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Comedic Lies as Transitory Truths

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Why are stand-up comedians better anthropologists than, well, anthropologists? And what happens when a Danish anthropologist takes the mic?

Anthropology News recently decided to no longer accept pranks and manufactured (false) ethnographic accounts as submissions for the magazine. While the esteemed publication has offered no satisfactory explanation for taking this radical decision, there is no doubt it will precipitate wide-ranging effects throughout the anthropological community. Prompted by this new and humorless policy, I offer one joke and a few reflections on the use of comedic material as the basis for anthropological insights.

I think that stand-up comedians are better anthropologists than I can ever be. But I am not always so sure that what they say is absolutely true—even when they claim to be baring the most intimate layers of their personal life. Consider **this excerpt from a set by New York comedian Liz Miele**:

> I am a mess but I actually hide it pretty well. Like, I would say that only my immediate family and, like, my friends of 15 years really know how batshit crazy I am. The problem is that when you are legit crazy, you can't always hide it. And I would say that I have a meltdown in front of an acquaintance, like, once a year. Have you ever had a meltdown so bad, you have to become friends with the person that saw it? I have two very distinct friend groups. I have, like, the friends I know and love and I would do anything for. And then I have the friends that I always help move 'cus they know too much.

I was fortunate enough to get to know Liz Miele and many other stand-up comedians working in and around New York City during six months of fieldwork in the spring of 2017. My research project focuses on the art and workmanship of writing and doing stand-up comedy, and so I hung out with up-and-coming and established comedians at local comedy venues around town. And, as painful as it might seem, I also did some

stand-up comedy of my own. The few seconds of awkward silence after having delivered a badly written joke to an audience that does not laugh are some of the worst moments of intense self-doubt I have ever experienced. The situation is so brutally intimate. It is impossible to hide that you wrote something, which you think is truly funny. And it just isn't.

It is probably no exaggeration to argue that we are in the middle of a comedy boom. Not since the late 1970s has stand-up comedy been so massively popular, evidenced by the explosive growth of comedy clubs, open mic venues, and bars with regular comedy shows in cities throughout the country and especially so in Los Angeles and New York. One could even suggest that comedy has become a dominant and potent mode of expression in communication forms ranging from **political campaigns** to **public debates** to **social media feeds**.

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Of course, there is huge variety in the forms of stand-up comedy that are currently being developed and performed, but one trend is for the comedians to focus on the hardships and challenges of their personal lives. During even short 5–10 minute sets at a comedy club or open mic venue in New York, you will likely hear comedians' self-deprecating take on various personal tribulations, whether social awkwardness or inner turmoil or, possibly, their own physical appearance. Liz Miele's confessional comedy about the implications of having regular "meltdowns" in front of both strangers and acquaintances is an apt example of how intimate experiences can be converted into effective comedic material.

While I haven't asked Miele whether she actually has regular meltdowns in front of acquaintances, she has been quite vocal about how mental health and her sense of emotional stability present a challenge in her everyday life. Her reflections about the impossibility of hiding how "batshit crazy" she actually is condense in few words a lifetime of experiences struggling to remain stable. The point at which the truth-value, as it were, of the joke becomes slightly more questionable is when Miele moves from the broader comment about her mental instability to focus on the problematic relationship she has with those persons who have seen her during a meltdown.

Stand-up comedians often use rhetorical questions—"Have you ever noticed that…?"—as a technique to lend a performance a certain immediate quality, as if what is a tightly written monologue were actually a dialogue between two interlocutors, comedian and

audience. On the face of it, Miele asks her audience if they too have experienced something similar to meltdowns so serious that it became necessary to befriend the person witnessing it in order, I assume, to avoid further embarrassment or exposure. As an indirect response to her own rhetorical question, Miele then tells us that she divides her friends into two groups: those whom she loves and cares for unreservedly and those who simply know too much about her mental health (and therefore receive her care and attention).

In a sense, the rhetorical question and subsequent response can be considered as a way of opening the main observation about the impossibility of hiding mental instabilities up for further scrutiny. This is, I would argue, not entirely unlike how anthropological accounts move from initial empirical observations or insights to broader analyses of social and cultural implications. The main difference being that the comedian is aiming for the surprising punchline, which will (hopefully) result in the immediate payoff of audience laughter whereas the anthropologist awaits the long-term impact that their analytical insights will (hopefully) have on readers (or viewers or listeners) of the anthropological account.

This difference in the form and use of an empirical observation is also what differentiates an anthropological account from a stand-up comedy act. Whereas both aim to communicate some insight about human life, only the comedians work within the structural confines of set-up and punchline. Returning again to Miele's story, the question she likely asked herself is how to most effectively—that is, comedically—communicate the challenges of living with mental instabilities and occasional public meltdowns to a live audience. And since Miele has to communicate her insights about the effects that mental instabilities can have on social relationships by way of a joke structure, the most comedically efficient and insightful way of doing so is not necessarily through a completely candid account of the situation. So, she lies a little. But only in order for her to be able to tell something more truthful and authentic about the experience she is trying to convey. I seriously doubt that Miele ever feels compelled to help friends move because they know too much about her meltdowns. Yet, because of the way that she has structured her comedic account, I absolutely get what she is trying to tell me about the relationship between mental instabilities and social relationships. I think. In a sense, the darkness and difficulties of living a life with constant mental fluctuations need the comedy structure in order to be optimally communicated to a wider audience.

Whereas the set-up to a joke conventionally lays out the premise to the story and leads it in one direction, the punchline is what creates the payoff to the story by going in a completely different direction that ruptures the joke's initial framing. The immediate surprise that comes from suddenly realizing that the punchline has shattered one's

expectations creates what can best be described as a form of "transitory truth." This is the kind of bodily reaction—the laughter, the astonishment—that invariably testifies to the value of the comedic insights. Such transitory truths may only exist for as long as the effects of the comedic juxtaposition between set-up and punchline endure in surprise and laughter, but it can be so much more powerful than even the most insightful anthropological account. Whereas an anthropological account is something that often requires careful intellectual reflection, the transitory truths of stand-up comedy jokes precede all reflection by hitting you in the gut with the immediate and corporeal realization that the insights that the comedian presents you with have some weird and distorted truth-value to them. Put somewhat differently, you can avoid or simply refuse to acknowledge the insights of an anthropological account. Not so much so with the transitory truths of stand-up comedy.

Happy April Fools' Day!

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