

## Chapter 9: Conclusion

This project started in 2016 after a sleepless night watching the election result forecasting tool of the *New York Times*, the ‘needle’, slowly lean towards the red side on November 8. Incredulity over Trump’s victory quickly translated into “Not My President’s Day” marches across the United States in February 2017. Four years of Trump’s presidency followed—something that even SNL comedians did not predict. Despite the funny sketches, there was nothing to laugh about outside of the studio. On the other hand, once Trump lost the elections in 2020, his supporters engaged in the ultimate carnivalesque act of reclaiming the power that they thought was taken away from them. By claiming that the elections were rigged, even ahead of his own 2016 win, Trump eroded his public’s trust in this democratic institution. Hence, the storming of the Capitol in January 2021: while Trump may have thought that he could hold on to power by instigating the insurrection, material from the January 6 Commission shows a significant number of people believed they had the right to transgress: to break down doors, windows, defecate in public, steal, declare that 6 million dead Jews were not enough, and wear horned fur hats in the chambers. And yet, many analysts consider a 2024 Trump win a distinct possibility.

Bakhtin’s carnival is “the apotheosis of unfinalizability” (Morson and Emerson 1990). What this means is that whatever happens during the carnival will not continue beyond it: everyone knows that carnival is limited. So whatever reversal of hierarchy or merriment you enjoy during it will be over sooner or later, when Lent takes over. This unfinalizability was a hallmark of the Trump campaign: only a handful of people believed in the Trump win during the first election campaign; many thought the campaign was the ultimate goal in itself, for branding or other reasons. So what happens, when Lent does not follow the carnival? What are you supposed to do when the carnival fool who grabs women by the pussy actually becomes the town’s mayor, or, in this case, the head of one of the most powerful states in the world? This is when all the supposed merriment of carnival starts to sour. Once the carnival fool who wants to burn the witches is in power, who will be able to stop them? There is ample evidence that once populists come to power, they continue the demonization practices on which they campaigned (Pirro and Taggart 2023). As a political strategy, carnival is ambivalent: it can liberate the marginalized, but as we have seen, it can unleash reactionary tendencies that exacerbate oppression rather than overturn the status quo. It will not lead to the political change it professes, because ultimately, it will keep things the way they are and make things worse for those who were never in power.

Trump’s carnival has fundamentally altered American politics. On the right, the carnival has never stopped. The transgression of the basic norms of democracy remains a feature of its politics. This is most evident in the fact that each time Donald Trump has been charged with crimes that include election fraud—despite him having sworn to uphold the Constitution—Republicans *increase* their support for him. In Florida, Ron DeSantis has pushed forward an obscene revision of the historiography of slavery, with grade school class lessons expected to refer to the useful ‘skills’ that slaves had learned. Along with Texas Governor Greg Abbott, DeSantis and their Republican supporters take joy in defrauding migrants and asylum seekers, sending them to Martha’s Vineyard and the Naval Observatory in DC in order to “own the libs.” Having once reached their destination, the people were stranded, unhoused, without food, and often many miles away from the courts where they had to appear in order to have their asylum application considered. The inhumanity of treating the people this way, despite their legal right to claim asylum, is a show that speaks only to the cruelty and inhumanity that Trump’s carnival has normalized. This callous and unconscionable endeavor—sending some of the most vulnerable people in the world to cities across the US with no regard to their obligation to appear in courts in entirely different parts of the country just to make a political point—is a despicable transgression of even the most basic norms of human dignity. The cruelty is also the point in the carnival culture as well. Sometimes it’s about physical abuse, often about ridicule. By scapegoating marginalized groups, connoting them as revolting and incapable of assimilation, it is possible to normalize the engagement in racist rhetoric as carnivalesque freedom.

The ferocity with which the GOP’s base support Trump demonstrates the enduring power of the carnival. Trump can violate the Constitution, yet the throngs of carnival-goers at his rallies and his supporters in opinion polls in 2023 suggest that these violations even enhance Trump’s standing in his base. The more cruelty is expressed, the more the norms of decency, humanity, and dignity are violated, the more the righteousness of Trump’s politics are affirmed. Today, as we approach the Republican primary, it is clear that Trump has deeply altered right-wing politics in the US. This is particularly evident when we look at what is likely to be the ephemeral arc of Vivek Ramaswamy, the biotech huckster running in the Republican primary, who frequently castigates the ‘victim culture’ of the left, yet—just like other far-right politicians—constantly synthesizes the falsehood that ‘woke’ culture, ‘political correctness,’ and ‘diversity’ are marginalizing everyday (read: ‘white’) Americans. This victim culture is endemic to the right, and is central to the transgressions of the Trump carnival. Ramaswamy’s proposals—such as laying off vast swathes of the federal government or changing the voting age—are so ludicrous they could only be conceived in the suspension of truth that sustains the

Trump carnival. What is frightening is that it seems the pundits and producers in the broadcast industry have learned almost nothing from 2016; Ramaswamy's bellicosity and polemic certainly make for great TV (just like Trump), but the constant invitations he receives only give him more opportunity to pander to the excesses of the carnivalesque square that Trump's campaign established.

Carnival reinforces existing societal hierarchy and safeguards the prevailing social order. It is no inherently revolutionary force for the liberation of anything other than the will for domination and power amongst those forlorn to lose their sanctioned superiority in the advance of democracy. More ominously, it provides discursive legitimization for violence against marginalized groups. We are not positivists at all in our analysis, but even we can recognize a spike of violence towards marginalized communities in the US. Southern Poverty Law Center 2016 statistics show an increase in anti-immigrant and anti-Black, anti-LGBTQ, antisemitic and anti-Muslim crimes. Trump's racist rhetoric correlates with this uptick in racist crimes. Trump calls Covid "the China virus" and an anti-Asian hate crime wave engulfs the country. Words matter, especially those that strip the humanity from people already marginalized by the existing social structures. A laughing culture cannot be an excuse for racism; it has been so for too long. When you laugh at blackface 'Jim Crow' and treat him as an object of pleasurable consumption, it suddenly seems normal to deny him rights and humanity. It's just a joke, chill! It is political correctness that is the real oppressor!<sup>32</sup>

One of the main differences between Trump's carnival and the original carnival is the extent of the elite's involvement in the carnival. After all, in the latter, it is their decision to allow it to happen. They also serve as a punchline for jokes. But the Trump carnival was different. Not only because in many ways he assumed the central role to be played in the carnival—the trickster—but also because by employing carnivalesque techniques, he made himself less vulnerable to the carnivalesque critiques of his opponents. He was right when he said that if he shoots somebody in the middle of Fifth Avenue, nothing will happen. Transgression becomes cool, a mark of accomplishment, a feature of "winning" and "owning the libs" who are stupid enough to follow all those rules. The fact that Trump's indictments haven't affected his approval rating (if anything, they have had a positive effect) shows that transgression perpetrated by those in power is completely legitimized. We could also include a *Family Guy* skin color matrix to show that Trump being

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<sup>32</sup> Just in case someone takes these two last sentences out of context, we are being sarcastic! For the record, we do not think that political correctness is the real oppressor. And while you are reading this footnote, slavery was bad too, despite current Republican attempts to rephrase it as "slaves learning useful skills."

white plays a critical role, but if you reached this conclusion, you already know that from the rest of the book.

While this book focused on the Trump election campaign and presidency, the carnivalesque framework can also help us de-provincialize Trump (Rosa and Bonilla 2017): the ideology of transgression, white supremacy, colonial and racial legacies are often part of other carnivalesque candidates' bids for power. Yet, it is important to note that currently, there is another presidential candidate in the US that embraces many of Trump's policies without the trickster flair and other carnivalesque practices—Ron DeSantis. However, without the laughing culture and sex, his policies can be categorized as simply fascist (Giroux 2022). Whether the other GOP candidates will be the Lent that ends the Trump carnival remains to be seen, though it seems the square remains abuzz. After all they are not far from each other policy-wise. The carnival is not over, the rules are broken and it is up to Americans themselves to fix them.