

Chapter 8: Sex and Materiality

Given that carnival is an antithesis of normal, highly religious Renaissance life, the former is also fascinated with the material aspects of existence. Hence, people are obsessed with body parts, bodily functions, sex, and material objects during carnival. As such, the body itself was supposed to be highlighted and represented in a very grotesque way. As Bakhtin himself noted (Bakhtin 2015):

the grotesque body is not delimited from the rest of the world, it is not closed, it is not complete, it is not ready, it outgrows itself, goes beyond its own limits. The accents lie on those parts of the body where it is either open to the outside world, that is, where the world enters the body or sticks out of it, or it sticks out into the world itself, that is, on holes, on bulges, on all sorts of branches and processes: open mouth, reproductive organ, breasts, phallus, fat belly, nose. The body reveals its essence as a growing and transcending principle only in such acts as copulation, pregnancy, childbirth, agony, eating, drinking, defecation. [...] This is always a fraught and birthing body, or at least a body that is ready for conception and fertilization—with an emphasized phallus or reproductive organ. (pp. 17–18)

In the quote above, Bakhtin emphasizes the transgressive nature of the body itself. By displaying the body, its orifices, and appendages, which are otherwise cloaked with clothing, carnival seeks to liberate not only the flesh but also the different bodily functions that the bounds of civilization are supposed to hide. Comedy shows constantly alluded to Trump's mouth as resembling a butthole (Jones 2017; Gilbert 2019) thus building a metonym such that whatever emerges from it is feces. There is even a whole philosophical theory about Donald Trump being an asshole (Meyer 2016; James 2016; Wahl-Jorgensen 2019), which again shows that even his critics engaged in the mode of carnivalesque abjection where the ridiculed person is supposed to be degraded to the extreme, physical bottom.

During the campaign though, as noted in the chapter on misogyny, it was women who were the targets of the carnivalesque abuse. No wonder that one of the most common ways of illustrating carnivalesque transgression is a fat female body (Brazier and LeBesco 2001; Arthurs 1999), a trope extremely common in American popular culture that is almost by default supposed to be raunchy, obscene, and "low class" (Warner and Savigny 2015): a quintessential carnivalesque. During the presidential election campaign, one of the main targets of Trump's ire was comedian Rosie O'Donnell, whom he called a "fat pig."²¹ If a fat female body is supposed to be funny in this male gaze, and to signify the grotesque, then certain types of female bodies are meant to be the object of another, lustful gaze.

21 <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ASd4-Vo7RAU>.

The pre-Christian origins of carnival were related to fertility rituals and connected to practices of phallic worship (Ahye 2000; Harris 2003; Cowan 1994). Moreover, the whole notion of carnival celebrates flesh and the sexuality associated with it, even though outside of the carnivalesque period, this celebration is not necessarily acceptable (Perkins 2011). This dichotomy is very visible in postcolonial readings of carnivalesque traditions, especially in the Caribbean, where celebration of the body was a transgression against the colonizer's ideology and rule (Cowan 1994; Outar 2017), not to mention an opportunity to perform a transgressive sexuality (Persadie 2021; Donnell 2014). Performing transgressive sexuality in the colonized context is an act of resistance, but what happens when the sexuality that is performed is very much in line with the dominant views? The transgression then moves to the area of displaced abjection, where non-conforming bodies are subjected to ridicule and violence. While the grotesque is a vital part of the ridicule and embodied experience, it is the metaphorical and sometimes literal bottom that should be the focus in carnival:

In the Middle Ages, a cheerful parodic grammar was very common [...]. The essence of this merry grammar boils down to the main way to rethink all grammatical categories—cases, forms of verbs and etc.—in the material and bodily plane, mainly erotic one. But not only parodies in the narrow sense, but also all other forms of grotesque realism reduce, land, make things corporeal. This is the main feature of grotesque realism, distinguishing it from all forms of high art and literature of the Middle Ages. Folk laughter, which organizes all forms of grotesque realism, has always been associated with the material bodily bottom. Laughter lowers the register and materializes. (Bakhtin 2005, p. 14)

As Ravenscroft and Gilchrist (2009) argue, there is a “hegemonic regulatory function” performed by the licensing of practices in gay pride parades. By restricting open celebration and the spectacle of queer bodies to a certain period of time, the gay pride parade does not necessarily normalize or mainstream the queer experience for the rest of the population. Of course, these celebrations are important to queer communities; but like the carnival, they do not inherently normalize queerness. In fact, pride parades have been used by autocrats to legitimize abhorrent anti-liberal policies and regimes. For instance, Russian Patriarch Kirill even claimed that the Russia's 2022 invasion of Ukraine was launched to prevent a gay pride parade in Donetsk (Moscow Times 2022).

8.1 Sex Sells

Let us not blame all the sex-centered discourse on Trump. As Matthew Baum has long argued, sex scandals have been the face of so-called soft news that helps sell

even boring foreign policy to the inattentive public (Baum 2002). One of the authors of this book, who was a teenager during the 1990s (it does not matter who), still remembers the avalanche of media reporting on what was back in the day called “The Monica Lewinsky scandal.” Of course, this was a very misogynistic way of reporting on the case of power abuse and infidelity perpetrated by one of the most powerful men in the world—former US President Bill Clinton. The media obsession with the minute details of the case led to many awkward sex-education-related conversations in one of the households that produced this book. Needless to say, the post-Soviet school system was not prepared to handle the discussions about different types of liquids, euphemisms for intercourse, and body shapes that the mass media around the world were eager to report. While there were no social media at the time, Monica Lewinsky became one of the most brutally shamed people in the world through the Internet (Dahl 2016) and by late-night comedians (Farnsworth and Lichter 2019), with the phrase “oral sex” appearing 162 times in *The New York Times* alone in 1998. While it is impossible to assess the exact impact the Bill Clinton sex scandal and subsequent impeachment trial had on American politics (Miller 1999), it has certainly influenced the way media normalized the discussion of sex acts on prime-time TV and in newspapers. On Amazon, it is still possible to buy “Hillary sucks but not like Monica” T-shirts, which are sold as a “funny election T-shirt.” Customers who bought it complained that the product smelled bad. We wonder why.

As carnival is laser focused on copulation, it is no wonder that male organs are supposed to be on discursive display. The world of carnivalesque phallic worship was especially visible due to the remarks made by another Republican presidential candidate—Marco Rubio. In early 2016, Rubio, seeking to criticize Trump, stated, “And you know what they say about guys with small hands ... You can’t trust them” (Jaffe 2016). The comment was seen as an attempt to mock Trump’s physical appearance and, by extension, his manhood, indirectly questioning Trump’s suitability for the presidency. It harked back to an old insult that had occasionally been directed at Trump over the years, suggesting that small hands were a sign of inadequacy or weakness. During a subsequent debate Trump felt compelled to defend the size of his hands, asserting that they were actually normal-sized and dismissing the notion that hand size correlated with any other aspect of a person’s attributes. The controversy surrounding Trump’s hand size gained significant media attention and became a topic of discussion during the campaign and was extolled ad nauseam by both mainstream news media and comedy shows with headlines such as “Trump defends size of his manhood, ‘little hands’” by ABC

News²² and “Trump defends his hands—again” by CNN,²³ with even supposedly sophisticated outlets like *The New Yorker* mocking Trump’s hands.

In the carnivalesque world of phallic worship, this incident provides a great illustration of how the election campaign had functioned on the level of the corporeal and ‘low culture.’ It is also indicative that Trump was not the one who initiated the discussion: in multidirectional discourse with multiple voices it is inevitable that someone else engages in the discussion about male appendages. Previously, these kinds of discussions in American politics were only implied and never discussed so openly (Appadurai 2021; Berger 2016), unless projected onto gun worship (Blanchfield 2018; Cohn 1987).

Another transgressive body manifestation was illustrated by the infamous *Access Hollywood* Tape that surfaced during the 2016 elections campaign. The scandal revolved around a leaked video that captured a conversation between Trump and Billy Bush, a television host, during their appearance on the entertainment news program, *Access Hollywood*, in 2005. The video, which was released by *The Washington Post* on October 7, 2016, featured a private conversation between Trump and Bush, where Trump made lewd and sexually explicit remarks about women. In the video, Trump boasted about using his celebrity status to engage in non-consensual sexual advances towards women, including comments about groping women without their consent. The remarks were widely condemned for promoting and normalizing sexual assault.

The revelation of the *Access Hollywood* Tape caused significant political turmoil during the presidential campaign. Trump faced immense backlash both within his own party and from the general public. Many prominent Republican leaders condemned his remarks, with some withdrawing their support or calling for him to step aside as the nominee. The scandal dominated headlines and further fueled the already contentious nature of the 2016 election. Even saying the word “pussy” on air was a transgressive challenge for a number of American pundits (Cameron 2020), where the anchors struggled and danced around the term that Trump had used. Even *The Daily Show* with Trevor Noah put asterisks in its description of what it called a “P***ygate Scandal.”²⁴ Large-scale protests against Trump’s election in November 2016 created a whole industry of knitting and selling pink “pussy hats” (Gökarksel and Smith 2017) that continued the handcrafted tradition of protest (Mandell 2019). Carnival is a marketplace too, after all.

22 <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Ve6I92hEozo&pp=ygUSdHJ1bXAgaGFuZHMgY29tZWRS5>.

23 <https://www.cnn.com/2016/03/21/politics/donald-trump-defends-hand-size/index.html>.

24 <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=LiPjWUn-PUo>.

Carnival's emphasis on material rather than spiritual life was particularly prominent in the Trump campaign. It was especially true for the focus on body parts. For what was probably a first, the size of a presidential candidate's penis actually came up during an American election debate (Mathis-Lilley 2016). One can argue that the physical features of presidential candidates have become increasingly important with the advent of TV and the visualization of politics (Bleiker 2016; Williams 2003; Hansen 2011), but none of the previous presidential campaigns were so extensively covered by news media and especially social media. Hardly any comedic segment on CBS, NBC, HBO, or Comedy Central failed to mention the size of Trump's allegedly small hands (Hopper 2016), his hair, or the color of his skin (e.g., "orange Hitler"), which is ridiculous in a political debate, yet normal in a carnival setting. Trump himself seems to be obsessed with body parts and close physical contact, as, for instance, his association with WWE and even active participation in matches shows. At the same time, wrestling has itself been identified as having carnival roots (Campbell 1996; Sehmy 2002), so the extent to which Donald Trump is a representative of carnival culture is itself grotesque.

Trump's philandering (Foran 2016) was particularly galling in respect of the traditional importance of the president of the United States' moral character, and showed that the 2016 election campaign genuinely signified a complete reversal of politics as usual. The (perhaps not so) surprisingly high voter support for Trump among evangelical and born-again Christian voters (Martínez and Smith 2016) can be primarily explained by carnival culture. Given that carnival is a temporary phenomenon and that it represents another life that one can live until repenting one's sins, many Trump voters stressed that they did not take Trump literally and admitted that his campaign was a way of winning office and did not reflect his true attitudes (Berman 2016).

Another side of this obsession with the body was related to the media and regular people's tendencies to focus on the body of the former First Lady Melania Trump, as well as Trump's opponent Hillary Clinton. In the latter case, Trump focused, in classic carnivalesque fashion, on ridiculing the supposedly infirm and weak body of his opponent, mocking her by exclaiming that he thought that she "needed a nap."²⁵ The grass roots inversion of that trope was the infamous body double conspiracy myth that was popular on social media in the US and beyond (Linville and Warren 2020; Gauffman 2023). According to the purveyors of this discredited theory, Hillary Clinton died of pneumonia and was replaced by a body double during the election campaign. The body double conspiracy is a carnivalesque phenomenon as it was very common for two actors to share one mask

25 <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=YvV0BJShGgg>.

(Roach 1995) or try to deceive the audience by having one actor wearing a mask or by means of one person wearing several masks.

As we mention above, focus on the body is vital in carnivalesque culture. Laughing about the body is integral and of course, laughing over disfigured or disabled bodies has been a staple of the carnival for centuries. In Trump's case, the target was Serge Kovalski. Serge Kovalski is a Pulitzer Prize-winning journalist who had previously worked for *The Washington Post* and currently works for *The New York Times*. He has a congenital joint condition, arthrogryposis, which affects the movement of his arms. During the rally, Trump criticized Kovalski for an article he had written in 2001, which claimed Trump supported the false assertion that thousands of Muslims in New Jersey celebrated the 9/11 attacks. As Trump spoke, he said, "poor guy, you got to see this guy" and flailed his arms and imitated Kovalski's physical disability,²⁶ seemingly mocking his mannerisms. The incident received widespread criticism from various quarters, including journalists, disability advocacy groups, and political opponents, although the crowd at the rally seemed to laugh at Trump's 'impersonation.' Many viewed Trump's actions as offensive and disrespectful, particularly toward people with disabilities. Trump, however, denied that he was mocking Kovalski's disability and insisted that he did not know what the journalist looked like, which was, of course, a lie. At the same time, Fox News created a compilation of Trump clips, most of them from after the Kovalski incident, where he appeared to mock other people like Ted Cruz, bank regulators, and US generals with somewhat similar 'physical comedy.' For the people in the comments section, that was evidence enough that the mocking was ok.²⁷

8.2 Violent Fantasies

While the incel movement obviously predates the Trump campaign, in many ways this ideology was emboldened by Trump, in part as a manifestation of carnival. The term 'incel' is a portmanteau of "involuntary celibate." It refers to an online subculture consisting of predominantly heterosexual men who claim to be unable to find sexual or romantic relationships despite their desires and efforts. Incels often congregate in online forums and communities where they discuss their experiences, frustrations, and beliefs. Some incel communities have gained notoriety for promoting misogynistic, violent, and hateful ideologies. Certain individuals within these communities express resentment and hostility towards women, blam-

26 <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=hFOy8-03qdg&t=19s>.

27 <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=CsaB3ynIZH4>.

ing them for their perceived lack of romantic or sexual success. Such views can manifest as misogyny, objectification, and even advocacy for violence against women. In other words, as Kelly and Aunsprach (2020) point out, incel discourse is “a white militant extension of compulsory sexuality that transforms alternative intimacies into violent masculinist fantasies of invulnerability and the sexual will-to-power” (p. 149). Essentially, by mainstreaming incel discourse, American media have changed the way in which conversations about sex are carried out (Bogetic 2023). Incels also use humor, which gives them (im)plausible deniability (Gothard 2021), but at their core they promote a reactionary and in many ways transgressive rhetoric that seeks to subjugate women and minorities.

An example of the ‘new way’ in which conversations about sex were carried out is Trump’s speech at the 2017 Boy Scout Jamboree (Regan 2017). In front of a crowd of teenagers, Trump waxed poetic about the glory days of one of his friends (?):

And he sold his company, for a tremendous amount of money, at the time especially. This is a long time ago. Sold his company for a tremendous amount of money. And he went out and bought a big yacht, and he had a very interesting life. I won’t go any more than that, because you’re Boy Scouts so I’m not going to tell you what he did.

Judging by the enthusiastic reception given to the speech, the Boy Scouts knew full well what Trump was not talking about. Apart from Jamboree capturing the atmosphere of one of Trump’s own rallies, where adoring crowds applaud and chant to Trump’s meandering monologues, the teenage boys were also drawn into the spectacle of Trump’s desirability by association with the supposedly decadent uber rich world of manly men. Do boys want to grow up like him? We hope not.

Trump’s physical characteristics did not necessarily lend to the creation of a profoundly virile image. That is why many supporters sought to amplify his masculinity through traditional visual means by depicting him in a more conventionally homoerotic and muscular way: numerous images of Trump with exaggerated pectoral muscles and biceps, featuring weapons, large cars, and other supposed attributes of manhood, became very common on social media, often re-tweeted by Trump himself or sold at his rallies by his supporters. Thus, even Trump himself was no longer embodied through his own physique but rather through the virile fantasy of what (probably he himself and) his supporters aspire to. This was a grotesque and unrealistic representation of virility that was supposed to reverse the hierarchy of what many of his supporters conceived of as a women-centric world. Trump’s photoshopped muscled body was often featured on T-shirts that are still sold on Amazon and are still sold at his rallies. The image of Trump as a muscular bodybuilder in the vein of Arnold Schwarzenegger or Sylvester Stallone serves as an avatar or even as a carnivalesque costume for his supporters to embrace. The grotesque steroid-enhanced

body, the overly emphasized muscles, the fleshiness that is supposed to convey extreme masculinity and desirability. At some point, Trump himself reposted a meme of his head photoshopped onto Sylvester Stallone's character, Rocky Balboa, the boxer from the eponymous movie. At the time, *The Guardian* posited that "no one knows what to make of it," but we do know what to make of it (Noor 2019). By hiding behind yet another mask of a muscular and hypothetically desirable man, he means to inherit those qualities himself and his base are supposed to pretend that this is why they vote for him.

The same applies to the images of Trump as a superhero. As Julian Schmid writes, comic books and specifically the superhero genre have a disproportionate effect on the way American politics is conceptualized (Schmid 2020). Moreover, the politics of superheroes, the vigilante ethos, and other hallmarks of the genre resonate with post-9/11 US foreign policy (Dittmer 2011, 2016). So it is no wonder that the genre and the cultural artifacts associated with it became a part and parcel of Trump's own rhetoric and his support. While many people dress as superheroes for Halloween, Trump and his base often dressed him up as such online, with Trump at some point even suggesting that he is as inevitable as Thanos, a supervillain appearing in American comic books published by Marvel Comics (Boje 2020; Knopf 2021). In a sense, Trump was right: he was inevitable. Whether we want it or not, the press will platform him as a former president. At the same time, it was remarkable that Stephen Colbert refused to say the former president's name on his show, correctly identifying Trump's brand as one of his strengths and instituting a type of cordon sanitaire, at least on this level of media engagement (De Jonge and Gaufman 2022).

8.3 The Stormy Daniels Affair

In 2011, it was reported that Donald Trump had had an affair with Stormy Daniels, an adult film star. According to Ms. Daniels, the affair lasted for several months. Trump, who was married to his current wife Melania Trump at the time, has denied the affair. However, as the 2016 presidential election neared, it was alleged that in October 2016 an agreement was made between Trump's personal lawyer, Michael Cohen, and Stormy Daniels in order to conceal the affair. The agreement involved a \$130,000 payment to Daniels as part of a nondisclosure agreement (NDA) to keep the affair confidential. In January 2018, *The Wall Street Journal* published a report revealing the existence of the alleged hush money payment. This disclosure led to widespread media coverage and public attention surrounding the affair and the arrest of Michael Cohen, who pled guilty to federal campaign finance regulations and tax evasion in relation to the scandal. Following the public revelation,

Stormy Daniels filed a lawsuit seeking to invalidate the NDA, claiming that it was void because Trump did not sign it. She also argued that the agreement violated campaign finance laws. Trump and his legal team sought to enforce the NDA. Amid the controversy, other women came forward with allegations of past affairs with Trump or of being subjected to inappropriate behavior by him. Notable among them was Karen McDougal, a former Playboy model who claimed to have had a relationship with Trump around the same time as the alleged affair with Ms. Daniels. In 2018, Trump's legal team and Stormy Daniels reached a settlement, resulting in the dismissal of the lawsuit. As part of the agreement, Ms. Daniels was released from the NDA, allowing her to speak publicly about the alleged affair. And speak she did.

Apart from the numerous interviews in mainstream media, including the very reputable "60 Minutes," Stormy Daniels appeared on several late-night shows: for instance, she was featured in an SNL skit—"Michael Cohen Wiretap Cold Open"²⁸—where she played herself, made jokes about her line of work and "not being known for her acting," asked Trump to resign, and made a double entendre about climate change. On Jimmy Kimmel, she gave an 11-minute interview in which she "talk[ed] about the press release that just came out saying that the affair with Donald Trump never happened, the aftermath of the Trump sex scandal, whether or not she has a non-disclosure agreement, Trump bringing the three women who accused Bill Clinton of inappropriate sexual behavior to a debate with Hillary, the In Touch article, the size of Trump's junk, and plays a round of 'Never Have I Ever.'"²⁹ Even the description on YouTube featured the penis discussion, not to mention the fact that after Ms. Daniels revelation, a mushroom emoji has also become yet another way to mock Trump and discuss his supposed physical inadequacy. The numerous innuendos and puns that *The Late Show* with Stephen Colbert used in Colbert's monologue descriptions had some kind of reference to sex: "Trump's less than magic mushroom," "Porn Star Wars," "the fellate show," "spank of America" are only some of the banners that were used to discuss the actual case of campaign finance violation, which was reduced to the discussion of sex and body parts.

One of the more initially bewildering shows of support for Trump's campaigns and presidency came from the white evangelical electorate. Evangelical leaders David Brody, Jerry Falwell Jr., Franklin Graham, and Robert Jeffress defended Trump during the scandal because he was supposedly an "imperfect vessel" sent to protect evangelical values (Smith and Connable 2021). However, evangelical

28 <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=K1K8s-tQGqY>.

29 <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Ntl5Da1vblI>.

Christian support for Trump is not at all surprising if we look at his candidacy through the carnivalesque lens. The act of essentially legitimizing sexual transgression and misogyny fits well with the transitive nature of the carnival that is supposed to uphold the existing social order. In other words, Trump did deliver on some of his promises to the evangelical electorate, including the ultra-conservative Supreme Court. Carnival does allow sexual transgression as long as once it is over the transgressor can pray for forgiveness and return to the fold. Trump did not even have to pray for forgiveness for his actions.

Another mode of sexual transgression that the media latched onto was the emphasis on Trump fantasizing about having sex with his daughter Ivanka. SNL also joked about mistaking his current wife Melania for a “Bangable daughter” in a cold open in October 2015 that amassed 15 million views.³⁰ And in their cold open about the last presidential debate on October 23, 2016, Kate McKinnon, impersonating Hillary Clinton, produced a bingo card of what Trump was supposed to have said, featuring a square with “If she wasn’t my daughter.”³¹ Incest is one of society’s most harsh taboos, so it was not surprising that Trump’s comments on the sexual attractiveness of his daughter were taken literally and blown out of proportion. After all, as a long-time owner of the Miss Universe pageant, Trump probably considered himself an expert on women’s physical attractiveness and wanted to increase his status by associating with beautiful women and claiming their beauty as his.

Sex and materiality are obviously part of life. While consumerism is often celebrated discussing the latest sexual exploits and kinks is supposedly “locker room talk”—Trump’s justification for the *Access Hollywood* Tape. Even though it seems that there is much less stigma associated with queerness and non-traditional relationships in popular culture, there is also a massive backlash towards this visibility among the reactionary and very mobilized electorate. There is a reason that Ron DeSantis is trying to capitalize on Trump’s supposed leniency towards the queer community. There is also a reason why the ironic “Thanks, Obama!” has morphed into the “Fuck Joe Biden!” chant at Republican rallies. It’s not about a sex-positive environment, it’s about establishing dominance via the only method the far right can imagine.

³⁰ <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Ft5XUalltuY>.

³¹ <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=-kjltrKZSY>.