Chapter 3: Carnival as Theory and Methodology

3.1 What Is Carnival?

Imagine a town square. Lots of people next to each other, often way too close, many are drunk or drinking. People are dressed in elaborate and colorful costumes, often with masks and extravagant headgear; sometimes the costumes are in disarray because of the festivities or even a secret tryst in a back alley. Some people are dancing and twirling, with meat and alcoholic drinks in their hands; musicians are playing folk and dance music. There are characters dressed as clowns and jesters, performing tricks and entertaining the crowd. You can watch a little carnival play performed by some travelling actors or buy a virility potion from a quack doctor. Make a fart joke or sing off tune if you like. It is ok to grab someone's buttocks or breasts if you fancy them. But don't be late for an effigy burning later, as well as more food, more alcohol, and more sex. Take it all in now, tomorrow it will be over.

The description above, with some updates, could be easily applied to a carnival in modern Europe, but Bakhtin developed the concept of carnival culture while analyzing François Rabelais's work and its connection to the popular laughing culture of the (European) Renaissance (Bakhtin 2015). At the same time, carnival also bears "the stamp of a dateless antiquity" (Frazer 2012), celebrating the body, the senses, and unofficial relations among human beings (Danow 1995). A quintessentially populist phenomenon, carnival has been an object of study for some time, but it was Bakhtin who elevated it to an epistemological category that has been applied mostly in literary studies, anthropology, history, and, more recently, political science. The vast literature on carnival's origins usually converges on the carnival being related to rituals of public expulsion of evil, common world-wide and not just in medieval Europe (Frazer 2012). In European culture, carnival's origins have been traced to ancient Greek celebrations of Dionysus that involved excess drinking and copulation (Rudwin 1919) and to Roman holidays of Saturnalia that incorporated some sort of hierarchy reversal, with slaves being allowed to don their masters' clothing and eat at the festive table (Marquardt 1963). Another antecedent, of a more religious nature, that seemed to have blended into the Rabelaisian tradition was the northern French custom of the Feast of Fools, *festum fatuorum* (Gilhus 1990), popularized for a general audience through the Disney adaptation of *The Hunchback of Notre-Dame.* The Feast of Fools involved a brief social revolution—in which power, dignity, and impunity were briefly conferred on those in a subordinate position—in elaborate theatrical performances (Harris

https://doi.org/10.1515/9783111238135-003

2011), and the celebration of marginal biblical tales and characters, for instance, donkey-related stories from the Bible.

How did Bakhtin develop the notion of carnival and the carnivalesque? He first started making notes about "the carnival of words"—his translation of "lexikalischer Karneval"—in a draft book titled "The Idea of Carnival: The Stylistic Image of Rabelais as the Carnival of Words" (Popova 2009), in which he built on German and French scholars of Rabelais and connected him with the Russophone tradition of laughing culture (Pan'kov 2010). Bakhtin was drawing a genealogical line from Menippean satire to medieval and Renaissance folklore laughing culture. Popova notes that it was an incidental interest in the issues of celebration, ritual, and the archaic origins of imagery fashionable in the 1920s-1930s that ultimately contributed to the elements of the theory of carnival (Popova 2009). Bakhtin's framework, however, rests on the 'distilled' Western European carnival practices that by the time of Gargantua and Pantagruel had already blended pagan and Christian traditions. Carnival culture emerged as an antithesis to the serious culture that was appropriate for a world dominated by religious and social doctrines. Renaissance folk, just like modern people, needed an outlet for their non-serious feelings and discourse and the Church allocated a time for folly for about three months each year (Bakhtin 2015). Carnival, in its essence, is a reversal of the 'real life': it allows one, for a short period of time, to experience the freedom individuals are usually deprived of, and to build a second identity in an alternative world. Carnival allows transgression, violation, violence, coitus, gluttony—whatever the official and real life is supposed to forbid and frown upon (Bristol 2014). In a sense, the notion of carnival is very close to the postmodern understanding of the world with its subversion and re-interpretation of existing social relations and norms (Murphy 1999). It is also close to the notion of simulacra (Grinshteyn 2000): a person within the carnival culture is defined by what they seem to be, not by what they are.

The carnival ethos was the antithesis of the 'official' and 'serious' Church-sanctioned and feudal culture; it brought out folklore and different genres of laughter that Bakhtin calls carnival. This culture is distinguished from the official buttoned-up discourse by its anti-ideology and anti-authority themes and is characterized by coarseness and vulgarity. These features are often associated with "the common people" or "plebeian society" (Bristol 2014). But for Bakhtin, the folkloric nature of carnival and its laughter vis-à-vis the authority culture was extremely valuable. In other words, carnival was for Bakhtin, a scholar in exile amid mass repressions, a benevolent manifestation of an anti-establishment drive. As Bakhtin notes, "[people] do not contemplate the carnival—they live in it, and they live in everything, because in its idea it is universally popular [i. e., for all people]" (Bakhtin 2015). During the carnival you can only live according to its laws, that is, according to

the laws of carnival freedom. Later literary scholars pointed out that Bakhtin's terminology, especially that related to the notion of 'folk' (*Narodny*, people's), was a sign of "terminological mimicry," with the Soviet state's rhetoric and especially with Stalinism (Boyarskaya 2015), that often reflected Bakhtin's idealized view of the popular.

Another dangerous aspect of the 'folk' and 'popular' side of carnival is its complete disregard for authority and expertise. Remember the quack doctor from the town square? He is perceived as having the same if not more authority than a real doctor (Erickson 2021). Granted, jade vagina eggs from Hollywood actresses would always find their customers, especially in the carnival square, but during a pandemic where the vast majority of experts issue expert advice, calls for 'freedom' (again, very carnivalesque) can literally be a death sentence for people in close proximity. For instance, Qanon, with its antisemitic blood libel roots, has prided itself in questioning the world-wide consensus on COVID-19 (Erni and Striphas 2022). This makes carnival even closer to populism as it is also anti-expertise. Attacks on Anthony Fauci (the 'face' of the expertise), ignoring what experts say, anti-masking, corona conspiracies, people choosing to take horse medication instead of tested medications or other 'miracle cures' sold on Instagram, Gab, Vkontakte, TikTok or Facebook (Ball and Maxmen 2020)—these are just some of the examples of the way anti-covid activists made sense of the pandemic in a carnivalesque way.

Edelman (1988) noted that carnivalesque elements can penetrate political discourse via outsider candidates or via the candidates who at least style themselves as such. James Janack (2005) studied Russia's own Vladimir Zhrinovsky, as well as retired World Wrestling Federation grappler Jesse Ventura's effective campaign for the governorship of Minnesota, that succeeded in large part due to his "carnival fool's role of protesting against the prevailing political system" (Janack 2006).[2] While Fetissenko (2008) offered a critique of this theoretical framework, as the "spectacle of democratic elections as a whole and the ritualized courtship of campaign events in particular [are] examples of carnival" (p. 105), this book argues that the Trump campaign went far beyond just 'familiar contact' with voters and encompassed many more carnivalesque elements. Moreover, Trump's presidential campaign and presidency in a sense became an immense accumulation of spectacles (Debord 2002), and not politics.

Bakhtin's work on carnival has been applied prodigiously in the study of movements of dissent (Çelikkol 2014). Trump's campaign was one such movement

2 Consistent with this ethos, during his time as a WWF wrestler, Ventura would regularly sport T-shirts emblazoned with the slogan: "Win if you can, lose if you must, but always cheat."

of dissent that incorporated those whose often violent opposition to the democratic norms were transgressive. Trump raised an anti-establishment battle-cry; it came to epitomize dissent as a means of rallying voters against his opponent, who was portrayed as mainstream and experienced—part of the "Washington DC swamp."[3] At the same time, Hoy (1994) mentions that carnival's potential for political rebellion is limited—though this could be inferred from Bakhtin as well, as carnival by its nature is a temporary phenomenon, of which its participants are well aware (Bakhtin 2015). In Trump's case this temporality was particularly well taken up by his supporters, who consistently insisted that Trump's most outlandish statements and actions were just for show, and that he would be a different, "more presidential" person once in office (Zito 2016; Roller 2016).

As several scholars have noted, carnival can also be perceived as a vehicle for a post-colonial understanding of the subaltern's voice (Gardiner and Bell 1998; Mukhopadhyay 2004), "with its attention focused on the micro-politics of sanctioned and undermining cultural norms, licit and illicit language, spoken and unspoken (but performed) utterance" (Gardiner and Bell 1998, p. 113). Carnival culture's "emphasis on the transgression of cultural norms and values by subaltern groups [is] the ideal critical tool for approaching all kinds of social and material interactions" (Humphrey 2000). In many ways, carnival views transgression as necessary and righteous because it is supposed to battle against a social order that the transgressors believe are oppressing them. (Kallis 2007). Even though Donald Trump, as a white, straight, rich male could hardly be seen as subaltern, he nevertheless managed to galvanize a substantial amount of support among the American population by marketing himself as an anti-establishment figure, in other words, a subaltern voice, by using elements of the carnival culture. Perceptions of subalternity can vary among different populations (Morozov 2015), thus even white voters can perceive themselves as disenfranchised and having insufficient access to modes of representation (Chattopadhyay and Sarkar 2005). Even though carnival culture reverses conventional hierarchy, it still works to maintain the status quo because of its inherent temporality. However, while temporary rule suspension was originally intended to reinforce the existing normative order, a long-lasting carnival can have disastrous consequences for a political community, especially one whose norms are designed to protect marginalized groups. What is most important is that carnival has specific *practices* of transgression, specifically laughter, cursing words, and vulgarity. The following parts of this chapter will examine the defining features of carnival and their applicability to the study of election campaigns.

3 It is notable that "drain the swamp" was one of Mussolini's promises.

3.2 Carnival as Analytical Framework

White and Stallybrass (1986) wondered why carnival had taken on such an epistemological value. They concluded that as an analytic category, it catered to the generalized economy of transgression and the high/low juxtapositions of the whole social structure. However, it is the critique of the carnival framework by literature experts that makes it applicable to the study of political phenomena. The sanctioned nature of the subversion shows that the inversion of hierarchy is not total and some stratified relations remain, with minorities and women not necessarily escaping the existing power structures.

Bakhtinian carnival exacerbates the antagonistic nature and structure of carnival (Coronato 2003), even though it did not and does not bring out the full potential of anti-hierarchy, because, as Umberto Eco has argued, the disruption of rules reinforces the laws, as carnival parodies existing rules with an *authorized* transgression (Eco 1984). As Donna Stanton notes in Bareau,

> The carnival also served to contain impulses toward more radical challenge. It could be viewed as a contestatory, chaotic ritual that paradoxically helped to sustain, even to reinforce, the dominant order. (Bareau 1987, p. 129)

While the carnival framework is extremely popular in political analyses of the movements of dissent, it is remarkable that Bakhtin's theory of the carnivalesque has often been reduced to the notion of transgression. But carnival cannot be reduced to just transgression. Its other features—e. g., the multidirectional discourse, the sanctioned nature of the transgression, and especially practices of displaced abjection—make the framework much more complex. Highlighting these aspects is crucial to the understanding of carnival. This book aims to address this caveat by showing how certain more entrenched power structures remain intact within the carnivalesque reversal and, to an extent, are even amplified in regard to the issues of displaced abjection and superficial 'freedom' from political correctness. Accordingly, this book will focus on the characteristics that have made carnival an attractive framework through which to study protests (multidirectional discourse, anti-establishment, language specificity, materiality), but at the same time highlight the features that conflict with Bakhtin's original idealistic perception of carnival (displaced abjection, misogyny) but were developed by other scholars.

Bakhtinian carnival theory allows for the adoption of a holistic approach to the study of political communication during the Trump campaign that encompasses the changed circumstances of media ecology. Not only does carnival emphasize the role of multidirectional discourse, but it also underlines the multiplicity of ac-

tors involved in the cultural production of Trumpspeak, from established media personalities to anonymous 4chan users, showcasing the dangers of a populist discourse in a democratic society. Moreover, methodologically, the carnival framework fosters a multi-method approach that involves discourse and visual analysis, as well as reflection on everyday practices and their reversal that leave a mark on political institutions.

Based on the carnival framework of social reality, several important aspects need to be studied. Firstly, if carnival is an analytic framework, then the multidirectional discourse is more of a theoretical underpinning that takes us from the physical square that Bakhtin envisions to the digitally enabled carnival in which people participate through media(tion), and shows us how social media in particular serve as a carnival square for his 'foolery.' Multidirectional discourse not only establishes the setting, including platforms, modes, and agents of communication, but it also has implications for democracy, marginalized groups, and political community. Subsequent empirical chapters deal with more concrete applications of the carnival framework and highlight its main features: displaced abjection (Chapter 5), laughing culture (Chapter 6), misogyny (Chapter 7), and sex (Chapter 8). The displaced abjection and misogyny chapters demonstrate how transgression against the taboos of political correctness is central to Trump's self-presentation. The laughter chapter tells us about the practice of transgression, and the discourse around sex showcases carnival's false promise of bodily liberation. In order to apply the idea of multidirectional discourse, the empirical chapters of this book will be divided into three main parts: discourse analysis of Trump's campaign rallies, interviews, and Tweets; mainstream media coverage; and their interpretation in far-right networks.

3.2.1 Multidirectional Discourse

An important feature of carnival is its refusal to accept an official authoritative discourse that claims absolute truth. Instead, the carnival square is filled with a multitude of voices, varying genres and levels of obscenity. Elliot (1999) opines that carnivalesque language disrupts the privileged order in polite utterances by including all sorts of colloquialisms (see also Hall and White 1993), including voices that are unwelcome in polite society for a reason—in the case of Trump's campaign, this meant featuring so-called alt-right rhetoric usually limited to the fringes of discourse. Moreover, a number of Republican politicians have long lamented the fact that the United States as a country has been constrained by political correctness—Trump himself insisted "political correctness is killing this country" already in 2013 (Lopez 2016). Thus, violation of political correctness is seen as truth-telling

and independence from the establishment, a necessary transgression that carnival emboldens. But carnivalesque multidirectional discourse enabled this type of rhetoric, and Trump successfully amplified it. The Trump campaign, deployed in a multiplatform media ecology, created an illusion of familiarity and a flattened hierarchy, paralleling the intimacy of the market square. However, with a kind of mediated market square, we are no longer talking about crowds but instead focusing on publics that often intersect due to the transmedia flows of information.

> Bakhtin's theories [...] cohere most in their mission to defend the integrity of the unfamiliar voice—whether it belongs to a 16th-century red-faced peasant or a sorrowing Indian widow. Bakhtin's presentation of carnival is not a prescription or a realization of utopian ideals; it is itself an artistic response, ambivalent and aimed at transforming not actual conditions but the ways of thinking of his hearers. [...] through awareness and creative manipulation of diverse modes of discourse, individuals can effect changes in their lives and beings when freedom of action is limited—a condition of life even in non-repressive societies. (Elliot 1999, 137)

Elliot's view of carnival is very close to Bakhtin's own idealistic view of the popular culture that he saw as inherently democratic and full of emancipatory potential. Indeed, much of the research on the movements of dissent in political science focuses on the anti-hierarchical carnivalesque elements that have some, if limited, potential for political change. Instead, multidirectional discourse can amplify the voices that seek to destroy the political community altogether and exclude the voices of others once and for all.

Another important characteristic of carnival is that the boundaries between performers and spectators are blurred. This is equally true of modern (political) communication, when the focus is no longer on consumers, but prosumers of content (Humphreys and Grayson 2008; Beer and Burrows 2010), which we discuss in the subsequent chapters. The participatory nature of media ecology has contributed to some foundational shifts in the way information is produced, consumed and regurgitated.[4] A typical example in this regard would be memes, available from websites wholly dedicated to providing these to users who then select an image and add text to their liking. Memes were a particularly important tool in the 2016 presidential election, to such an extent that the Trump and Clinton campaigns were often described as engaging in a World Meme War (Schreckinger 2017).

A foundational feature of carnival is its ritualistic nature that relies on certain tropes and practices that are repeated on a regular basis. Carnival participants are perfectly aware of what they are in for, because despite its perceived lawlessness, carnival period follows a very clear pattern, including a clearly delineated and an-

4 This issue will be addressed in more detail in Chapter 3.

ticipated end. Thus, carnival participants are grounded both discursively and practically in the existing (non)-carnivalesque features oft the event. In this regard, when Trump tried to 'channel' Nixon (the forgotten majority) and Reagan (Make America Great Again), it could be interpreted as him trying to fit within an existing political rhetoric that would have both conservative and far-right appeal. This way, Trump unleashed the carnival by violating the norms of decency and democracy. Despite him being a carnivalesque candidate, Trump still followed a certain set of rules that exist even in such a setting as carnival.

Carnival *is* multidirectional, but multidirectionality is not so much an aspect of carnival as much as it is how carnival *works.* It is the multiplicity of voices/heteroglossia that usurps authority. Trump's carnival is multidirectional, and this has as much to do with the reality of political communication and media systems because they make this multidirectionality possible. So, what matters in what we take away from Bakhtin is that carnival involves a heteroglossic structure that suspends the normal/existing stratification of communicative potential. It is then amplified and enabled by social media and the attention economy. While multidirectional discourse enables the carnival, the carnival itself has specific targets, its objects of ridicule in the laughing culture, that serve as the taboos to transgress: specifically, the abject and the feminine. We will start with the abject.

3.2.2 Displaced Abjection

An enemy in carnival culture is an enemy of carnival square freedom (Bakhtin 2015). The carnivalesque construction of enemies involves demonization, whereby "a marginalized group is degraded so as to restore specifically the core values that mainstreamers hold" (Tsukamoto 2002). Several Bakhtin critics point out that he idealized popular culture without paying sufficient attention to the fate of the real subalterns of medieval society, even though they are supposed to be elevated in the carnival's reversal of hierarchies. Historical evidence shows that carnival definitely preserved some elements of hierarchy and potentially served as an outlet to maintain the existing order, with marginalized groups being the focus of populist anger and frustration, an anger that was never actually directed at the ones in power (White and Stallybrass 1986).

In other words, in carnival culture an enemy is a focus of 'displaced abjection'—i. e., when socially 'low' groups direct their anger not against someone in authority, but towards someone (or something) of hierarchical inferiority (White and Stallybrass 1986). The idea of abjection was developed by one of Bakhtin's principal translators, Julia Kristeva (1982, p. 1):

> There looms within abjection, one of those violent, dark revolts of being, directed against a threat that seems to emanate from an exorbitant outside or inside, ejected beyond the scope of the possible, the tolerable, the thinkable. It lies there, quite close, but it cannot be assimilated.

Kristeva emphasized that it is the part of identity that has been rejected that creates the abject, not the actual object of abjection; it is caused by the disruption of identity, system, and order. Jews in the Middle Ages were, unfortunately, a perfect fit for this social phenomenon, especially when it came to the impossibility of assimilation mentioned by Kristeva, but abjection has been utilized in contemporary critical theory as well when some societies connote particular groups of people—mostly minority groups—as revolting figures (Tyler 2013).

Given that the abject was often symbolized by a pig, the dehumanization of Jews was intertwined with the ambiguous legacies of the pig in European culture as it served as the symbolic analogy of scapegoated groups and demonized 'others' and, in medieval tradition, primarily Jews (Komins 2001): "Like the pigs in the Venice carnival, which were chased across Piazza San Marco and stoned, in Rome Jews were forced into a race at carnival time and stoned by the onlookers." Moreover, the pig in Western culture serves to define a boundary between the civilized and the uncivilized, the refined and the unrefined. Circe's transformation into swine of rapist sailors who wandered onto her island reflects this European genealogy of the pig metaphor. As Komins (2001) notes, "the Jews who excluded themselves from the pig *carne-levare* (lifting of meat) not only became a human embodiment of the animal's festive and sinister aspects, they also were a gloomy reminder of the real abstinence of the flesh which follows the carnival season, i. e., Lent." The carnival tradition of burning or hanging an effigy (in earlier carnival traditions, even killing the mock king) is the ultimate act in achieving social inversion (Bristol 2014). Bakhtin somewhat obfuscates the dark side of the carnivalesque, with its potential for violence and death, with the idea of rebirth (Bakhtin 2015), but the lowest part of the social ladder had primarily to deal with carnivalesque cruelty.

Thus, despite Bakhtin's idealization of the popular culture, the real subaltern in the context of carnival remains subaltern. The folk that reverse the hierarchy with the elite still keep certain other social groups at the very bottom of the social ladder, who remain there through carnival practices of abuse. In other words, even in a carnival reversal, certain groups do not rise to the top of the hierarchy. Or, as Lindahl notes, carnival did not destroy the hierarchy, it just re-arranged its contents (Lindahl 1996), as carnival is inherently about creating an effigy. While Bakhtin might have frowned at us for suggesting this, the emancipatory potential of carnival is always limited for the marginalized groups because of the performative

violence that is exerted on the public square. This has clear implications for the Trump campaign. In a sense, for him and many of his supporters, the campaign essentially symbolized the suspension of what they could call a "libtard episteme," where they thought themselves subjugated and were justified in being violent. While it appeared as if 'the people' took control of the government, in the end the power remained in the hands of the same Wall Street or Washington elite. Apart from directing some of his abuse at a representative of the elite—Hillary Clinton—Trump still reserved a fair amount of his rhetoric to disparage marginalized communities and specifically communities of color. At the same time, Hillary Clinton was a suitable target of abuse due to another unpalatable carnivalesque characteristic—misogyny.

3.2.3 Misogyny

As a number of researchers have pointed out, Bakhtin does not discuss the topic of gender in detail (Barta et al. 2013; Ginsburg 1993), apart from pointing out the carnivalesque praise of the fertile feminine body that usually led to misogynistic satire (Byrd 1987). At the same time, the perception of the female body was sometimes interpreted as "unruly resistance to a monologizing and specularizing discourse of phallic authority" (Nell 2001). Despite carnival's emancipatory promise for women, it was still infamous for its portrayal of "senile, pregnant hags" (Russo 1986) that were supposed to symbolize the idea of rebirth. Ultimately, it did not offer a complete inversion of the male/female hierarchy as the taboos were re-deployed in an ambivalent way and it was specifically the (grotesque) female body that became the main subject of derision and laughter (Russo 1986).

Misogynistic practices related to carnival are ubiquitous. Frazer describes "burning of the witches" rituals common to Western Europe (Frazer 2012, pp. 160–163) that with time were supplanted by fires *sans femmes*. Nevertheless, carnival culture retained foundational elements of anti-female tropes, as "by reducing women to misogynistic stereotypes, the buffoon acts out a contempt for women grounded in the traditional belief that they are available for sexual pleasures but never to be trusted or taken seriously" (Murphy 2006). From a psychoanalytical perspective, this kind of disparagement could be interpreted as a type of castration fear before agential women (Ducat 2005), especially given that in earlier carnivalesque rituals, women took control over their bodies and decisions.

In the context of the Trump campaign, especially once Hillary Clinton became Trump's main adversary, his misogynistic rhetoric was very much in line with European medieval popular culture. The 'mauvaise femme' (wicked woman) trope (Enders 2004, 2005) emerged from the theatrical performances of 'silly stories' (*fab-*

ula ineptissima) that featured a blood libel tale with an obligatory female Christian maid who worked for Jews and was seen as a co-conspirator in ritual murder (Rose 2015). The wicked woman was supposedly equally guilty of the ritual murder allegation, not only because she worked for Jews, but because she failed to report suspicious activity. Thus, Trump's misogyny tied in neatly with his antisemitic dog-whistling, especially when he accused Hillary Clinton of secretly colluding with 'Jewish' bankers (Posner and Neiwert 2016).

While carnival epitomizes the reversion of hierarchy, other, more foundational hierarchical relationships remain intact—such as, the domination of women by men. While women are somewhat liberated from constant male control in the context of carnival, its practices are often misogynist and employ women either as objects of sexual release or as vessels of procreation—the (monstrous) womb (Coronato 2003). Both roles remain within the gender hierarchy present outside of carnival and the only difference here is the fact that a carnival square is also a *legitimate* place for erotic frivolity (Bakhtin 1968, emphasis added). In other words, the male policing of the conjugal order is somewhat suspended, but women are still objects in the male gaze or hands.

In the case of Trump's carnival, the misogyny of carnivalesque rituals is blended with the patriarchal hold on the American media ecology and society. Studies have shown that Hillary Clinton had to contend with misogynistic double standards and outright misogyny on all mainstream media fronts (Southern and Harmer 2019; Banwart and Kearney 2018; Karpf 2017; Bachmann, Harp, and Loke 2018; Harp 2019), not to mention an organized misogynistic hate-campaign on social media and image boards (Merrin 2019). Lilly Goren and Joseph Uscinski pointed out that Senator Clinton was treated unfairly during her presidential campaign in 2008 by mostly male newscasters (Uscinski and Goren 2011) and little had changed by 2015–2016. It was especially revealing that some of the prominent journalists who covered the elections and applied the double standard to Hillary Clinton in the first place, including Matt Lauer and Charlie Rose, not to mention Bill O'Reilly or former head of Fox News Roger Ailes, turned out to have been serial sexual harassers and misogynists themselves (Poniewozik and Lyons 2017).

3.2.4 Sex and Materiality

Given that carnival is antithetical to normal, highly religious and spiritual Renaissance life, it is concerned much more with the material aspects of existence. Hence, during carnival people obsess over, and are defined by, body parts, bodily functions, sex, and material objects. Jesse Ventura's wrestling nickname—'the body'—is an all too literal example, but even the supposedly anti-Trump journal-

ists were obsessed with his hair, skin color, the size of his hands and genitals, not to mention his weight. While Foucault discussed the "body of the sovereign" and the medieval and late medieval practices of public execution that were supposed to harm the criminal's body as much as he harmed the state (Foucault 1977), carnival equalizes the bodies of all participants and brings the shamed and forbidden practices and body parts to the fore.

> It must be said that one of the leading moments in the comedy of the medieval jester was precisely the translation of any high ceremonial and rite into the material-bodily plane; such was the behavior of jesters in tournaments, at knight ceremonies, and others. (Bakhtin 2015, p. 14)

The practices of translation that Bakhtin mentioned do not constitute a monological process. While the jester seeks to invert the traditions from their official forms, in the context of the Trump carnival, mass media were often involved with the translation of Trump's material-bodily/obscene/linguistically iniquitous statements into mainstream speak (Parks 2019) and often reduced his candidacy to his body as well. Carnival is first and foremost carnal, a part of the "bodily low" as Bakhtin would say, and Trump has often used the erotic in order to shame his opponents for instance, a male opponent is not as virile, a woman is an object for the projection of masculine desire, while his own lifestyle and image are supposed to demonstrate his own strength and potency.

The figure of the trickster is central in the material-bodily plane. While a number of scholars think that the trickster is an archetype of a clever hero such as Loki, Odysseus or Robin Hood, others point out other, less flattering features, such as lasciviousness or cruelty. In the context of carnival, the trickster is not necessarily smart or cunning (Carroll 1984). He (always a he) is a tool of the carnivalesque gaiety that only serves to symbolize the alleged subversion of the hierarchy. In the now classic work of Evans-Pritchard (1967), the Zande trickster, "Ture," was seen as clever but adulterous, a thief who did the opposite of what morals would prescribe, representing society's unconscious desires. Carroll notes the trickster's "elaborate attempts to copulate with a variety of women or to gorge himself—a reflection of our own uninhibited desires for sex and for food" (Carroll 1984, p. 113). It is the trickster/jester who sets the tone for other practices of excess, proudly displaying his transgressions of etiquette, linguistics, or law.

Another inextricable part of the material carnivalesque existence is food (Bakhtin 2015). Bakhtin notes that the material and bodily substrate of the grotesque image (food, wine, reproductive power, organs of the body) is profoundly positive. Thus, the material and bodily substance prevails, as in the end the excess is more important. Food, as well as other elements, is supposed to be present in an

excessive, grotesque way: it is the food that is supposed to be gorged on, consumed without regard to the future. It is important to note that food has significant religious connotations (e.g., sacraments), but is also associated with 'guilty pleasures' and the perception of gluttony as a sin (Coveney and Whit 2000). That is why it was bound to become a significant part of carnival culture: as a sacrament, it had to be reversed into the material culture of gluttony and pleasure normally condemned outside of the carnival. The consumption of specific foods by politicians is an important part of political spectacle (Marvin 1994; Marvin and Ingle 1999). However, such ritualistic eating is not without risks. A cultural miss-step can sometimes lead to calamitous results, as UK politician (and, at the time, leader of the Labour Party) Ed Miliband, infamously photographed consuming a bacon sandwich during 2014 local elections, would attest when the image was widely circulated during the 2015 general election campaign. In American politics, the types of food and the setting of the meals are very closely observed for the signs of "being close to people" (Obama's Dijon mustard) and authenticity (Elizabeth Warren's corndog). One wrong bite, and a candidate may lose an entire state (McCarron 2019). It is worth noting that the original "Pizzagate" scandal was about a 2016 presidential candiate John Kasich eating a pizza with a fork.

3.2.5 Language: Cursing and Laughter

Stand-up comic Lenny Bruce, an American icon of freedom of speech in 1950s and 1960s, was popularized in the 21st century by the hit Amazon show "The Marvelous Mrs. Maisel." Bruce was put on trial and essentially banned from a number of US cities for the use of profanity in his routines that some researchers characterized as quintessentially carnivalesque (Damon 1997). His performances were not only distinctive in their embracing of sexual themes but also the use of swearwords, both of which were heavily policed in public spaces in the US and are still censored on TV. A documentary about his life entitled "Swear to Tell the Truth" reflects the carnivalesque belief that obscenity being the language of the populace is uniquely equipped to speak truth to power (Bakhtin 2015), while "laughter is one of the essential forms of the truth" (Bakhtin 1968, p. 66).

This combination of obscenity and laughter as conveying an impression of authenticity stems from the carnivalesque tradition. While describing Lenny Bruce as vulgar was intended to discredit him, it is essentially a compliment in a carnival. "Every speaker is a pig, every speech a vulgarity, every joke is an obscenity," cites Rudwin (1919) describing carnival in Germanic lands. Rabelais's characters quaff and gorge in medieval France, while enjoying a similar license for linguistic levity, as a vital part of the market square discourse is its liberation from the official,

sanctioned, polite form. Bakhtin refers to it as "billingsgate" or "coarse and raw" language:

> Unceremonious billingsgate speech is quite frequently characterized by swearing, that is, swear words and whole swear expressions, sometimes quite long and complex. Swearing is usually grammatically and semantically isolated in the context of speech and is perceived as a complete whole, like proverbs. Therefore, curses can be spoken of as a special speech genre of the unceremonious billingsgate speech. By their genesis, curses are not homogeneous and had different functions in the conditions of primitive communication, mainly of a magical, spellbinding character [...] [In this context] they contributed to the creation of a free, carnivalesque atmosphere and a second, laughing, aspect of the world. (Bakhtin 2015, p. 12)

The genealogy of obscenity is quite long and complex, dating back to early belief systems as well as their Christian instantiation of wishing ill of somebody, often involving magic and witchcraft (Frazer 2012). Owing to their forbidden nature, it is no wonder that their use was a subject of strict social control (McDonald 2014). Moreover, in medieval culture, cursing was considered a female practice connected to misfortune. It was women who were primarily accused of and prosecuted for witchcraft. *Malleus Maleficarum*, the handbook of witch prosecution, specifically singled out its feminine nature (*maleficarum*, not *maleficorum*) and reflected the misogyny of the underlying social structure. But given that carnival suspends the everyday religious order, curses and obscenities seem to no longer have their power and are part of the inversion and subversion of the world, contributing to the grotesque.

Danow notes that the most significant weapon of the medieval grotesque is laughter (Danow 1995, p. 36), but the laughing culture of carnival is ambivalent. It is not an individual activity, but rather, it is best interpreted as a mass emotional contagion that is not reflexive and spreads quickly through crowds (De Gelder et al. 2004; De Gelder 2006). "'Official' authority is subverted most of all by laughter, a current of slippery ambivalence" (Elliot 1999, p. 130). Jesters or tricksters who are allowed to speak their mind regardless of subordination are a good example of the way carnival works. The carnival fool, a madman, or clown is supposed to serve as a short-lived regent (Danow 1995), a king for laughs (Bakhtin 2015). Proper names are replaced by nicknames, there is a high degree of familiarity: you can slap each other on the shoulder, or even on the stomach (Bakhtin 2015). This appealed to the inherent intimacy of carnival interactions: carnival participants are on a familiar footing with each other regardless of their social standing (Bristol 2014; Burke 1978; Bakhtin 2015). Moreover, the town square as the focal point of the assembled masses shrinks the spatial continuum.

When James Twitchell decried the "trashing of taste" in America in the 1990s, he compared it to carnival culture that trades in *reductio ad obscenitatem* (Twitch-

ell 1993). This stands in stark contrast to Bakhtin's own understanding of carnival as a more truthful, more freethinking culture that is liberated from the confines of authority and the Church. It is inadvertently Bakhtinian that late-night comedy shows have become a staple of the American news landscape, where jesters like Jon Stewart or Stephen Colbert are universally considered to be more authentic than traditional pundits on mainstream TV (Hart 2013). By using carnivalesque language, engaging in the grotesque on a daily or weekly basis, late-night comedians accidentally laid the ground for the transformation of political communication as a whole into a carnivalesque space. As Bakhtin noted (2015), contemporary swearing has the same embodied and sexualized angle. If you send somebody on an erotic hike (i.e., tell a person to go fuck themselves), you are lowering the conversational plane to the grotesque level, to the body's bottom or to the places of the body where the person is born. If you send them to where they came from, it is a wish for the addressee to die, but nowadays that meaning is lost and only comes back in the carnivalesque interpretation.

Carnival, because it is multidirectional, enables a wide range of voices to engage in transgression, but it is the carnival fool, Trump, that directs this transgression at specific taboos: racism and gender equality. The next chapter, on multidirectional discourse, shows us how the transgression is executed and how Trump enables it. What matters is that by making it transgressive, Trump is making the far right *cool* and *edgy* and even *innovative*. This is the crux of his mainstreaming, how he makes politics carnivalesque and licenses anti-democratic transgression.