

# Chapter 7: Misogyny

## 7.1 Carnavalesque Misogyny

According to Bakhtin, carnival culture is inherently woman-phobic. If in the Gallic and mythical tradition men are supposed to be more fearful of their sons who might come to kill them and take their position in society or their throne—from Zeus and his daddy Chronos to Oedipus and King Laius (Bakhtin 2015)—in the carnival this fear is projected onto the woman who actually gives birth to the said son (Bakhtin 2015, p. 110). The fear is then projected onto women’s genitals as the place where the threat is supposed to originate—the “pussy” that Trump claimed to brazenly “grab.” Bakhtin himself connects this carnivalesque fear to the “fear of change and renewal [which] here appears in [the] form of fear of the horns [i. e., the fear of female infidelity, being cuckolded], of the betrothed, of the fate embodied in the image [of] woman who puts to death the old and gives birth to the new and the young” (Bakhtin 2015, p. 110). This type of fear still exists in Bakhtin’s native Russian language: one of the worst situations in which one can find oneself in is described through the obscene term for women’s genitals. In the ancient Slavic pagan culture that associated Mother Earth with a woman, the curse of death on someone was literally to send someone to the place from whence they were born—woman’s crotch.

In carnivalesque iconography, especially in the Middle Ages, women’s physical attributes played a major role (Kolyazin 2002). The full-body costumes—masks—depicted in the *Schoenbartbuch*, a very meticulous graphic illustration of the carnival in Nuremberg (*Schembartlauf*), featured several common characters, for instance, “demon with a bird head” or “a savage woman” that had exposed breasts, not to mention a mainstay of the procession—“an old hag” that would carry a bucket with a female doll that was supposed to indicate the sinful lust of the medieval bath houses. It is not surprising that it was the women who served as avatars of and were blamed for promiscuity (Leonardo and Chrisler 1992), not to mention being impugned for the spread of sexually transmitted diseases (Gilman 2019). This all fits very well with the folkloric tales of women with toothy vaginas trying to find and emasculate men during intercourse (Gaufman 2022) or at the very least give them a nasty venereal souvenir.

As a number of researchers have pointed out, Bakhtin is comparatively silent on the topic of gender (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). This is in stark contrast to the more recent (postcolonial) literature on carnival that specifically emphasized the gender-bending aspect of the

practice (Cowan 1994; Outar 2017). 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). The term ‘hag’ has been used to such an extent to shame women online that it led, in a very Bakhtinian spirit of reversal, to feminist appropriation of these appellations (Sundén and Paasonen 2018): “[the] feminist comedic universe [is] densely populated by woman-splainers, woman-spreaders, cuntblockers, absent mothers, female stalkers, middle-aged women with a taste for fresh meat, lesbophobia, old-girls-networks, and the occasional ‘good’ meninist girl.”

Misogynistic practices related to carnival are ubiquitous and the digital ecosystem has facilitated online flows of misogyny in numerous ways. Sarah Sobieraj (2018) noted in the aftermath of the Trump campaign how women are being driven out of digital spaces through at least three strategies, whereby online harassers intimidate, use femininity to undermine women’s contributions, and call attention to physicality. Indeed, digital misogyny should be viewed “not merely as a feeling, attitude or type of behaviour towards women but rather as a method or set of methods that are used—whether deliberately or subconsciously—to keep women ‘in their place’” (Ging and Siapera 2019, p. 2). The trend for digital misogyny was best exemplified by the Gamergate and “the fappening” online anti-feminist actions (Massanari 2017), where in the first case women and minority gamers and game developers were systematically harassed; and in the second, nude photos of female celebrities were acquired and shared via different platforms. There is a lot of evidence that both of these events were heavily motivated by revenge fantasies and geek masculinity that was further enabled by the toxic technoculture of online platforms (Banet-Weiser and Bratich 2019).

## 7.2 Trump’s Misogyny

It is not surprising, then, that a lot of Trump and far-right anxiety is connected to women’s behavior and femininity altogether. Several scholars have connected the Gamergate scandal (Merrin 2019) to one of the proto-Trumpian publics that emerged before the full-blown 2016 presidential elections actually took place. Moreover, the fear of emasculation is so mainstream that even Trump’s critics were obsessed with exposing Trump as less of a man (Kelly 2018; Smirnova

2018) and maintaining a certain gendered ideal of masculinity. Thus, even the idea of presenting Trump as the “toddler in chief” (Drezner 2020; Klikauer and Campbell 2020) or depicting him in diapers were essentially links in the same misogynistic train of thought. After all, accusations of “toddler tantrums” are essentially the same feminization technique that presupposes a rational male body as the norm versus an emotional, often female, body of the other (Jimenez 1997; Ussher 2013). By flying giant Trump baby blimps dressed in diapers or erecting naked statues of him with small penises, his opponents effectively reinforced a gendered hierarchy.

As Kelly Wilz points out (2016), the double standards of treating female politicians in the 2016 elections were on full display, where voices, appearances and demeanor of female presidential candidates were constantly criticized. Serial misogynists and abusers in the newsrooms (Poniewozik and Lyons 2017) often broadcast a politer version of what one could find on social media, with Donald Trump actively mainstreaming this type of discourse. *Saturday Night Live* highlighted Trump's misogyny in their cold open about the final presidential debate in October 2016 when Alec Baldwin as Trump proceeded to claim that “no one has more respect for women.”<sup>9</sup> The entire planet erupted into laughter at the deceit of this statement.

Another side of the carnival that we highlighted in previous chapters is related to the different types of voices that are heard. Trump himself sought to elevate more marginal ones that were not necessarily a part of the general discourse. One of the most effective platforms for him was, of course, Twitter, where he routinely re-tweeted accounts with very few followers as long as their posts resonated with his agenda. Trump was infamous for his misogyny even before the elections, routinely referring to women he did not like as dogs (Graham 2020; Boatright and Sperling 2019). One of many such cases occurred when Trump retweeted a meme that featured an unflattering picture of Ted Cruz's wife—at that point Ted Cruz was competing against Trump in the Republican primaries. The retweet featured a split-screen image with an unflattering photo of Heidi Cruz alongside a glamorous photo of Melania Trump. The tweet was captioned, “A picture is worth a thousand words.” The retweet drew criticism and sparked controversy, with many people considering it an inappropriate and personal attack on Heidi Cruz, but entirely unsurprising in the American misogynistic context where women's physical attributes are used in political argumentation (Sobieraj 2018).

The incident led to a heated exchange between the two candidates, with Senator Cruz condemning the retweet as inappropriate and calling Trump a “sniveling

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9 <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=-kjyltrKZSY>.

coward” who tried to “smear” his wife—yet more evidence of carnivalesque name-calling spreading beyond Trump himself and the social media context. In the context of the Republican primary campaign that featured repeated attempts to slut-shame Melania Trump, it is not unusual that the wives of the primary candidates were included in the discussion, not to mention his female primary opponent Carly Fiorina whose face was supposedly not up to his standards. Melania Trump, a former model who arrived in the US on a talent visa, was constantly objectified and orientalized by her husband, mainstream media, comedians, and social media users (Wiedlack 2019). If during the Republican primaries the right-wing commentators focused on her modeling career and revealing photoshoots, once Trump became the Republican candidate, it was the left’s turn to focus on her supposed sexualized transgressions and surgically enhanced looks (Weis 2023; Luthar 2023).

One of the most carnivalesque misogynistic moments of the 2015–2016 campaign was, however, the incident in the aftermath of the Republican primary debate moderated by then Fox host Megyn Kelly. In August 2015, Kelly asked Donald Trump about his past derogatory comments towards women: “You’ve called women you don’t like ‘fat pigs,’ ‘dogs,’ ‘slobs,’ and ‘disgusting animals.’ ... Does that sound to you like the temperament of a man we should elect as president?” After “correcting” Ms. Kelly, claiming that he had only referred to Rosie O’Donnell—which the audience laughed at—Trump replied:<sup>10</sup>

I think the big problem this country has is being politically correct. I’ve been challenged by so many people, and I don’t, frankly, have time for total political correctness. And to be honest with you, this country doesn’t have time either. This country is in big trouble. We don’t win anymore. We lose to China. We lose to Mexico ... And you know what? I’ve been very nice to you, although I could probably maybe not be, based on the way you have treated me. But I wouldn’t do that.

Trump’s response has several hallmarks of carnival here. For starters, he bemoans the shackles of political correctness instead of confronting his own disrespectful attitude. He is also essentially threatening Kelly in this interaction: by not agreeing with Trump’s rules of the game, Kelly might be downgraded to the level of those women he had previously insulted. Secondly, he legitimizes his misogynistic transgression by engaging a perceived sense of victimhood and veiled racist dog whistles by singling out non-white countries. Moreover, as Cuen and Evers (2016) demonstrate, in the 24-hour window after Trump refused to participate in a debate under her moderation, among the 80,000 tweets directed at Megyn Kelly’s Twitter

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10 <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=8f83CrDM0K4>.

handle, the following words were included: bitch (n=423), bimbo (n=404), blonde (128), whore (n=88), cheap (n=66), ugly (n=59), skank (n=39), cunt (n=34), slut (n=27), and hooker (n=13). This is entirely consistent with the kinds of abuse women are treated to during the carnival and outside of it.

Another carnivalesque outburst came after Trump was asked to comment on the altercation. Trump panned Kelly in his Don Lemon interview for CNN, saying her questions were “ridiculous” and “off-base.” “You could see there was blood coming out of her eyes,” “Blood coming out of her wherever.”<sup>11</sup> He later clarified his comment on Twitter by stating that he was referring to Megyn Kelly’s nose, but the phrase itself was widely interpreted as a derogatory and disrespectful remark towards women and it is of course a very carnivalesque one. Openly discussing bodily functions, blaming the woman for his own inadequacy, and transforming women into the abject are key features in this exchange. It is reminiscent of Klaus Theweleit’s (1987) study of *Freikorps* soldiers in Germany before World War 2 who describe women as a red tide crashing against their bodies, becoming metonyms for what flows, unrooting them from the German soil in which they feel at home. This red flow-simultaneously communist, feminist, and menstrual-reverberates in the Trump carnival’s construction of the female abject. Even the conservative camp was openly critical of the remark and the clarification. Penny Young Nance, CEO and president of the conservative group Concerned Women for America, told CNN that Trump’s “tantrum was even more enlightening than his original remarks she [Ms. Kelly] questioned” (CNN Wire 2015)

As Bakhtin (2015) notes,

The same carnival hell is an earth that absorbs and gives birth, it often turns into a cornucopia, the monster—death—turns out to be pregnant; various deformities—all these protruding bellies, huge noses, humps, etc.—turn out to be signs of pregnancy or reproductive force. (p. 45)

By discussing Kelly or Heidi Cruz in misogynistic terms, Trump is trying to make them into monsters that carnival ridicules and debases. The main issue here is the perceived loss of control over women.

For instance, 4chan users reveled in the “grab them by the pussy debate.” For them it was an issue of dispensing with what some users called “gynocentrism,” which they often attributed to antisemitic conspiracy myths, in which they associate a women-centric world with “open borders. Regulating speech. Big government [...] Marxism, communism.” In the end, some 4chan users expanded the metaphor

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11 <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=UZdX6WHACnk>.

to “grabbing civilization by the pussy” and restoring the influence to “MANkind.”<sup>12</sup> This type of rhetoric is very reminiscent of Klaus Theweleit’s (1987) analysis of the Nazi Freikorps argumentation: even the equation of women with Marxism and communism is eerily similar. The more typical ‘American’ contribution to the discourse is the association of the government with a ‘nanny state.’ According to Steven Ducat (2005), the ‘nanny state’ has been a particularly pervasive metaphor and object of fear in the right-wing political discourse as it is ultimately about the fear of emasculation and castration at the hands of women. The act of grabbing women’s private parts is something that is obviously taboo—not only from a legal perspective, but also from a normative one. Yet, during carnival, this prohibition is somewhat lifted and much closer encounters are permitted. The hierarchy reversal almost necessitates the establishment of the domination of the women, who are seen as dangerous by their potential to emasculate the men. Thus, “grab civilization by the pussy” becomes a rallying cry of transgression, where 4chan users imagine taking control by transgressing the norms of civility and sanctity of other bodies.

While Trump sets a misogynist example, the swarm that adores him online takes carnivalesque misogyny even further. Male supremacism and misogyny have long been fundamental aspects of far-right culture (Ferber 1998; Daniels 2009; Carian et al. 2022). The specter of the woman, as we note with Theweleit above, is a metonymic figure in which woman stands simultaneously for the “red flood” of (Jewish) communism crashing against the sturdy men of Germany as well as the projection of male desire and potency. After the flood recedes, it leaves behind a sticky mire that taints everything, rendering modernity a kind of morass of degeneracy. This is, without any doubt, a white supremacist imaginary that is by no means temporally limited to interwar Germany. In the United States, fears about ‘degeneracy’ emerged from the earliest days of slavery and remain today in fears about the sexual propriety of white women, ‘miscegenation,’ and transgressions of their ideal heteronormative order. While the woman appears as a central figure of derision in carnivalesque populism, the stakes are high in that the perception of having control of women, their bodies, and particularly their reproductive capacity is paramount to the Trump carnival.

Coalfax, a website that lists and details white females and black males in relationships with one another, is perhaps one of the most extreme creations of the misogynist swarm that venerates Trump’s derision of women. Using this platform as an extreme example, we will try to illustrate how the carnivalesque misogyny is

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<sup>12</sup> Based on the authors’ analysis of their archive of collected 4chan posts of October and November 2016.

deeply connected to the racist and white supremacist aspects of the Trump carnival among his supporters, already referenced in the Twitter response to Megyn Kelly, above. Coalfax is probably the most despicable thing to come out of far-right digital cultures—at least, perhaps the most despicable thing to be seen on the public-facing web. Riffing on Carfax, which provides reports on vehicle data for customers interested in used cars, Coalfax was meant to be a repository where one could find a report on a white woman before dating her. In particular, it was a website that hosted a list of white women, whose pictures were stolen from Instagram for example, that were in sexual relationships with Black men. The “coal” half of the website’s titular portmanteau comes from the white supremacist neologism, “coal burner,” which refers to a white woman that dates Black men. It was a doxxing website, essentially organized in the so-called ‘chanosphere’ (see Baele and Brace 2021), where anons (members of the chanosphere) would collect information on women and post their photos and personal details from social media on the website. The women were categorized into four groups and organized with “tags.” One of the tags was “toll paid,” which refers to white women who dated Black men but now find themselves in a difficult situation, e.g., single motherhood, or in more extreme versions, victims of domestic violence and even murder. Tagging women on Coalfax with “toll paid” involves the direction of laughter and pleasure at the misfortune of these women. In this example, we see the intertwining of extreme racial and misogynistic imaginary in the transgression of even the most fundamental norms of decency.

In fact, Coalfax networks were too extreme even for 4chan and 8chan, and briefly found a home on the obscure 9chan. The website’s domain changed a number of times; it was initially listed as coalfax.net before changing to coalfax.me and coalfax.ru (Baele and Brace 2021). Today it is completely unavailable, though vestiges and similar projects can be found on extremist platforms like Gab.ai and in obscure Telegram channels (see also Baele and Brace 2021). Coalfax represents many aspects of carnival coming together: the transgression of norms of decency by engaging in extreme defamation of women; the proliferation of multiple kinds of terms and insults to denigrate and dehumanize white women and the Black men with whom they were in relationships; and celebrating the misfortune of women whose relationships faltered or, in even more extreme cases, celebrating and reveling in the death of women at the hands of Black men because it fulfils the users’ racist prophecies.



### 7.3 Anti-Clinton Discourse

Misogyny was an integral part of the 2016 election campaign (Boatright and Sperling 2019), which broadly reflects public opinion polls that indicated that American society is not entirely ready for a female president, even though between 2008 and 2017 that opposition has been cut in half, from 26 % to 13 % (Burden, Ono, and Yamada 2017; Streb et al. 2008). As Barbara Spackman notes, “in a fascist topography of gender and sex, stepping out into the public sphere ‘masculinizes’ and ‘sterilizes’ women” (Spackman 1996, p. 35). This line of argumentation was extremely visible in the anti-Hillary Clinton discourse that is genealogically linked to the Republican campaign against Bill Clinton’s presidential campaign in the 1990s. The same ideas about ‘ball-busting’ first ladies—an integral carnivalesque fear—resurfaced again in their different iterations. Memes with Hillary Clinton being the shark from the movie *Jaws* that is supposed to devour the poor unsuspecting American created a parallel with one of the most common folkloric urban myths of the toothy vagina—*vagina dentata* (Otero 1996; Gaufman 2022), which is also a poignant carnival narrative (Noel 2010; Gilmore 2010).

As Ritchie argues, Hillary Clinton’s image had already morphed with one of a monster or a cyborg during the 2008 presidential campaign (Ritchie 2013). During her competition with Barack Obama, multiple misogynistic jabs at her were taken, including memes that represented her as a Terminator. But even the liberal-leaning and Democratic forces often embraced the misogynistic rhetoric of the far right. If Trump supporters would don T-shirts emblazoned with the slogan “Trump that bitch,” even SNL—in a broadcast on the eve of the election in October 2016, which racked up almost 30 million views—had Kate McKinnon as Hillary Clinton promising to be a “stone-cold B” in comparison to the F that a Trump presidency would be.<sup>13</sup> This goes to show that carnivalesque internalized misogyny was a staple during the presidential election campaign.

One of the most commonly cited examples of Trump’s misogyny is his “nasty woman” remark (Smirnova 2018). On October 19, 2016, during the final presidential debate, the discussion turned to the topic of social security and each candidate’s plans for it. Clinton criticized Trump’s approach to the issue, suggesting that his plans would ultimately benefit the wealthy at the expense of working-class Americans. In response, Trump interrupted Clinton and referred to her as a “nasty woman.”<sup>14</sup> In a very carnivalesque fashion, Trump sought to present Hillary Clinton as the ‘old hag’ of the carnivalesque procession. The remark garnered signifi-

<sup>13</sup> <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=-kjltrKZSY>.

<sup>14</sup> <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Q2KOQfZ0Zd0>.



cant attention and sparked widespread controversy and a backlash as sexist and disrespectful. Supporters of Clinton and women's rights advocates seized upon the incident as an example of the gender bias and derogatory language that women often face in politics and society. However, Clinton's supporters, especially many women, embraced the term 'nasty woman' as a symbol of empowerment, just like Trump supporters adopted Clinton's 'basket of deplorables' as a badge of honor and yet another sign of her disconnection from the 'real people'. It became a rallying cry and a badge of honor for many women who felt marginalized or dismissed by Trump's comments and his overall campaign rhetoric. Apart from "nasty woman" search queries, Google trends captures a very high interest in "nasty woman shirt" queries across almost all states.<sup>15</sup>

A fixation on the dangers of women's genitalia continued throughout Trump's presidency. In an attempt to reclaim the narrative from the right-wing misogynistic pundits, the late-night show comedian, Samantha Bee even instituted a special award in her *Full Frontal* show, called "Thundercunt" to honor journalists who have warned about Trump's danger to American society.<sup>16</sup> The first and last recipient of this award was CNN's journalist Jack Tapper who promised not to wear the T-Shirt that the *Full Frontal* team gave to him and not to mention the title of the award to his children. The term itself, according to Bee, emerged from Twitter. It was among the myriad instances of online abuse Bee herself had experienced over the years.

Bee's open critique of Trump did not stop at his presidency, but expanded additionally to his daughter Ivanka, who also assumed a role as "presidential advisor" in the Trump administration. The incident occurred on May 30, 2018, during a monologue about the Trump administration's immigration policies where Bee called out Donald Trump, former Attorney General Jeff Sessions, and former Secretary of Homeland Security Kirstjen Nielsen, as well as Ivanka. Amid the implementation of new racist immigration policies and the family separation scandal, Samantha Bee called Ivanka a "feckless cunt" because of Ms. Trump's failure to influence her dad's policies. Samantha Bee's comment sparked a significant backlash and controversy. Many viewers criticized her for using derogatory language and argued that it was inappropriate and disrespectful. *Buzzfeed News* complained that Ivanka deserved a "sharper critique" and not a "lazy insult" (Koul 2018); *The Guardian* argued that "cunt" remains the last word you cannot say on Amer-

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<sup>15</sup> <https://trends.google.com/trends/explore?date=2016-01-01%202016-12-31&geo=US&q=nasty%20woman%20shirt&hl=en-US>.

<sup>16</sup> <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=SdOUspS-djo>.

ican TV (Mahdawi 2018). Indeed, CBS news designated the term “a vulgar slur”<sup>17</sup> and ABC complained that the debate is over once comedy crosses the line.<sup>18</sup> Interestingly enough, two years prior to the incident, on another comedy show, Samantha Bee and Stephen Colbert performed a comedic bit on the different ways women can be allowed to reference their “bathing suit area.”<sup>19</sup> In 2018, following the backlash, Samantha Bee issued an apology, expressing regret for her choice of words and acknowledging that they were offensive and inappropriate. Bee stated that she had intended to criticize Ivanka Trump’s actions and not to attack her personally. The incident fueled discussions about the boundaries of acceptable language in political discourse and the role of civility in public debate: it seemed that transgression was only legitimate and allowed in the case of male participants of the carnival.

Of course, it is not only men who engage in (online) misogyny. Internalized misogyny was an important factor in shaping Trump’s presidential campaign and his presidency, where a number of female pundits and politicians engaged in anti-Clinton rhetoric from a gendered angle (Strolovitch, Wong, and Proctor 2017; Kune-mund 2019). It is widely considered that gender played an important role in the 2016 election campaign. Moreover, the gender issue did not seem to make any changes to Trump followers online (Wang et al. 2016): they stuck with him no matter what.

The misogyny did not stop with Trump’s election. During his presidency he invariably attacked not only Hillary Clinton, but also new members of Congress, especially women of color; and in particular, the so-called “Squad,” consisting of four women elected in the 2018 United States House of Representatives elections: Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez of New York, Ilhan Omar of Minnesota, Ayanna Pressley of Massachusetts, and Rashida Tlaib of Michigan. All four have been the target of vicious attacks by Trump himself and his online supporters who have engaged in disgusting behavior on their message boards. Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez, also known as AOC, who is often perceived as a populist herself (Cooper and Avery 2021), has been an especial target of numerous death threats, rape threats, and hate speech. Trump, for instance, has said that the four congresswomen should “go back and help fix the totally broken and crime-infested places from which they came” (Pengelly 2019). 4chan users alternated between lusting after AOC and re-

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17 <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=d5tYcliU3jA&pp=ygUaZmVja2xlc3MgY3VudCBzYW1hbnRoYS-BiZWU%3D>.

18 <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=N5hQbAduGQ&pp=ygUaZmVja2xlc3MgY3VudCBzYW1hbnRoYSBiZWU%3D>.

19 <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Q8MbSwCd78M>.

telling violent fantasies about “putting her in her place.”<sup>20</sup> Just as in the 16th century France, the carnivalesque “rites of violence” (Zemon Davis 1971) were supposed to discipline supposedly domineering women, the online mob tried to find an “iron muzzle” to silence and punish the women they don’t like.

Misogyny is an integral part of the carnival. While it is supposedly anti-authority and intended to enable the inversion of power, women and femininity altogether tended to stay put in the same heteronormative niche. The only temporary dispensation accorded was permitted promiscuity, but again, it carried stigma only for women, not for men, just like outside of carnival as well. The central role in the carnival is played by the fool, a male fool, who can be funny and allow himself to be ridiculed, especially if he is in on the joke, just like Trump was featured in all those SNL skits. For women, this role is much more precarious. As we explain below, ‘funny women’ have traditionally been restricted to several (visual) stereotypes, often dictated by carnival culture (Porter 1998). A fat, cheerful man can have a political career outside of carnival. A woman of the same stature not so much, at least, not yet.

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<sup>20</sup> Based on the authors’ analysis of their archive of collected 4chan posts of October and November 2016.