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The Problem with Clowns: Political Perpetrators and Their Comedic Critics

Abstract: Political clowns engage in statutory, cultural, and discursive crimes. While statutory crimes are available for litigation and resolution, cultural and discursive crimes are not. To comment and correct those actions, we turn to comedic clowns to police and parody political perpetrators. Those parodies and take-downs are clever, but they do not affect the behavior of the perpetrators, nor do they the result in the resolution of repetitive and stressful experience. Instead, those parodies produce familiarity, potential retraumatization, and coverage. The problem with clowns is that critical attention increases the reach of their influence and the assumption of their inevitability. This condition has hardened our political discourse and divisions and made it difficult to see civic enactments, such as elections, as productive or therapeutic in this age of cultural trauma. This article has four sections and a discussion. Part one discusses the clown as a perpetrator of discursive crimes. Part two explores how public commentaries on clownish political perpetrators both keep them in the public eye and excuse their actions as a joke. Part three focuses on how comedic response specifically repeats the discourse of perpetrators and runs the risk of retraumatizing their spectators. Part four examines how perpetrators employ self-clowning to invite derision and to delegitimize critique. The article will close with discussion of what currency we can find in the ideas of truth and reconciliation.

Our current crop of political clowns engages in three types of crimes: statutory, cultural, and discursive. Statutory crimes are crimes of motive. They are the easiest to identify and provide the clearest avenues for civic response. Legal systems are in place to establish the level of proof in cases of fraud, obstruction, defamation, extortion, and perjury. Cultural crimes are crimes of means. It is easy for political agents to appeal to extant hatreds and divisions, but it is difficult to litigate those appeals because they are protected speech. We do not have systems in place to tie complaints about China or legislation restricting drag shows, for instance, to violence against

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Asian or LGBTQIA+ citizens or to show that a reduction in such speech would lead to a reduction in violence. Specific institutions can police hateful or uncivil behavior, but to condemn divisive speech as crime is often to invite the perpetrators to present themselves as victims.[1] Discursive crimes are crimes of opportunity. The now general belief that language is slippery and our postmodern recognition of the space between the sign and its referent allows contemporary politicians in the U.S. and elsewhere to say whatever they want and to defend those statements however they might, if they even bother. This condition produces exhaustion in those who seek to police lies and provides coverage for those who use them to further their agendas and celebrity.

The problem with clowns is that critical attention increases the reach of their influence and the assumption of their inevitability. Our repetitive contempt for dangerous, political performers leads to a resigned familiarity with their persistence and outsized influence. Our reliance on late-night comedians to critique their actions reduces their crimes to antics and we citizens to spectators. This article has four sections and a discussion. Part one discusses the clown as a perpetrator of discursive crimes. Part two explores how public commentaries on clownish political perpetrators both keep them in the public eye and excuse their actions as a joke. Part three focuses on how comedic response specifically repeats the discourse of perpetrators and runs the risk of retraumatizing their spectators. Part four examines how perpetrators employ self-clowning to invite derision and to delegitimize critique. The article will close with discussion of what currency we can find in the ideas of truth and reconciliation.

Clowns and Words

I will say more about discursive crimes below, but first a word about clowns. I use the term "clown" because populist, nativist, and authoritarian politicians have stormed the stage, particularly though not exclusively in the United States, and their discourse is full of the ridiculous, the dangerous, the contemptible, and the performative. There is a clownish element to contemporary campaigns, to their coverage in the press, and to political performances of successful candidates after they win and unsuccessful candidates after they fail to admit defeat. Congresswoman Marjorie Taylor Greene was called a clown for carrying a balloon around the halls of Congress ahead of President Joe Biden's 2023 State of the Union Address. Former newscaster, election denier, and failed gubernatorial candidate, Kari Lake has been called a clown

by members of her own party. Congressman George Santos was on the 15 March 2023 cover of *The Advocate* in clown makeup. Joe Biden called Donald Trump a clown during their presidential debates and then apologized for doing so. A long list of victorious and defeated election deniers and Trump supporters are regularly dismissed as clowns, unable or uninterested in distinguishing between a joke, a lie, and the truth.[2] Trump's own clowning is presented as his Achilles' heel, his one great talent, and as a sturdy defense to charges ranging from racism to inciting insurrection.

I use the term "clown" also because we turn to professional clowns (comedians, talk show hosts, and celebrities) to expose and protect us from these jokesters, bombasts, and grifters. Our late-night talk shows are hosted almost exclusively by comedians, most of them men. In addition to the soft interviews of actors, writers, and other celebrities, they provide an interested, critical, and comic commentary on the civic and cultural crimes of political perpetrators. While the language has become more aggressive since the 2016 presidential election, the format and the faith in the power of parody and contempt are traditional and familiar. The host comments on the news of the day, exposes the clownishness of whichever political figure has transgressed, models amusement and outrage at the event, and then directs the audience to a derisive and comforting version of the truth. The idea is that laughter exposes hypocrisy and falsehood, and that once we see that the emperor has no clothes, we, and everyone else, will cease to participate in the hyperreal charade of their power.

These half-therapeutic and half-prosecutorial performances have been going on for some time. Some examples: in his monologue of 21 March 2023 on Trump's call for protests should he, Trump, be indicted, Jimmy Kimmel made fun of speaker of the house Kevin McCarthy's suggestion that Trump is not actually calling for protests but rather self-education ("Jimmy"). Kimmel quotes Trump directly to expose McCarthy's hypocrisy, including highlights of Trump's all-caps claims about the end of American and the need "to take the nation back." The audience laughs appreciatively, and both they and Kimmel go on to the next set of jokes. These include jokes about Trump's poor spelling and small hands. Jimmy Fallon jokes about getting Trump's fingerprints from the Cheetos dust on his diet coke cans ("Jimmy"). James Corden makes a pun about Trump being screwed twice in the investigation into paying hush money to a porn star (Chilton). Just one post from Trump on his own social media platform shows up on all the major news platforms and results in both comedy and threats of real violence.

This is the problem with clowns. They will not leave the stage, and we cannot laugh them off. They trade in the figures of hyperbole, feigned grievance, and misdirection. This allows them to say whatever they might, while denying responsibility for the consequences, intended or not. In her comments on Trump's call for protest, Rachel Maddow says that Trump is playing with fire.[3] What he is actually playing with is language. He is not alone. Trump is not a master of the posted word, but he is an active participant in the hyperrealities that such discourse produces, and he benefits from language's particular contemporary slipperiness. Jean Baudrillard is not the first to tell us that language is not transparent nor that it draws attention to itself. In the discussion of the four signs, he reminds us that language points at reality, distorts it, hides its absence, and disconnects from it entirely (Baudrillard 6). Trump and other clowns are perpetrators of discursive crimes in that they take advantage of the opportunity of indeterminacy to trade in lies, alt-facts, and immediacies as if they are on the same footing as truth, inquiry, and thoroughness.

James Kinneavy is not the first to divide discourse into specific categories, but he does give us a way to understand what kind of thing a text is and how difficult it is to ascribe responsibility (Kinneavy). He divides discourse into the expressive, the referential, the persuasive, and the literary. Expressive discourse is the realm of the speaker and of emotions. It is where we present surprise, joy, anger, excitement. It is difficult to argue with, for it is, finally, what the speaker says they feel. Referential discourse is the realm of reality. It is the discourse of pointing, definition, discovery, and verdict. This is Aristotle's forensic discourse, concerned with what has happened and what is. Persuasive discourse is the realm of the audience. It is discourse designed to move others to understanding, value, or action. Here is where the anxiety about rhetoric comes from, the concern that we will be moved to the ill rather than the good.

Literary discourse is the realm of figure. It is discourse that draws attention to representation, art, pleasure. When we say that Trump puts on a show at his rallies, we are suggesting that he is an entertainer, providing an aesthetic experience. If the attendees go burn down an FBI office afterwards, that's neither his fault, nor his intent. If he posts a screed about how democrats want to destroy America and that we have to take the country back, that's just self-expression. The same argument holds for the year-round yard signs and the flags on the back of pick-up trucks. They are defensibly offensive as self-expression or art.

To paraphrase Baudrillard, everywhere is the circus. Contemporary political speech and politics swing rather narrowly between the third and fourth sign. The third sign is the exaggerated

or faux version of a thing that serves to hide its absence in the real or conventional world. Disneyland hides the absence of happiness or community in small-town America. Prisons hide the absence of freedom in the wider culture. Trump's out-loud narcissism and incompetence hide the absence of civic virtue and qualifications in the current Republican Party and in U.S. democracy as a whole. A discursive function of Trump's later imitators is that their absurdities hide the lack of seriousness and coherence in his own positions and speech. By being the most hyperbolic of the commentators himself, Trump hides the absence of reasonableness in the calls for calm in the discourse of his supporters. Given that concealment is a consequence of fake representation rather than a goal or motive, it is difficult to identify the perpetrators or to ascribe motive. Means just looks like a function of grievance or a joke. To apply Kinneavy, when perpetrators are accused of false reference or incitement to ignorance, hatred, or violence, they can say that they were only engaging in the expressive discourse of grievance or the literary discourse of joke. Putting aside the appeals to free speech, those two moves would have likely made up the substance of Fox Corporation's defense in the Dominion Voting Systems defamation lawsuit. They were clowns, expressing their sadness or making us laugh.

Contempt Breeds Familiarity

Here is the difficulty of the job we have given to our comedic talk shows. We want them to entertain and also to expose the dangerous and ridiculous discourse of the ignorant, the hateful, and the contemptuous. The problem is that contempt breeds familiarity and not the other way around. Most of us first discovered Georgia congresswoman Marjorie Taylor Greene in February 2021 when the House voted to strip her of committee assignments for incendiary comments and encouragements to violence. Here is how National Public Radio reported the vote and Greene's defense of her previous comments:

> The Georgia freshman has come under fire in recent weeks for her history of trafficking in racism, anti-Semitism and baseless conspiracy theories, along with her support for online comments encouraging violence against Democratic officials prior to taking office.

Greene spoke on the House floor ahead of the vote and said her past comments 'do not represent me.' (Sprunt)

In that speech, Greene rejects her past QAnon beliefs, admits to the reality of school shootings and the 9/11 attacks, and asks, "Will we allow the media, that is just as guilty as QAnon of presenting truth and lies, to divide us?" In responses to Greene's half-apology, Stephen Colbert suggested that "This is the new GOP! They want credit for recognizing reality."[4] Taking a joke about Greene to be a comment on the entire GOP expands the familiarity to the entire party.

Most Americans would be hard pressed to name their own congressperson, let alone one from the other side of the country, and yet here we are, our news feeds full of articles on the incendiary comments of otherwise ineffectual and inarticulate congresspeople. Since that speech, Greene has been mocked for claiming that wildfires are a product of "Jewish Space Lasers," complaining about Nancy Pelosi ordering "the gazpacho police" to spy on members of congress, and suggesting that the Founding Fathers would be in support of a national divorce between the red and blue states. What she has not done is leave the national stage or suffer professionally.

In fact, her discourse has become both more incendiary and more focused on the internal enemy. During a rally for Trump in October of 2022, Greene said that "I'm not going to mince words with you all. Democrats want Republicans dead. They've already started the killings." She added the following: "We will take back our country from the communists who have stolen it and want us to disappear. We will expose the unelected bureaucrats, the real enemies within, who have abused their power and have declared political warfare on the greatest president this country has ever had" (Zitser). She regularly calls democrats communists, out to destroy America. Just as regularly, she is called crazy, silly, and ridiculous on late-night talk shows (*Daily Show* "Marjorie"). This focus on enemies and victimhood is right out of the perpetrator playbook, but the mockery and contempt that has met these and other comments have not reduced Greene's profile. A change in leadership has seen her appointed to the Homeland Security Committee and the House Oversight Committee in January of 2023.

Critiques of Greene are funny and now almost exclusively parodic, the regular fare of the late-night talk shows. Comedians present clips of her from her appearances on news shows and then parody her voice. With parody, both the speaker and the audience are in on the joke. In his

parodic response to Greene's call for a national divorce between red and blue states, Seth Meyers of *Late Night with Seth Meyers* said:

> A National Divorce? 'A National Divorce was the VISION of the Founding Fathers. I know, because I time-traveled in a semi-conscious state and talked to them.'
>
> How about this? This will be the compromise: Instead of Red States getting a divorce from Blue States, America gets a divorce from Greene? She's definitely dressed for it. Remember when she showed up to the State of the Union screaming at Joe Biden in a white fur collar, like she was demanding sole custody of the Maltese? ("*Late Night*")

Colbert offers this fake quotation from Abraham Lincoln in his take on Greene's claim that a national divorce would not be a civil war: "A house divided against itself is actually a lot stronger than it is right now! Vaccines have microchips!" Self-conscious and hyperbolic lies are offered to hold perpetrators responsible for their discourse, but only in the sense that they are being foolish, clowns. The House vote to strip Greene of her committee assignments was a serious effort to hold Greene responsible for her words (Sprunt). It did not work either. What we get instead is familiarity. She continues to garner national contempt and attention—the latest being visits to incarcerated January 6th rioters (Macaro) and abusive questioning of witnesses before congressional committees (Pitofsky)—and there is talk of her being Trump's running mate in the 2024 presidential election (Smith).

Donald Trump's own persistent familiarity is a numbers game. It is estimated that he received some five billion dollars of free publicity during his first, successful campaign for the presidency. There has been no slacking of attention. Though much better known that Greene, his arrival at permanent political familiarity was much like hers. Like Greene, he was punished for his use of hateful discourse at the very beginning of his political career. The comments he made about Mexican immigrants at the announcement of his candidacy led directly to his being fired from his TV show, *The Apprentice*. These were not his first public forays into racist discourse, and they have not been his last. As with Greene, there was some expectation that he would either alter that discourse or be regulated to the unserious and clownish section of the campaign. The "covfefe" tweet was his gazpacho moment, and his flubs and errors are still held up to ridicule. He has called himself a "very stable genius," and in a rather prescient and ironic moment, he warned the president

of Iran in all caps that "We are no longer a country that will stand for your demented words of violence and death. Be cautious."[5]   The comic contempt with which these and other posts and policies have been met has done little if anything to reduce Trump's familiarity or standing among hardline supporters.

Here is where familiarity moves into inevitability. What seems inevitable is the cycle of condemnation, mockery, and escalation. Trump's complaints have focused, much like Greene's, on the enemy within. His screeds against Manhattan District Attorney Alvin Bragg Jr. and Fulton County District Attorney Fani Willis sound very like his January 6 speech on the national mall ahead of the riot, though, again, Trump has turned up the racism, calling Bragg an animal and Willis a racist (Goldiner). Both Bragg and Willis are Black. In a social media post on Bragg, Trump lumped all of his critics and investigators into one conspiratorial group, closing the post with, "They spied on my campaign, Rigged the Election, falsely Impeached, cheated and lied. They are HUMAN SCUM!" (Levin "Donald"). This "they" figured prominently in a campaign rally in Waco, TX, where Trump made an escalating series of threats. These included "Either the deep state destroys America or we destroy the deep state," "I am your retribution," and "2024 will be the final battle" (Linton and Watson). The lack of surprise from both critics and supporters of the former president speaks to this idea of inevitability, both regarding his continued central and familiar place in contemporary politics and the increasingly apocalyptic and aggrieved tone of his discourse.

The responses of earnest and comedic critics have also been familiar. Some one hundred and fifty former federal prosecutors have signed a letter condemning Trump's violent rhetoric toward Bragg. Comic Bill Maher said of Trump's threats of death of destruction that "[this is] [w]hat is known as an unveiled threat. Makes you miss those innocent days when he just undermined faith in our elections, you know?" (Christopher). Seth Meyers invented a fake quote from George Washington—"Not cool, dude"—to mock Trump's threats. Jimmy Kimmel said of the choice of locale for the rally, "Trump chose Waco because it's a powerful metaphor for his campaign. He's going down in flames, and he's taking his cult followers with him." He went on to list the lies Trump told at the rally (Bendix "Late"). The familiarity here is double-edged. In none of these comments and criticisms is there any indication that these comments from a former president are a surprise. Nor is there any hope that such comments will cease in the face of critic.

Finally, what is inevitable in this mix of earnest distress and comic mockery is fatigue, the chronic sort. It is difficult to conceive of a time when this sort of discourse will be rejected by political figures at rallies, on news shows, and on social media. The opportunities to garner attention and commentary, of whatever variety, are not going away. Impeachments, indictments, suspensions of social media accounts, serious and parodic public condemnations, all of these actions and responses serve to expand the boundaries of the circus.

Repetition as Trauma

I have been talking about familiarity as a result of the comedic parodies of political clowns. Now, I want to suggest that familiarity is itself part and productive of the traumatic experience. It does not stand outside of the event. This section is indebted to Lucy Bond and Stef Craps' study of trauma for the New Critical Idiom series (Bond and Craps). In terms of defining trauma and our reactions to, I want to borrow from Bond and Craps's discussions of Cathy Caruth and of Dominick LaCapra. In terms of the social trauma we experience when a public event abuses our faith in social bonds, I want to borrow from their discussion of Kai Eirkson and of Paul Saint-Amour. I borrow the ideas of cycle and repetition to discuss how the parody of abusive discourse can contribute to a repetitive cycle of discursive trauma.[6] To go further, I suggest that this discursive trauma is collectively produced, however unwittingly, by perpetrators, their apologists and enablers, and by commentators, parodists, and critics.

While each of us experiences the trauma of our current political discourse individually, collectively we are stuck in a situation where there is repetition but no resolution. This idea tracks with Bond and Craps discussion of Cathy Caruth's definitions of trauma and with LaCapra's notions of "acting-out" and "moving-on." Caruth defines trauma as an event not experienced fully "but only belatedly in its repeated *possession* of the one who experiences it" (qtd. in Bond and Craps 56). LaCapra divides our interactions with traumatic memory into "acting-out," where we relive the past in the present, and "working-though," where we re-establish a distinction between past, present, and future (Bond and Craps 143; 151). Applying these two ideas to our current political conditions, almost everyone is a trauma victim, Trump supporters possessed with wanting to "Take America Back" from the trauma of the 2020 election, and Trump critics, who re-enact-out Trump's characterization of himself as a victim of abuse. The four trials scheduled to take

place during Trump's run for re-election/restoration to the presidency would seem to be an effort at working-through the events of 2016-2023, but we should expect a hardening of positions relative to our traumatic political divisions.

Einstein's apocryphal definition of insanity is "doing the same thing over and over and expecting different results." Repeated appeals to the rule of law and to the rules of civil decorum have had zero effect on our clownish perpetrators. In April 2023, House Committee on Homeland Security Chair Mark Green, of Tennessee, said that he would talk with Marjorie Taylor Greene, and with House Speaker, Kevin McCarthy, about her abusive behavior during questioning of witnesses. Greene was undeterred; McCarthy unmoved. For the victims of abuse, trauma can be defined as "doing different things over and over in response to abuse and getting the same result." Efforts to mock, call out, censure, impeach, search, indict, expose and ignore clownish perpetrators have had no effect on behavior or have been repurposed as campaign ads or to justify escalating threats. Trump's first campaign rally, for instance, featured video from the January 6th riot.

Both the clowning of perpetrators and our parodic responses track the characteristics of the typical abusive relationship. In the one, we have the belittling, threats, gaslighting, isolation, violence, and delusions of victimhood that make up, and are used to justify, the abuse. In the other, we have the magical thinking that a familiar response with the right tweak will somehow produce a novel change. The difference is that the trauma that comes from political and discursive abuse is public, pervasive, and perpetual. The abuse is public in that it takes place in plain sight. Trump, for instance, makes a threat of violence on social media or during a public rally. The mainstream media uses the public nature of the threat to establish it as legitimate news. Comedians and critics repeat, police, and critique the comment in front of a live studio audience. More articles summarize and celebrate the clever putdowns and public shaming. And the cycle repeats.

The process is pervasive in that it is everywhere and in that it produces trauma across the discursive apparatus. The initial incitement to violence is direct, producing shock and trauma. Reports repeat or remind us of the discursive event. Explanations or defenses of the perpetrator undermine the confidence of the victims or blame them for the event in the first place. Perpetrators claim that they are the real victims and make threats of retribution from that position. Late-night comedians dismiss the perpetrators as clowns and their threats as jokes, stunts, or bits. The more serious consumers of the initial threats and the critical response use those responses to make threats

of their own. Note the death threats directed at prosecutors and judges in Trump's current civil and criminal trials, as well as those directed at campaign officials after the 2020 election.

A word about political trauma. I define it as anxiety at the systematic mistreatment of groups across political activities and platforms and dread about the future persistence of the present political condition. In that sense, it is not an unwelcome revisiting of a past event so much as a repetitive despair in the present moment. I take that definition from Bond and Stef's discussions of Kai Erikson and of Paul Saint-Amour, and I illustrate it with a quotation from a POPSUGAR article. In 1976, Erikson defined collection trauma as "a blow to the basic tissues of social life that damages the bonds attaching people together and impairs the prevailing sense of community" (qtd. in Bond and Craps 99). Again, a variety of subjects across the political spectrum would argue that our bonds of attachment and sense of community have been damaged, even as they might disagree about the nature of the events that have caused that trauma. In documenting the progression of our application of the idea of trauma to events and ways of reading, Bond and Craps cite Saint-Amour's call for "a re-orientation of trauma studies from the past to the future, from memory to anticipation" (Bond and Craps 127). Here it is the future, rather than the past, that affects and infects the present. Across political spectrums in a number of countries, there is dread at what future elections and divisions may bring. That dread is a collective experience, persistently available. In a web article on political trauma, Esme Mazzeo quotes psychiatrist Zamira Castro's definition of political trauma as "the outcome of traumatic events that have happened at the social level with political consequences and ramifications for certain groups of people based on their group membership" (Mazzeo).

Our political trauma is perpetual in that it never stops, and it never goes away. In the conventional domestic abuse scenario, there are sometimes moments of calm, periods where the victim can recover, strategize, or even hope for change. This is not true in cases of political trauma. As with the pandemic, we can adapt, but we cannot make anything go away. In all likelihood, we will redo the 2020 presidential election in 2024, with the same candidates and the same arguments. If the outcome is the same as in 2020, we can expect all manner of election denials and charges of illegitimacy. It is not much of an exaggeration to say that we have been redoing or reliving the 2020 election since election night, or that Trump spent much of his presidency redoing 2016. Trump's campaign rallies and slogans all center on recovering what was unfairly lost and punishing those who stole it. Comedians respond to those rallies and postings with reminders that

he lost. Investigations, indictments, and trials center on his efforts to hide information and overturn results.

To illustrate the collective nature of our political trauma and the repetitiveness of the strategies and the results, let us turn briefly to an examination of the responses to Trump's indictment for campaign finance fraud in March of 2023. Supporters, imitators, and republican rivals to Trump turned to the tropes of anger. Critics and comedians turned to the tropes of hope. These two emotions are familiar locations in an abusive relationship. Trump's supporters expressed outrage, in the modern sense of the word as meaning outsized rage. Former Vice President Mike Pence said that an indictment for campaign finance issues was "an outrage." Florida Governor Ron DeSantis complained about a weaponized legal system turning "the rule of law on its head." Then-Fox News host Tucker Carlson expanded the reach of the indictment when he said, as quoted in *The New York Times*, that it was "probably not the best time to give up your AR-15s. The rule of law appears to be suspended tonight—not just for Trump, but for anyone who would consider voting for him." Other commentators said such things as, "This is a time of sorting" and "people better be careful" (Bender and Haberman). Manhattan DA Alvin Bragg's office was inundated with death threats and racist epithets, including "We are everywhere and we have guns" (Crane-Newman). This is the abusive bandwagon effect.

Anger's immediacy and fierceness can give it an outsized feeling of legitimacy relative to deliberation. It is expressive discourse, both evidence and excuse, and we can choose to perceive it as unmediated or unspun. For the abuser, and their apologists, the victim is the one who inspires the anger that causes the abuse. Warnings and threats are directed at identifying the victim as the transgressor and then justifying the recourse. House Speaker Kevin McCarthy said of the indictment, "The American people will not tolerate this injustice, and the House of Representatives will hold Alvin Bragg and his unprecedented abuse of power to account" (@SpeakerMcCarthy). Trump's own feral remarks on women, journalists, despots, and laws are often celebrated as evidence of his authenticity (Katz and Kilbourne). It is common for abusive perpetrators to take their own anger as evidence of righteousness in order to justify the abuse in the first place, to wrest away the mantle of victim, and to frame and justify further threats. Even calling Trump's serial posts storms or rants or screeds suggests that they come from some real and unmediated space that makes them more justified.

The responses of late-night hosts to Trump's indictment were generally gleeful, focusing on resolution, change, and release. Trish Bendix documented their responses in an article for the *New York Times*. Jimmy Kimmel hugged the American flag in a parody of Trump from the 2016 campaign. Jimmy Fallon ran a deepfake video of Trump singing "I'm So Indicted" to the Pointer Sisters' song, "I'm So Excited." Stephen Colbert said, "Ladies and gentlemen, he was right. We are saying 'Merry Christmas' again! I didn't know I would feel this good!" He also ate a bowl of ice cream on the air. Seth Meyers claimed he had the cue card "Donald Trump has been indicted" ready for seven years and ran the audience through a lecture on the precedent for indicting and imprisoning former leaders in functioning democracies (Bendix, "Tickled"). The positive response to Trump's indictment is understandable. Here are crimes that are identifiable and available for litigation. The courtroom provides a space to resist manipulation and indifference to the truth. Where elections have become spectator sports rather than civic enactments, trials establish a baseline for truth and punishments for lying, or so we hope. There is hope that the prosecution of statutory crimes will provide a model for addressing the more divisive cultural and discursive crimes of political clowns.

Where anger is received as a condition, hope is put forth as an argument. It is prophetic in that it points at the looked-for outcome and suggests that one or more steps toward rescue or rehabilitation will lead to others. This is all well and good, but there are problems with hope, particularly in abusive relationships. As Ellen Sinclair and her co-authors point out, hope is often counterproductive. The central problem is that hopes are dashed, and the return to or recognition of the abusive status quo has consequences for both the relationship and the self-concept of the abused partner. The other central problem is that appeals to positivity without strategies for improvement or escape make the abusive situation worse. In the few rational days after January 6, 2021, there was some hope that we would soon be permanently done with Donald Trump. Cabinet members were resigning. Sycophants such as Lindsey Graham and Kevin McCarthy were jumping ship, and the House of Representatives impeachment of Trump invited the Senate to convict on the one charge of incitement to insurrection. The Senate forgave Trump his abuse of the electoral system, voting 57-43 to convict, ten votes short of conviction.

In saying "forgave," I am using the vocabulary of a literature review on the effects of positivity strategies on victims of domestic abuse. Ellen Sinclair, Rona Hart, and Tim Lomas suggest that positivity without strategies for change and Post-Traumatic Growth (PTG) exacerbate

the levels of abuse and the psychological and physical suffering of the victim. I quote at length from the abstract to clearly set out their findings about hope and abuse: "Overall the literature suggests that misdirected or overgeneralized positivity exacerbates harm and abuse: an optimistic bias can put victims in danger; empathy, hope, acceptance and resilience are associated with refraining to leave abusive relationships; and forgiveness increases the likelihood of further transgression" (Sinclair et al. 26). They go on to say that appeals to collective resilience tend to "paper over" the problem of abuse and police the individual into maintaining allegiance to the specific community and the *status quo*. Republicans who voted to impeach or convict Trump were effectively purged from the Congress entirely or from positions of power in the party. Sinclair et al. also suggest that "[a]n event that shatters personal assumptions" (43) can lead to change and growth, however painful that event may be.

Comedians, even those responding to criminal clowns, are in the entertainment business. They may tell jokes to power, but their job is to please the studio audience and to maintain a sustainable share of viewers across platforms. They are not in the problem-solving business, John Oliver's and Seth Meyers' lectures aside. They are our surrogates though, and in that they, and we, are bystanders to clownish abuse. Graham Murdock argues that contemporary political campaigns in the United States and in Britain have tapped into a dissatisfaction with declining living standards and the ascendance of neo-liberalism to turn us into "spectators at pageants of power, rather than citizens collaborating in constructing a collective future" (43). In our consumption of comic responses to political clowning, and in our reposting to social media, we are also bystanders. We witness the abuse of opponents and marginalized groups and hope that jokes about the stupidity of that abuse and those abusers can help us to process its trauma. Jokes help us process the event, but they also retell it. The problem for bystanders is that in recounting the event we suffer similar levels of distress as the victims (Janson and Hazler 241).

Clowns and Immunity

There are strategies to address clownish inevitability and political trauma. Some comedians have stopped using Trump's name or reporting on the clowning of his minions and subalterns. Many of us have limited our exposure to social media. Most of us watch late-night shows in the daytime and on YouTube when we can control and appreciate the jokes. Post-traumatic growth

and communalism are local opportunities, finally. There are more important and mundane fights to be had over school boards and city councils. Despite efforts to delegitimize electoral events and court proceedings, there are systems in place to decide on our leaders and to litigate their crimes.

What is clever or chilling about the prevalence of parody as a response to political discourse is the way it is adapted by its subjects as a method of pre-emptive immunity. The problem with our political clowns is that their clowning provides deniability and distraction. If we call out a particularly hateful or false statement, they can claim they were only joking. When they package dangerous claims or incitements to violence with the other buffooneries, we focus on the silly clowning instead of the serious. Explainers and enablers of Trump have regularly had to claim that he was joking in claiming that Barack Obama founded ISIS, that Lysol cures COVID, that he really wants the police to be more brutal, and that his threats of death and destruction were something other than calls for peaceful protest (Phelps and Gittleson) (Singer). Representative Lauren Boebert of Colorado gets more press asking questions about public urination or encouraging "patriots" to be rude on airplanes than for citing a psalm in seeming to pray for Joe Biden's death (Pengelly). Marjorie Taylor Greene gets more attention for her outfit than for attacking witnesses and claiming that democrats are pedophiles (Concepcion).

I examine this protective and distracting clowning from four perspectives: the real, the distorted, the hidden, and the empty. These categories track Baudrillard's four signs. In each case, clowning, whether intended or not, serves to protect the perpetrator from accusation and to distract the respondents from the perpetrators' more serious crimes. Rudy Giuliani is the example of our real clown. There is no debate or disagreement about the public nature of his clowning or of his penchant for telling the truth about both his and Donald Trump's crimes. Giuliani has admitted that Trump paid off a porn star (Shear and Haberman), that Trump fired an FBI director for not lying for him (Faulders), that there was an effort to extort Ukraine into investigating Joe Biden (Levin "Rudy"), that there were no actual problems with voting machines (Chloe Kim), and that he and his campaign lied to suppress the Hispanic vote during his 1993 campaign for mayor of New York (Yang).

What protects Giuliani is the pathetic, public, and pervasive nature of his clowning. He may or may not get convicted over election tampering in Georgia, but if he avoids trials and prison, it may be due to a series of sad public moments. His hair dye ran down his face at a press conference on the 2020 election. He farted during a hearing of the State of Michigan Oversight

Committee on that same election. He gave a press conference at Four Seasons Total Landscaping in November 2020. When reporters there told him that the Associated Press and all the television networks had just called the presidential election for Joe Biden, Giuliani really said, "Networks don't get to decide elections, courts do" (O'Donnell). Sometimes when we call a public figure a clown, it is because their efforts to perform with dignity in public are comic failures. This is the case with Giuliani, and it makes it difficult to call him to account for his crimes.

Boebert and Greene are angry clowns of the second sign, where reality is distorted. They use anger to shift the context of a discussion and to reject criticism and characterization. We cannot pin down when they are clowning, joking, lying, or making a case for particular policies. We cannot criticize them into improving their behavior. They mix heckling President Biden with claims that democrats are communists and jihadists. Both characterize themselves as patriots rather than representatives. Both suggest that foes and critics are anti-American and anti-them. Both delegitimize their opponents and take up the mantle of victim when they are criticized. Their apologies are accusations, their defenders are counter-accusers, and their jokes are indistinguishable from their complaints and criticisms.

What protects them is their ability shift the context of the discussion and to take criticism as an opportunity to restate their arguments. Boebert responds to criticism with denial and counteraccusation. When Representative Ilhan Omar of Minnesota called out Boebert for a fabricated and anti-Muslim joke, Boebert took the opportunity to accuse Omar of being pro-terrorist (Kaczynski). When Boebert was called out for anti-LGBTQIA+ rhetoric in the wake of the shooting at Club Q in Colorado Springs, she called the idea that her rhetoric was partly responsible "disgusting" and went on to defend social media posts where she claimed that empowering transgender children was grooming (Caitlin Kim). Greene takes that approach to the next level. She ignores criticism of uncivil rhetoric and personal attacks altogether and makes the accusation again. In April 2023, she told the president of the American Federation of Teachers that she was not a real mother, a real doctor, or a real teacher. In the face of criticism—which *USA Today* described as "criticism from her Democratic colleagues"—Greene reposted the accusations and a video of her questioning on Twitter (Pitofsky).

Ron DeSantis is no clown at all, despite efforts by social media posters, political opponents, and late-night comics to portray him as one. His policies match his positions in terms of being anti-woke, anti-immigrant, anti-LGBTQIA+, misogynistic, and authoritarian. He supports Florida's

bans on books, curriculum, and abortion. He got married in Disneyworld and has unironically attacked the company for criticizing Florida's "Don't Say Gay" law. His cruel stunt of lying to immigrants in Texas so that he could fly them to Martha's Vineyard, Massachusetts was not something he denied or joked about. He just attacked critics and immigrants over the selectivity of their outrage. There are efforts to make DeSantis a clown. The Trump campaign makes fun of how he eats pudding. *The Late Show* with Stephen Colbert played a parody of his campaign song. John Oliver calls him Fred Flintstone. The Daily Show aired a faked flight safety video in their response to the immigrant flight (Daily Show, "Leaked").

What protects DeSantis is that the apparatus for the making of fun is already in place. We can see him no differently than the pathetic and angry clowns discussed above. If our reception of him is to make fun of his authoritarian policies and complaints, he comes off as ridiculous instead of cruel or dangerous. He is Baudrillard's third sign come to life, a humorless clown who hides the absence of humor in the clowns that surround him. He is the willfully unfunny stand-up comic that makes the other comics funny. He does not have to be a clown himself. He just has to be clowned. The jokes about his boring book and presidential aspirations make it difficult to offer more damning and actionable critiques. And the absence of humor in his own discourse makes it more difficult to directly critique the cruelties in the Republican Party generally.

Trump's everyday clowning is almost exclusively grievance-based now and angry. His comic clowning is a side hustle consisting of trading cards and other merchandise or the occasional dancing and mugging at campaign rallies. Trump is the empty sign, full of jokes and threats and complaints signifying nothing. He is not duplicitous in the reflective sense of the word. He is indifferent. Despite their passion, so is his audience. It does not matter to him or to his supporters either what he says nor how he says it. Like AI chatbots, he traffics in iterations and familiarities. Documenting the number of his lies is of little use in combating his clownish rhetoric. The number is of no interest to his supporters and no surprise to his critics. His rhetoric exists at either end of Kinneavy's taxonomy, with expressions of grievance alternating with the figures of hyperbole. This pushes his believers away from reference and deliberation as well.

Trump's clowning is political posturing with consequences. The surprising thing about his January 6 speech is that it was not surprising. Trump told the crowd that "This the most corrupt election in the history, maybe of the world," and then went on to repeat a standard claim that the media is "the enemy of the people" (Naylor). There is plenty of evidence to suggest that he is a

racist, and, at the same time, Trump has repeatedly said that he is the least racist person in the room or world. In April 2023, he returned to his anti-immigrant and racist roots with the repeated and unsubstantiated claim that a psychologist at a mental institution in an unnamed South American country—a good man, according to Trump—has nothing to do now because all his patients have been sent to the U.S. (Dale). His claims at rallies that "this is the final battle" and "I am your retribution" are empty outside of how they allow both a comedic and serious embrace of grievance on the part of his audience. His discourse has consequences but not meaning, for if it was just a matter of exposing his falsehoods and cruelties to supporters who have been confused and manipulated, he would not be the frontrunner for the Republican nomination for president. That discourse is a simulation, measured not by its level of truth but by its effect on the ratings.

What protects him is the absolute emptiness of that discourse. If you do not lie, then there is no need to remember what you said yesterday. Engaging in a series of empty signs serves the same purpose. There are consequences to hateful, exclusionary, and indifferent rhetoric. We have criminalized poverty, immigration, even the idea of constructed, progressive, and discovered identities. Indifference both to meaning and to victims is a persistent and cruel policy, easy to enact and difficult to undo. There are efforts to identify Trump and those that come after as pathetic clowns (the *Des Moines Register* called him "a sorry little boy' (Leslie)), angry clowns (he threw his lunch on January 6th) or no clowns at all (judges have warned against jury tampering via social media posts). Popular culture has embraced the idea of parody and critique, but we might need something else.

Conclusion: Truth and Reconciliation

There is not much currency in truth and reconciliation at the moment. Panels, systems, and legislation in support of those concepts are attractive, but in the case of political clowning and trauma, it is difficult to decide how to deliberate about the truth or what conflicts and belief systems are in need of and available to reconciliation. Our political clowns engage in statutory, cultural, and discursive crimes. Litigating the first category is underway, and we can expect the economic penalties to maintain the *status quo*. Fox News, for instance, settled suits that allow it to continue to clown and report. The second category, cultural crimes, will remain more difficult to address. Our news feeds and YouTube habits will continue to suggest that some C-lister clown got burned

trying to troll this or that group, but as Calvin D. Armerding has pointed out, contempt leads to feelings of inferiority which leads to vertical striving for superiority, and the cycle continues (482-3).

Discursive crimes and how to address them are largely the responsibility of those of us who study language for a living. Perpetrator studies provides a location for doing that study. We can examine how political clowns both employ language and benefit from our assumptions about the nature of language. That has been the intent of this article. Our own precipitating shattered assumption might be the recognition that postmodern tropes are not exclusively available to one or another political or ideological position. That is a truth we can become reconciled to without having to throw up our hands and alphabets in defeat.

Parody is difficult to do. It demands a level of agreement on the focus and motive of the original text and an agreement on the level and length of the suspension of truth. Our current crop of political clowns may be engaged in an unintentional and undirected long-game parody of our complacent and compliant democratic systems. Cultural commentators of this particular moment in the political circus will debate how strong and central was the embrace of anger, contempt, indifference, and cruelty. They will also decide or discuss how central a role parody played and plays in processing the divisions and dangers that political clowns have incited and employed. MAGA voters might find themselves added to the pantheon of suffrage agitators, muckrakers, civil rights marchers, and social justice advocates. They might also find themselves lumped with the nativists, racists, no-nothings, and silent majorities of centuries past. We cannot leave these tasks exclusively to contemporary late-night clowns or to future civic agents. The one group gives us a location to process fear and anger. The other gives us a location for hope and progress. In between, we face the challenge of developing practical problem-solving strategies.

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[1] Calvin D. Armerding argues from an Adlerian perspective that contempt produces a sense of inferiority in the object of that contempt and the concomitant vertical striving for superiority.

[2] I have in mind Harry Frankfurt's definition of bullshit as speech indifferent to the truth. See also Caleb Ecarma's article in *Vanity Fair* on the clown caucus in the U.S. Congress.

[3] See the HuffPost report on Maddow's interview with MSNBC host Jonathon Capehart.

[4] See Spellberg on Colbert and Greene's apology.

[5] For a list of Trump's more outlandish tweets, see Dodds.

[6] See page 13 of Philip Scepanski's *Tragedy Plus Time* for a discussion of the use of clinical metaphors in terms of cultural trauma.

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