later, during the first year of Bill Clinton’s presidency, Elayne Boosler took the stage, and she too refused to be treated as a female comedian, but as a comedian who does the job. She sees this as a way of refusing to marginalize herself. (Kahn, 2015, April 27.) Thus, both Boosler and Poundstone reject the marginalized category of “women’s comedy”, which assumes opposition to “mainstream” comedy.

Compared to Poundstone’s androgynous strategy, Boosler uses the observational style to create a sense of critical distance (Gilbert, 2004, p. 125). At the WHCA dinner, a big part of her routine focused on sex scandals, sexual harassment, and sex education, which could be narrated from an openly gendered position. Yet her reporting style lacked any use of personal experiences and kept the discussion on a general level. Instead of focusing on individuals or even any gender, she criticized the American public for their endless fascination on other people’s sex lives. (Boosler, 1993, May 1.) Thus, her strategy to step out of gender position is to aim for a sense of “objectivity”, which deals with her style, not so much with herself and her embodied presence as a woman.

Both Poundstone’s and Boosler’s strategies for working in a male-dominated field draw attention away from their gender in order to create professional identities that highlight individual stories of post-gender desires. Yet, neither of them were completely able to
escape from gendered interpretations. Poundstone, for example, was disappointed to note that after her performance at the WHCA, news outlets focused more on what she had worn (a white tuxedo) than what she had said, and she saw this treatment as a gendered practice (Kahn, 2015, April 27). Additionally, because it took 16 years before another woman was invited to host the dinner, and due to the small number of female hosts, their marginalized positions as hosts are constantly brought to the attention of the audience. Thus, although Poundstone and Boosler use their performance styles to create individual narratives of comedians rising above gender categories, they ultimately fail to reach these goals because the audience still reads their performances in the gendered context. This brings to mind Joseph’s (2009, pp. 249-250) critique on post-gender: individual post-gender narratives are often identity strategies, which do not reflect the gendered perspectives of the wider social context.

Besides being too idealistic, the concept of post-gender has also been criticized from the potential desire to deconstruct all sex/gender categories. According to this criticism, gender is an existing identity and social category, and its denial would do a disservice to understanding societal tensions (Deutscher, 1997, pp. 11, 13). In the 21st century, when women have a somewhat stronger footing in the comedy industry, the WCHA comedians Wanda Sykes (2009), Cecily Strong (2015), and Michelle Wolf (2018) have all openly acknowledged that they speak as women (and feminists). For Sykes, her gender and sexuality add to her critique of the white gaze on African Americans (Mizejewski, 2014, pp. 155-158, 177-179). Strong, on her part, acknowledged that she was younger than most hosts, and a woman, and says she is glad that they asked a woman even though she was not going there to make big statements (Johnson, 2015, April 20; Rahman, 2015, April 23). Wolf, similarly, is comfortable with the term feminist and often uses gendered expectations and hypocrisy as part of her routine. At the WHCA’s dinner, Wolf took the stage as a woman. She said, “It’s 2018, and I am a woman, so you can’t shut me up”, and later on stated that the MeToo campaign “is probably the reason I’m here.” (Wolf, 2018, April 28.)

These women, instead of asking for a non-gender response, emphasize that they are speaking from the position of a woman. Gilbert argues that because stand-up comedy has been a male-dominated field for so long in the United States, women continue performing from a marginal position. This position, however, does not reduce their comedy to a marginalized category of “women’s comedy”, but instead provides a powerful rhetorical
position from which to criticize and deconstruct society and culture. (Gilbert, 2004, pp. xv, 173.) Sykes, Strong, and Wolf, who make their gender part of their comedy, use this gender-identity strategy. Wolf emphasizes this perspective further by addressing women in the audience as her main audience, as part of “us”. She warns women in the audience “Fox News is here. So, you know what that means, ladies: Cover your drinks. Seriously.” And she positions herself as a representative of women by asking “What would I do without Megyn Kelly? You know, probably be more proud of women.” (Wolf, 2018, April 28.) These rhetorical choices emphasize her gender identity, the position from which she sees the world.

On Twitter, part of the audience responded to this gender-identity question. This was one of the three main themes dealing with gender aspects of Wolf’s performance. Most of these responses were positive and supportive of the comedian. They saw Michelle Wolf as a feminist force or a representative of “girl power”. These tweets called her “a true model and inspiration for women” and “beyond awesome”, or were supportive, with such phrases as “you go girl”, “women need your voice”, and “I see you girl!” For many, Wolf’s comedy and the invitation to host were a positive sign that women are represented in the fields of popular culture, political comedy, and public discussion. Most of the tweets taking this stance saw Wolf as representing girl power and/or feminism, and thus being empowering to the audience. Her performance was also interpreted as a sign of women’s resistance to current policies and politics in the US, and as a way to break into the “boys only club”.

Both Wolf and the tweets supporting her feminist approach highlight that, by taking the stage, Wolf (and women) took rhetorical power. For these same reasons, women exercising control in a public arena can meet resistance. Although Wolf’s supporters saw her embrace of authority as a positive issue, there was also a reactionary side. Other tweets displayed Wolf in a negative light as an angry feminist. For them, her identity represented a threat, highlighted in a tweet arguing “I wonder how much she was paid to speak at the #WHCD... And how much you have had to pay to keep women from speaking again?” In these tweets, too, gender remains an important identity category: whereas supportive messages saw the performance as a sign of inclusive cultural practices, the negative tweets opposed this inclusion.
It is clear that the WHCA’s dinner performances have not diminished gender distinctions. In the 1990s, women tended to rebel against these existing categories, and in the 21\textsuperscript{st} century women performers have more openly embraced gender as part of their identity as comedians. Most importantly, all the female hosts have been recognized in public as belonging to a different category than male hosts. Consequently, post-gender comedy is not able to (nor does not necessarily want to) stop gender mattering or making a difference. However, this does not mean that there could not be such a thing as post-gender comedy. Instead of looking at the sex/gender of the performer, we need to look post-gender tendencies regarding the style and content of their comedy. In this interpretation, “post” would not try to hide gender from view, but to present it in another way.

**RESISTING GENDERED COMEDY STYLE**

Another central gender-related theme in the analyzed tweets was that aggressive roasting is culturally more acceptable from a male comedian, and that a female comedian is out-of-line and out-of-character when she acts mean. In these tweets, the problem appeared to be that it was a *woman* who was mean and vulgar, instead of being classy and well-behaved lady. Wolf was described as “rude, crude, and socially unacceptable” and a “disgusting, distasteful, foul, vile” woman. These descriptions were seen to break the expected behavior, and some saw it as sign either of immaturity or being poorly brought up. For example, she was compared to mean girls in high school, and someone argued that Wolf’s performance “shows what little class, dignity & respect” she was raised with.

This kind of criticism is not new. Women who adopt aggressive, vulgar, or cruel styles are sometimes interpreted as unfunny, unfeminine, or acting-male, because they have to deal with cultural assumptions that aggressive comedy is masculine. Politics and political humor are both seen to work in a male space because of their aggressive and power-wrestling nature. Thus, raunchiness and off-color language are often understood as male privilege, and women are expected to avoid antagonistic or overly forward styles in their comedy. (Graban, 2014, pp. 157-158; Mizejewski, 2014, pp. 17-18; Shouse & Oppliger, 2012, p. 205.) Wolf, however, has never attempted to conform to these expectations. In her work, including an HBO special that was ironically named “Nice Lady” (2017), her jokes for *Late Night with Seth Meyers* and her role as a correspondent in *The Daily Show with Trevor*
Noah emphasize her controversial and aggressive style of (political) commentary. Even before the WHCA dinner, she was known from her direct, aggressive and even hostile jokes, all while she embraces her gender-identity. As Gilbert (2004, p. 173) argues, when a woman does aggressive stand-up comedy, she is not being “male”, instead she is questioning the cultural assumption that aggressive humor is inherently male.

By challenging the assumption of how women should perform, Wolf shows that post-gender might have more potential when discussing style, instead of sex/gender definitions. Then, the focus is turned towards cultural practices and representations where post-gender does not hide gender as an identity category but refers to breaking down cultural hierarchies related to gender. Thus post-gender practices can refuse to differentiate between marginalized “women’s comedy” and (male) “mainstream” comedy. Here, “post” claims that gender should not define the content and style of performed comedy, even as it continues to recognize “gender” as a social category.

Wolf is not the only performer at the WHCA dinner who has been accused of being too aggressive. Wanda Sykes’ jokes about Rush Limbaugh, who had publicly hoped for Obama’s presidency to fail, caused a lot of controversy. Sykes (2009, May 9) compared Limbaugh to Osama bin Laden, and this was seen by many as going too far. Here, similarly, the criticism was directed at the aggressive style of the jokes. For example, Karl Rove, Fox News Contributor, commented: “at the White House correspondents’ dinner, you expect there to be good-natured fun poked at the president, poked at the press, poked at other public figures. But these were nasty, vicious, mean, ugly comments and had no place at the dinner.” (Fox News, 2009, May 11.) Sykes interpreted this criticism as a reaction to transgressive black laughter. And because she has pictured herself as a troublemaker, outsider, and outspoken critic of white culture, she has purposefully sought to make the African American perspective visible and resist the white gaze by expressing both anger and sexuality. (Mizejewski, 2014, pp. 155-179.)

Thus, both Sykes and Wolf shift cultural expectations by being aggressive. Similarly, it could be argued that if women’s aggressive style can be seen as a sign for post-gender comedy, it would be wrong to assume that all post-gender comedy should be aggressive. Instead, the whole point would be not to expect certain types of comedy from comedian based on their gender. Thus, whereas Sykes and Wolf can be seen to shift the boundaries
within the field, we should allow different styles for all genders. For example, Sykes and Wolf could be compared to Colbert’s (2006, April 29) similarly controversial performances. Yet, some other comedians, such as Cecily Strong (2015, April 25) and Seth Meyers (2011, April 30), have taken a more good-natured approach to roasting. They also should avoid gendered categorization, because using gender as an explanation for a style always involves a question of power hierarchies.

Although, or because, Wolf’s aggressive style was criticized, it carries post-gender potential with it. (Sexual) aggressiveness and political incorrectness can break down gendered expectations and break into “boys-only” spaces, even if it does not always fare well with all members in the audience (Foy, 2015, pp. 703, 705; Mizejewski, 2014, p. 5). Some scholars have argued that due to women’s marginalized role in society (and in the political field in particular), women have the anarchistic and transformative potential to shift hierarchies and power relations, which suits political comedy perfectly (Mizejewski, 2014, pp. 15-18; Gilbert, 2004, pp. xii, xiv, 170). Similarly, for example, Sarah Silverman’s hostile humor challenges assumptions about “women’s comedy” and attacks the norms of comedy, and thereby creates room for post-gender stand-up (Shouse & Oppliger 2012, p. 213). Thus, a negative reaction to a comedian’s aggressive style can also be a seen as a reaction to these shifting hierarchies. The tweets that criticized Wolf for crossing cultural expectations of gender show that these gendered attitudes still exist. However, other tweets proved that there is growing demand to allow all genders to use aggressive strategies. Several tweets showing support for Wolf argued that it seems that people have double standards for evaluating women, because many male comedians in the history of the dinner have been similarly aggressive in their roasting. It seems that these people would have seen Wolf differently if she had been a man.

Interestingly, in Wolf’s case, her being “unladylike” was also used as a tool to disagree with what she was saying. In these tweets, being offended was not so much about what is feminine or masculine, but disgust served as an effective tool of rejection. In particular, jokes about abortion and use of curse words were often mentioned in these tweets. For example, one argued that “these nasty women” should not be given “platforms to allow them to joke about ending life”. Also, there was a general understanding of her being hateful and aggressive towards different people and institutions. Thus, the question of style blends with the question of message.
WOMEN LAUGHING AT WOMEN

The question of how each gender should be treated was an important part of the Twitter debate, which targeted not only Wolf’s style, but also the content of her monologues. At the dinner, she joked about multiple targets – Republicans, Democrats, and media outlets. Her main targets, however, were President Trump and his administration. She joked about Trump’s Russian connections and his controversial relationship with media, and called him out for being a racist, being bad in bed, bribing off porn stars, etc. These jokes were an expected part of the evening’s program, but in addition, Wolf criticized several women in Trump’s administration. She called Ivanka Trump, Kellyann Conway and Sarah Huckabee Sanders disappointments to other (white) women. For example, Wolf made fun of Ivanka Trump by saying, “She was supposed to be an advocate for women, but it turns out she’s about as helpful to women as an empty box of tampons.” (Wolf, 2018, April 28.)

Jokes that criticized these women were at the center of the post-show debate. Wolf, as a woman, was held responsible for attacking other women. Her act was seen as a disloyal gender practice, which was a disservice to women’s (political) empowerment. People tweeted, for example, “So much for Women supporting Women”, and “Women bullying women. Is that supposed to be acceptable?” Within this discussion, the bipartisan dimension, a typical topic for the WHCA’s comedy hosts, was also visible (Rossing, 2017, pp. 176-177). Wolf’s jokes were seen as representing liberal women attacking conservative women, and even claiming a “war on women” in this biased sense: “Liberals pretend to stand up for women, unless those women are conservative”.

The attack on women was interpreted as a provocation, and the focus on the looks of Sarah Huckabee Sanders became the symbol of this. Wolf compared Sanders to the dystopian character Aunt Lydia from The Handmaid’s Tale, criticized her way of handling White House press meetings, and called her an “Uncle Tom for white women”. However, her calling Sanders a liar got the most attention. Wolf joked that Sanders “burns facts, and then she uses that ash to create a perfect smoky eye. Like maybe she’s born with it, maybe it’s lies. It’s probably lies.” (Wolf, 2018, April 28.) This joke was decoded by many as a mean-spirited commentary on Sanders’ looks. Several people argued it is not appropriate to focus on women’s looks and appearance: “No one deserves to BE ABUSED. Over makeup? Personal appearance?” For them, the joke was unfair and sexist.
Rossing notes, however, that the WHCA’s dinner roasts often laugh at the outer appearances of politicians, instead of focusing on their policies. Rossing sees this tendency as a sign that roasting targets the public as well. By keeping jokes simple and without true political depth, the comedians create an implicit criticism that is directed to the audiences. It is a way to point out the lack of civil engagement and interest in the entertainment. (Rossing, 2017, pp. 178-179). Rossing’s argument seems relevant when we look at Wolf’s reaction to the criticism. She has refused to apologize or explain her chosen style and jokes, but she responded to this joke by asking, “Why are you guys making this about Sarah’s looks? I said she burns facts and uses the ash to create a ‘perfect’ smoky eye. I complimented her eye makeup and her ingenuity of materials.” (Wolf, 2018, April 29.) With this argument, Wolf hints that part of the audience has failed to see the political criticism under the surface. Several tweets that defended Wolf raised a similar argument. They argued that the joke was misunderstood to be about appearance, whereas it targeted dishonesty.

Additionally, the defenders reminded others that during her monologue Wolf made a joke about former governor Chris Christie’s weight (“it’s like shooting fish into Chris Christie”) and Mitch McConnell (“He’s finally getting his neck circumcised”), and she also joked about her own looks (“It's like if my name was Michelle Jokes Frizzy Hair Small Titties”). (Wolf, 2018, April 28.) None of these caused similar controversy, because making fun of male politicians’ appearances and women comedians’ use of self-deprecating humor are established cultural practices (e.g. Rossing, 2017; Gilbert, 2004). The failure to recognize the double standards about how and when it is culturally acceptable to joke about appearances as part of comedy is a sign of existing gendered comedy practices, because it shows how women continue to be misunderstood as the audience misses the ironic context around it (e.g. Colletta, 2014, p. 209). Defenders of Wolf argued that others were (purposefully) misunderstanding the joke simply to avoid discussing the bigger problem - Sanders’ press conferences.

The people supporting Wolf’s performance raised the issue of hypocrisy in addition to misunderstanding. The most typical response was to (at least partially) agree that it is not good taste to joke about women’s (or other culturally marginal groups’) appearances, but instead of blaming Wolf they turned to Trump and his supporters. They brought up that Trump has said the same, and even more and worse things, about women as Wolf did, and also, when Michelle Obama was the First Lady, several conservatives went after her looks.
Thus, if these actions could be explained away as jokes, why is it now a problem when a comedian makes similar jokes?

The nature of the roast typically raises such questions among audiences as how far a comedian takes the roasting, and how well the target takes the jokes. For example, in the WHCA dinner the President’s ability to take a joke is considered a sign to accept the offered communicative relationship between the President and the audience (Waisanen, 2015, p. 353). In Wolf’s case, it seems that because both the comedian and the targets were women, the limits on what is acceptable were tight due to the gendered readings of the situation. This shows that post-gender comedy still faces challenges regarding its reception. Some people, who argued that the hypocritical message behind this debate is that “women cannot take a joke,” or that “ladies are somehow more breakable than gentlemen”, also recognized these challenges.

Some, although a minority, argued that Wolf did not do a disservice to other women; instead, she was holding the women in power to the same accountability as men in power. People tweeted, for example, “She went after the women with actual power”, and “That is as insightful, fresh & original a critique (& of course therefore controversial) of the alt right women as I have seen.” In these arguments, Wolf’s jokes were seen as a good and necessary criticism. In a way, these tweets became arguments against the gendered reading of comedy, because they wanted all female comedians and politicians be treated equally to men without receiving gendered treatment. In a way, by making gender a clear aspect of her routine, Wolf is making interesting claims. She is being aggressive and talking to power, but she is also holding women as much, or even more, responsible for abusing power. Thus, although she states her starting point as a woman strongly, she is still somewhat post-gender positioned. She ensures that comedy can be social criticism.

Within the field of political comedy, Rossing (2017, pp. 169-170, 181) argues that the WHCA roast plays a role in American democracy, and continues that the aim is to make the democratic system (including its administration, political system, media, and audiences) more functional by criticizing its failures in a setting which celebrates this same system. Wolf’s monologue brought forward several tensions within the system, where bipartisan reactions mixed with liberal-conservative gender values and politics. Conservatives, here, represented themselves as defending women’s honor, and liberals wanted to hold all genders
accountable for their actions. Thus, the gender of the comedian and the gender of those she roasted became one important theme in the aftermath, proving the power of popular culture to make visible the shifts in cultural values and attitudes. The debate also showed that comedy still works within gender categories, and gender can also work as a powerful tool for content in comedy.

CONCLUSION

In this chapter, I examined three different dimensions of Michelle Wolf’s roast at the White House Correspondents’ dinner (2018) – the role of a (female) comedian, style of roasting, and content of comedy. Based on these three dimensions, the possibility for post-gender comedy is challenging. First, if post-gender is understood to refer to sex/gender categories, contemporary political comedy remains far from any post-gender ideals. Comedians and their audiences continue to recognize gender as an important identity category, and also a possible source of comedic content. In this strict definition, post-gender comedy might not also be hoped for, at least now.

However, a broader understanding of the concept that would look into cultural practices and gender hierarchies instead of gender categories, brings up interesting notions. It has been suggested that in order to perform comedy as a woman, one needs to step outside their gender (Russell, 2002). However, I argue that post-gender would not require any comedian of any gender to step outside their social identity unless they want to. Instead, post-gender could mean diminishing the assumed cultural hierarchies about gender. The aggressive style of roasting, and often political comedy in general, is starting to widen its boundaries. The assumption that political comedy and aggressive humor is a male space is being challenged both by comedians and by part of the audience. Here, the shift is taking place within the hierarchical positioning of genders, and thus, post-gender comedy could be a way to remove these hierarchies while continuing to recognize gender as a social identity.

The question of reception will remain for some time, because cultural expectations about women and men, comedy, and politics do not change overnight. The Twitter debate about Wolf’s monologue at HCAS shows that although there was a strong negative response to her performance, there were also comments that acknowledged and expressed the desire to open
up gender expectations when it comes to political comedy. Thus, whereas comedians can bring post-gender practices into their style and jokes, the possibilities for post-gender comedy as a cultural practice is also finding audiences. It opens up possibilities where “women’s comedy” and “men’s comedy” are losing their hierarchical positioning.

REFERENCES


