Unruly Women and Carnivalesque Countercontrol: Offensive Humor in Mediated Social Protest

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Abstract
At the Women's March in January 2018, many protest posters featured offensive jokes at the expense of Trump's body and behavior. Such posters were shared widely online, much to the amusement of the movement's supporters. Through a close analysis of posts on Instagram and Twitter, we explore the role of "vulgar" and "offensive" humor in mediated social protest. By highlighting its radical and conservative tendencies, we demonstrate how we can understand these practices of offensive humor as a contemporary expression of "the carnivalesque" that is complexly intertwined with social change.

Keywords
offensive humor, social protest, women's march, digital culture, carnivalesque

Introduction

The Women's March in January 2018 was a worldwide protest to advocate legislation and policies regarding human rights and other issues, including women's rights, immigration reform, health-care reform, racial equality, freedom of religion, and workers' rights. Most of the rallies were aimed at Donald Trump, largely due to statements he had made and positions that he had taken which were regarded as racist, anti-women, or otherwise offensive. To vent this anger, many protest posters featured offensive jokes at the expense of Trump's body, mocking his "comb over" hairstyle, his small hands, his orange taint, and so on. Such posters were often spotted at protests and shared widely online, much to the amusement of the movement's supporters. While some people suggest that such charged political online humor can mobilize people and serve as "a pre-political gateway to future civic engagement" (I. Reilly & Boler, 2014, p. 442), there is also concern that it remains inefficient or even antithetical to meaningful sociopolitical change (Thorogood, 2016). Thus, in the context of social media, offensive political humor advances the so-called echo chambers where people only speak to like-minded individuals (Bore, Graefer, & Kilby, 2018). Others argue that routine online searches for pleasure and entertainment "entrap[s] us within the circuits of neoliberal communicative capitalism—a process that continuously replaces political action with political feeling, forever turning activity into passivity" (Pedwell 2017, p. 157).

By drawing on the literature that explores and adapts Bakhtin's (1984) concept of the carnivalesque (e.g., Rowe, 1995; Stallybrass & White, 1986), this article argues for a more nuanced understanding of offensive political humor as a flexible affective resource that is complexly intertwined with social change (Pedwell, 2017). Based on our analysis of 400 social media posts from Instagram and Twitter, we argue that the online circulation of humorous (yet offensive) protest posters creates forms of "polysemic undertow" (Waisanen & Becker, 2015, p. 261) that both contest and confirm normative assumptions about white masculinity and the political public sphere. For this reason, the meanings of these protest posters are not so coherent as to reflect either transgression or backlash politics exclusively. Rather, the contradictory nature of offensive humor holds these circulating online images in tension, thereby enabling what Reilly and Boler (2014) call "prepolitization"—a novel form

of civic participation that can mobilize citizens who would not otherwise explicitly participate in civic life, thereby creating new political sensibilities and desires.

We argue that the Women's March provides unique insight into how offensive humor can function as a mobilizing force, without glossing over its limitations in the realm of civic engagement. Offending those in power does not replace rational political debate. Nonetheless, it can be an effective tool for drawing attention to situations of injustice, for binding people together against formal power structures of authority, and for carving out a space for empowering feelings of countercontrol, which are necessary ingredients for social and political change (Day, 2011; Mouffe, 2005). In this sense, this article contributes to the work of contemporary scholars of social movements and media who rethink traditional understandings of politics and participatory democracy.

Literature Review: Offense, Online Humor, and Mediated Protest

The cheerful vulgarity of the powerless is used as a weapon against the pretence and hypocrisy of the powerful. (Stamm, 1982, p, 47)

Giving and taking offense on social networking sites is a contested topic. While some celebrate the interactive architecture of social media as a democratizing and diversifying force, others warn that these seemingly antihierarchical affordances invite offensive behavior, such as cyberbullying or the production and circulation of offensive material that more traditional media outlets would have censored or regulated. Thus, social media and other user content hosting companies are increasingly under the ethical and legal responsibility to make their network a "positive" and "safe" space where offense is avoided.

Offense, however, is an affectively charged, slippery subject that escapes clear definitions. Although offensive material is, in principle, distinguished from that which is illegal (obscenity, child abuse images, incitement to racial hatred, etc.), it remains difficult to define the boundaries in a robust and consensual fashion. Generally, media content is judged to be offensive when it is too graphic or explicit in style and content (Attwood, Campbell, & Hunter, 2012). Intrusive images of suffering, or racist, classist, or sexist depictions that contribute to stereotyping, or bias and inaccuracy in the media are often reported as offending audiences (Livingstone & Hargrave, 2009). In public discussions, "offensive" media content is often equated with "harmful" content. This equation is based on simplistic theories of media effects that conceive offense as a monolithic "bad" thing that can be pinned to certain media representations and eliminated through censorship. Such understandings fail to see the contextual, relational nature of offense (offensive to whom? in what situation?) as well as the emotional messiness of offense. Offense is far from a monolithic, clear-cut emotion but contains a wide range of contradictory feelings and emotions, such as pain, anger and frustration, alongside joy and titillation (Das & Graefer, 2017). Furthermore, these approaches overlook the potential for the so-called negative emotions to push us into new critical directions, as it has long been theorized by feminist scholars such as Audre Lorde (1984), Sara Ahmed (2007), and Sianne Ngai (2005). Taking offense and "getting angry" is here often conceived as an affective mobilizing force for social and political transformation.

Offensive joking, in particular, has been theorized as offering temporary relief from oppressive social norms and conventions (Freud, 1960). Pickering and Littlewood (1998) argue that what remains crucial in this context is whether the humor kicks socially upwards or downwards; whether comic aggression is directed "at those who are in positions of power and authority, or at those who are

relatively powerless and subordinated" (p. 295). Such an understanding implies that offense is not in and of itself wrong and that, depending on its direction, it can have a positive or negative impact.

The affirmative and liberating possibilities of grotesque, offensive humorous transgressions are often associated with "the carnivalesque": A general mood of liberation, mocking of hierarchies, and temporary suspension of rules (Bakhtin, 1984). For Mikhail Bakhtin (1984), the popular tradition of carnival has the potential to suspend social hierarchies through mostly bodily and bawdy humor, which finds expression in the celebration of bodily grotesqueness and excessiveness, fooling around, and profanities. These markers of indecorum are strictly policed during "normal" times, but during carnival, they can be animated and enable comic reversals. For instance, a jester might be crowned in place of a king, and, as a result, the authoritative voice of the dominant discourse momentarily loses its privilege. Bakhtinian carnival theory has been criticized for its neglect of carnival violence against women and Jews, its failure to consider social relations of gender, and its failure to deal with the consistence of dominant culture (e.g., Russo, 1994). We nevertheless see Bakhtin's concept as a valuable starting point and draw on the productive ways in which it has been extended through the work of Stallybrass and White (1986) and Rowe (1995). First, Stallybrass and White (1986) argue that the carnivalesque should be situated within a wider pattern of transgression, in order to "move beyond Bakhtin's problematic folkloric approach to a political anthropology of binary extremism in class society" (p. 28). They maintain that this broader focus on "transgressive symbolic domains" enables us not only to examine cultural hierarchies and binary social structures that underlie the carnival but also to "operate far beyond the strict confines of popular festivities." Second, Kathleen Rowe (1990, 1995) builds on Mary Russo's (1994) work on the female grotesque to adapt Bakhtin's concept for thinking about female unruliness. As Rowe (1995) argues, the transgressive figure of the "unruly woman" can help "sanction political disobedience" but is also associated with dirt and pollution (p. 83). She threatens "the conceptual categories which organize our lives," and this liminality evokes intense, contradictory feelings: "Her ambivalence, which is the source of her oppositional power, is usually contained within the licence accorded to the comic and the carnivalesque. But not always." Our study, then, draws on these two key extensions of Bakhtin's work to examine how transgression spills over the confines of the temporary, local contexts of the Women's March through the online circulation of offensive protest humor. Here, the carnivalesque functions as a malleable resource that can provide spaces for disruption and rebellion, without glossing over cultural differences.

However, while some scholars in critical humor studies have argued that offensive humor can operate as a powerful social corrective as well as a strategic and effective commentator on political issues (Bivens & Cole, 2018; Thorogood, 2016), others highlight that its uniting-and-dividing function draws a sharp boundary between those who laugh and those who are not "in on the joke" (Kuipers, 2011; Lockyer & Pickering, 2001). From such a perspective, bawdy political humor that predominantly works by deriding and offending those in power is merely:

> further convincing those who agree with it while alienating those who don't agree. Thus, the satirical mission to "make laugh, not war" only serves to polemicise the gap between those who agree and disagree with its political message, suggesting its transformative worth is limited. (Thorogood, 2016, p. 217)

This so-called echo chamber phenomenon is often discussed in the context of social media. Critics argue that, rather than enabling debate and deliberative compromise essential for creating political change, our social media practices of "posting," "liking" and "sharing," along with algorithms, generate filter bubbles and echo chambers with restrictive partisan sentiments, where only like-minded people speak to each other (Bore et al., 2018; Jamieson & Capella, 2008; Pariser, 2012).

Nevertheless, Bivens and Cole (2018, p. 6) maintain that "the prevalence of social media use, like Instagram, Facebook, and Twitter, provides a method through which individuals can push back against the legislative structures in the United States." They illustrate in their work on "grotesque protest" that social media provides individuals with opportunities to resist attempts to control bodies and to reinsert individuals' voices in political discourse that is aimed to exclude those bodies (Enli and Skogerbø, 2013). In a similar vein, Tufekci and Wilson (2012) found that social media use greatly increased the odds of being involved in a protest, and that it "represent[s] crosscutting networking mechanisms in a protest ecology" (Segerberg & Bennett, 2011, p. 197). Thus, although commonly understood as like minds speaking to like minds, social media can also be seen to diversify protest networks and encourage debate.

Methodology

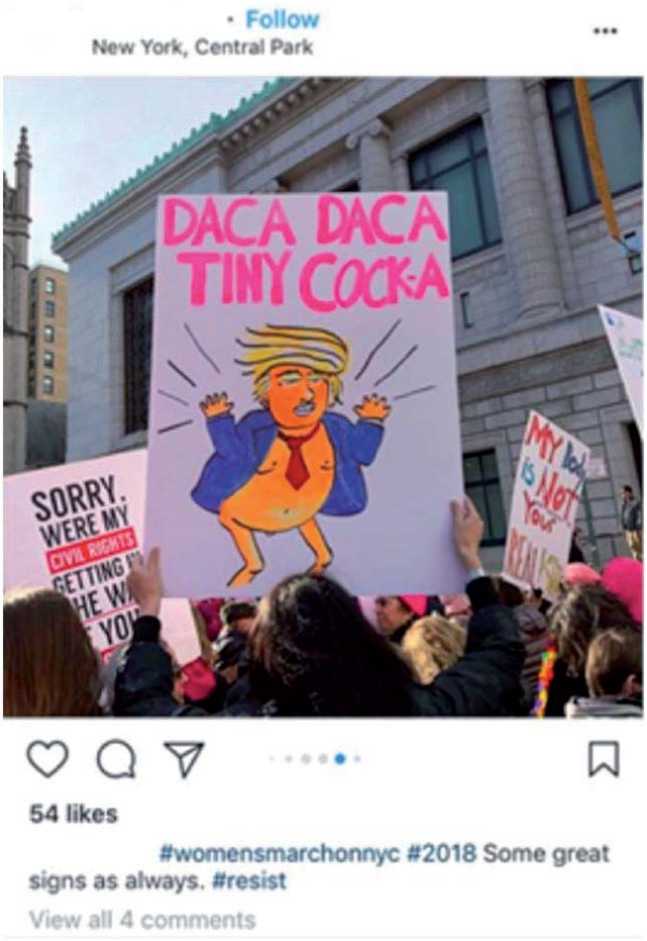
This article builds on our previous study (Bore et al., 2018), which examined the social media circulation of images from the 2017 Women's March. One of the key themes we identified was the prevalence of images featuring placards that mocked Trump's body. We want to explore this tendency further within the context of the 2018 Women's March, to consider how offensive humor might function as an affective protest strategy. We collected our sample by using the #WomensMarch2018 and #WomensMarchNYC hashtags to search for public posts of images that were shared on Instagram and Twitter between January 20 and 21, 2018. We chose these two platforms because they are associated with different affordances and cultures. Twitter is reportedly used by 24% of the U.S. adults (Smith & Anderson, 2018), and, although it facilitates the sharing of imagery, it is primarily associated with text content (Sulleyman, 2018) and has often been used for political communication and activism (Enli & Skogerbø, 2013). Instagram is reportedly used by 35% of the U.S. adults (Smith & Anderson, 2018). This platform foregrounds imagery and is often considered a feminized online space that is preoccupied with celebrity, beauty, and style (Seligson, 2016). We are interested in images of protest signs as a form of visual and affective political communication, and about how protesters and social media users can grab our attention and encourage circulation through the use of offensive humor and spectacle.

Our data collection followed a three-step process. On the day of the march, we followed the #WomensMarch2018 and #WomensMarchNYC hashtags on Twitter and Instagram and observed recurring images of individuals and groups of protesters holding protest signs, many of which were designed to offend Donald Trump through bawdy and bodily humor. This trend confirmed that offensive humor was once again a prevalent protest strategy. On January 22, we then used the platform tools to collect the 200 "top" posts from each of the two platforms for thematic analysis. We identified three recurring themes: The ridicule of Trump's body, the association of Trump with excrement, and name-calling and violence targeting Trump. Finally, we selected one illustrative post from each of these three themes for close analysis. We include screengrabs of the images here but have removed social media usernames and profile pictures. The three-case study images were all widely shared on social media. This approach facilitates reflection on how the reiteration and circulation of images "invite polysemic undertow" (Waisanen & Becker, 2015, p. 264) that can unsettle Trump's intended personae as serious public official and thereby animate political engagement and social change. Having outlined our theoretical framework and our methodological approach, we will now move on to our three-part analysis. We begin by exploring the tendency to mock Trump's skin color.

Orange Skin, White Masculinity, and Carnivalesque Countercontrol

Trump's body is often the target of ridicule. His "orange" skin tone has inspired large numbers of Internet memes where the president is mocked as "Agent Orange" or "Cheeto Trump." Equally

popular targets are his supposedly “tiny” hands. Merchandise includes t-shirts that read “Keep your tiny hands off my rights” and coffee cups with extra small handles, just two of the many physical and digital artifacts through which Trump’s opponents publicly ridicule his masculinity. Here, we focus on the recurring degradation of Trump as failed White masculinity and use Bakhtin’s (1984) concept of the carnivalesque to consider the ambiguous workings of this offensive humor in political protest.



The above poster draws attention to the Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals (DACA) act that the Trump administration has tried to rescind since September 2017. DACA, an Obama-era protection scheme, allows those who entered the United States illegally as children to receive a renewable, 2-year period of deferred action from deportation and to be eligible for a work permit. The scheme is now closed to new entrants and puts 800,000 registered recipients in danger of deportation. Trump’s attack on DACA offended not only many DREAMERS (recipients of DACA) but also protesters at the Women’s March. Thus, numerous protest posters in the 2018 March focused on DACA and the above placard is one such example.

Under the pink headline “DACA DACA TINY COCK-A,” we see a cartoonlike drawing of Trump. He is naked, showing off his “orange” skin, and wearing only a blue jacket and a red tie. His signature comb over hair-do is exaggerated and his arms are wide open. The lines around his small hands make it look as if he is “flashing” the onlooker, showing off his small penis, or his “tiny cock-a,” as the poster reads. The poster criticizes the imminent changes in DACA policy and aims to provoke

laughter by offending and shaming Trump's body through the use of "carnivalesque" humor. Drawing on Bakhtin's (1984) work, we employ the concept of the carnivalesque to think about vulgar, grotesque, bodily humor that is commonly intended or experienced as offensive, and that is used to challenge privileged positions and reframe public and political discourse.

The rhyme "DACA DACA TINY COCK-A" mimics the ways in which small children try to offend each other in the playground. It relies on the shared understanding that there is a comic incongruity between our expectations for "presidential" behavior and the "childish" and unconsidered ways in which Trump presents himself publicly and politically. Trump's child-like behaviour violates dominant assumptions about the rational, male agent in the political public sphere, and it can be argued that it is exactly these kinds of transgressions that Trump's opponents experience as offensive, and which in turn mobilize them to protest and give offense back.

The poster also makes reference to the running joke of Trump's "tiny hands," and the popular myth that a man's hand size is indicative of his penis size. Small hands here suggest a lack of masculinity and a lack of gendered attributes, such as strength and leadership. The link between hands and gender performance is underlined by Janice Winship's (1981) influential work about the relationship between the positioning of hands and sexuality in advertising. According to her analysis, male and female hands are part of an entire message system of representation signifying appropriate gender behavior. In other words, hands allow us to tap into familiar ideologies of masculinity and femininity because the big and strong hand of the "leader" is "naturally" the hand of a man, whereas the small and delicate hand of the homemaker and caretaker is "naturally" the hand of a woman. By repeatedly mocking Trump for his "small" hands, opponents do not only offend his masculinity on a personal level, but they undermine his presidency by insinuating that he is not a "real" man, he is not a "leader" and therefore not someone we should fear, trust, or follow.

Furthermore, the poster constructs the naked, overly tanned Trump as the butt of the joke because orange skin is commonly perceived as a funny tanning "accident" rather than a desired skin hue. As Graefer (2014) argues, "orange" skin invites ridicule and offense giving as it symbolizes excessiveness, lack of taste, and the pollution of "proper" whiteness. Regarded as "ugly" and "tasteless," this skin tone stands in stark contrast to the White hue that the proper White, middleclass subject should embody. The White, middle-class subject is controlled and rational in its desire to darken its skin, making tanning in this case an acceptable and positive habit. Orange skin, on the other hand, is taken as visible evidence of a subject's inner out-of-controlness and illustrates that Trump does not have the supposedly innate cultural tastes and decorum that wealthy White people should have. His highly visible over- and misuse of tanning products also marks him as vain and overly concerned with his appearance, characteristics that are commonly associated with femininity rather than masculinity.

The DACA DACA protest poster then uses offensive, bodily humor to produce Trump as a figure of ridicule, but this kind of humor is riddled with both transgressive and conservative tendencies: One could, for instance, argue that offensive humor works here to undermine the powerful White man via emasculation. Yet it ironically also works to restore dominant assumptions of an idealized White masculinity that is free from feminine traces, such as tiny hands or vanity, and immaculately White, rather than orange. Furthermore, the vulgar ridiculing of Trump's body can also be interpreted as conservative because women have historically been silenced and policed through these same mechanisms of body shaming.

However, we should not reject offensive humor as a tool in mediated social protest altogether. Rather, we suggest that this online sharing of offensive humor aimed at the powerful can be seen as a contemporary expression of Bakhtin's (1984) carnivalesque. Despite the fact that online practices

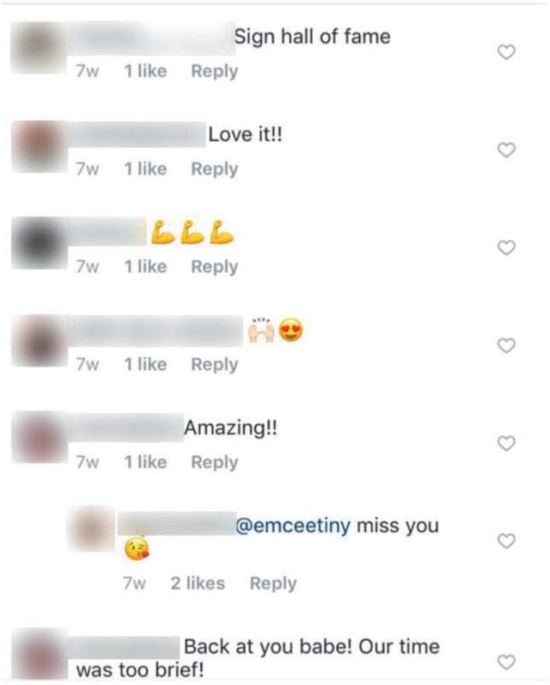
in the context of Instagram and Twitter defy the circumscribed spatial and temporal specificity of "carnival," it still provides a useful tool for understanding the transformative potential of offensive, vulgar humor because it illustrates how the transgression of social boundaries (i.e., being offensive) can be a productive act of resistance. This potential is grounded in the collective experience of transgression:

> Carnival is not a spectacle seen by people; they live in it, and everyone participates because its very idea embraces all the people . . . It has a universal spirit; it is a special condition of the entire world, of the world's revival and renewal, in which all take part. (Bakhtin, 1984, p. 7)

Notwithstanding the inherent problems of Bakhtin's celebratory universalism, it can be argued that posting offensive placards against Trump generates new forms of collectivity because it serves as a public act of stance taking (Du Bois, 2007), where people align (and disalign) with others through the stances they take towards a particular idea, object, or person. Offending Trump through humor works, then, not only to vent the protesters' anger and frustration but to create a sense of superiority and belonging, through the affective experience of shared laughter:

> Laughing at faulty behaviour [and bodies] can also reinforce unity among group members, as a feeling of superiority over those being ridiculed can coexist with a feeling of belonging. (Duncan, 1982 cited in J. C. Meyer, 2000, p. 351)

These acts of online offense giving, then, are performances designed to appeal to like-minded others, thereby aligning bodies with antiracist counterpolitics and drawing boundaries between "us" and "them." Some of the comments below the online image highlight this uniting power of offensive humor:

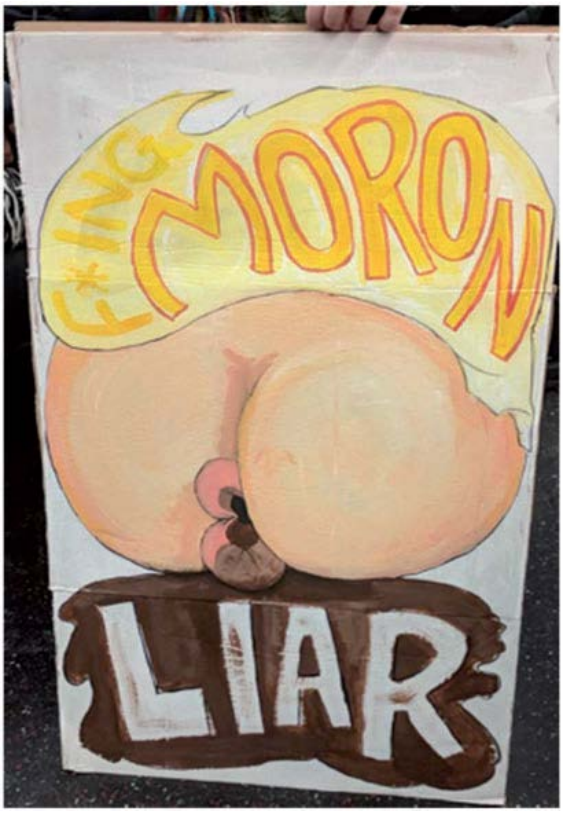


Expressions such as "Love it" or the powerful arm emoji illustrate that sharing "great signs" beyond the marches enables new forms of collectivity, temporary zones in which feminists are able to take a

stance and make their anger visible while enjoying themselves in the process. The glee and pleasure that users experienced when engaging with these offensive online images can be seen as producing carnivalesque moments of countercontrol where activists no longer feel helpless in the face of patriarchy and racism, but where they feel powerful and impactful. Our premise, then, is that offensive humor, as communicated through these images, is affective and, as such, drives online exchanges and attaches people to particular platforms, threads, or groups. A direct, tangible and measurable "effect" of activism might not be easy to locate, yet it would be wrong to ignore results like the production of feeling, which, we argue, is necessary for social change.

Filth, Cultural Transgression, and Immigrant Bodies

We now turn to the second recurring theme in the circulated images from the 2018 Women's March, which was the degradation of Trump through the semiotic resource of filth. Combining the concept of the carnivalesque with Stallybrass and White's (1986) notion of cultural transgression, we examine a sign shared on Twitter and consider how it responded to Trump's offensive behavior by shifting the shame and otherness he inscribes on immigrant bodies onto the president himself.



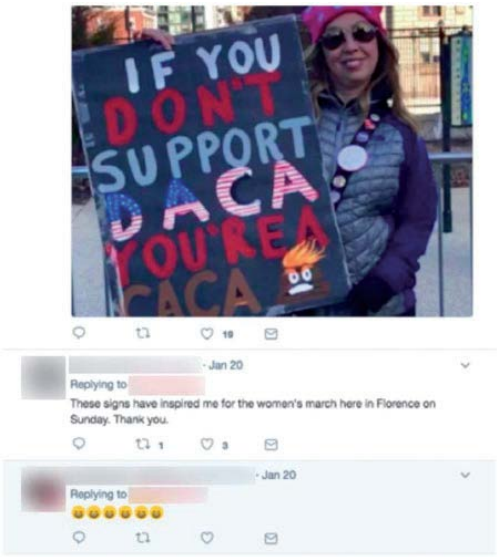
This sign illustrates the recurring association between Trump and feces. The image was posted by a private Twitter user, who photographed and shared his "favorite" signs from the Women's March in New York City. At the time of our data collection, the tweet had been shared 625 times, favorited 1.7K times and had received 70 comments. The sign depicts Trump's face as a bottom that emits a brown puddle. Across his yellow hair, the text reads "F*ING MORON," while text within the brown puddle reads "LIAR." The discursive association between Trump and feces work in two key ways here. First, the sign is a critique of Trump's use of the term "shithole countries" to refer to the nations of origin of immigrants he considered undesirable (Dawsey, 2018). Second, the sign uses

comic inversion and grotesque imagery to construct Trump as abject. We explore how these strategies work together and reflect on how they invite onlookers to feel both offense and pleasure.

Trump's "shithole" remarks were made in a meeting with the U.S. senators on the January 11, 2018, and received extensive international media coverage. The president of Senegal said he was "shocked," the government of Botswana said the remarks were "irresponsible, reprehensible and racist," while an African group of ambassadors at the United Nations described them as "outrageous, racist and xenophobic" (Taylor, 2018). The remarks, then, were widely constructed as offensive.

The protest sign shifts the "shithole" label from these nations onto Trump himself, repositioning the offender as the target of offense. Here, Trump becomes the "shithole," reduced to an abject body part and dismissed as a "moron." As in the grotesque imagery described by Bakhtin (1984), we see a decentered body that is ruptured by bulges and orifices. The close-up image fills the entire sign. The buttocks are comically round and disproportionately large. The anus protrudes and leaks filth. The vulgarity of the picture is echoed by the crudeness of the written language: Trump's debased body contaminates the world with its "shit." Such rhetorical strategies work "to mock, destabilize, and publicize private parts and activities we are socialized to hide" (Bivens & Cole, 2018, p. 20). Situated within protest culture, the sign employed this carnivalesque language and imagery to contribute an affective critique of Trump to public sphere debates around his presidency. By shifting the "shithole" label from developing nations onto Trump himself, it reverted the cultural hierarchy of Trump's racist immigration policy, simultaneously articulating offense at his racism, and giving back offense by degrading and insulting the president.

The reach of the sign was extended beyond the moment and geographical context of the march through the circulation of the image on social media. The Twitter user who shared it used the platform's comment function to share a number of other photographs of protest signs, while other users responded by expressing excitement, laughter, calling for Trump to be impeached, and sharing photographs of other signs that resonated with them:



We can locate these photographed protest signs within a wider symbolic practice that degrades Trump by associating him with the lower stratum of the body (Bakhtin, 1984). Trump's buttocks and feces were recurring themes in circulating images from the 2018 Women's March, while other social media users have also adopted the hashtags #PEEOTUS and #SCROTUS to avoid mentioning Trump's name and title, thereby denying the legitimacy of his presidency (Bivens & Cole, 2018). This refusal

indicates that he is seen as a transgressive figure. He is both president and other, both insider and outsider. Drawing on Stallybrass and White (1986), we argue that the widespread use of grotesque representations signals a dual sense of disgust and fascination with Trump. His offensive behavior represents base impulses that should have been repressed from the rational public sphere, a notion that is also evident in Hillary Clinton's labeling of some Trump supporters as "deplorables" with "racist, sexist, homophobic, xenophobic, Islamaphobic" views (K. Reilly, 2016). Trump-as-president is a hybrid of high and low discourse, a transgression of established cultural boundaries that creates a 'powerful symbolic dissonance' (Stallybrass & White, 1986, p. 25). The recurring use of filth as a semiotic resource in protest signs can be seen as an attempt to reaffirm the classification of him as other, suggesting the coexistence of a desire "to degrade the high and mighty" and "a paradoxical reverence for tradition and hierarchy" (Gilmore, 1998, p. 6). Through this mingling of transgressive and conservative tendencies, the target of laughter and offense is not the presidency as institution, but Trump as an illegitimate president.

Challenging the universalism that undermines Bakhtin's work on the carnival, Stallybrass and White (1986) were interested in examining the cultural transgressions of class binaries. Our study, in turn, underscores that class structures inter- sect with those of race, nationality, and gender. In each case, "discourses about the body have a privileged role, for transcoding between different levels and sectors of social and psychic reality are effected through the intensifying grid of the body" (Stallybrass & White, 1986, p. 26). Trump attempts to classify, legislate, and control the bodies of immigrants by associating them with excrement, while protesters use the same semiotic resource to degrade his body and delegitimize his presidency. As Stallybrass and White (1986) note, "somatic symbols...are ultimate elements of social classification itself" (p. 26).

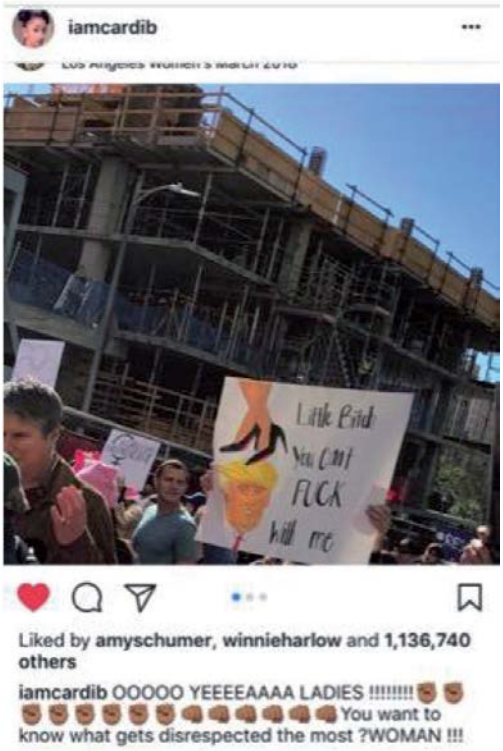
Thorogood (2016) suggests that crude, ambiguous humor can help fight disengagement from formal politics. By "reducing politics to the excretions of the human body," protesters negotiate and challenge geopolitical discourse by connecting contemporary debates to our shared bodily vulnerability. As Grant- Smith (2010) writes, "we all shit," and so defecation can be mobilized to dem- onstrate our "common humanity and animality" (para. 29). However, we would argue that this sign does not work to position Trump within a human collective but instead positions him as a repulsive other. Its strategy resembles that of the "DACA DACA" sign, as it employs the playground rhetoric of "no, you're the shithole." However, drawing on Bivens and Cole, we nonetheless argue that "grotesque protest" can still work as "an effective tool for opening space, transgressing boundaries, and demanding attention." The excess of protest signs like this one invites us to take gleeful pleasure in offending Trump, reminding him that he is out of place and illegitimate, and demonstrating resistance to his attempts "to control bodies." In this way, the grotesque is mobilized "to strategically reframe public and political discourse about the body" through street protests and on social media (Bivens & Cole, 2018, p. 7).

Across the protest signs focusing on "orange" Trump and Trump-as-filth, his White, male, heterosexual, and wealthy body is subjected to degrading strategies that have long been used to oppress women and minorities. It here becomes violently appropriated as a site of resistance, used to articulate feelings of offense but also to cause offense. This strategy valorizes anger as a political emotion and invites us to take pleasure in voicing that anger without concern for the decorum imposed on women by patriarchal discourse. The last part of our analysis will focus in on this relationship between gender, anger, and offensive humor.

The Retaliation of the Unruly

In this final theme of circulated protest signs from the 2018 Women's March, we examine how

female protestors used the characteristics of unruliness, such as offense (Rowe, 1995), to appropriate Trump as the target of carnivalesque humor. To illustrate this trend, we conduct a close analysis of the sign saying “Little bitch, you can’t fuck with me,” which demonstrates the ambiguity that was evident in some of the offensive Trump placards:



This sign mixes humor, politics, and popular culture to promote the embrace of unruly feminism and to protest an epidemic culture of sexual harassment and the policing of women’s bodies. The sign features a quote from music artist Cardi B’s song “Bodak Yellow”; a “diss” track that skewers those who have mocked B’s rise to fame from Bronx stripper to music history maker. In this track, B uses the pejorative term “little bitch” to lambast those who criticize her achievements, but in the context of the Women’s March, the term is used to insult Trump’s behavior and body.

According to The Urban Dictionary (2006), “little bitch” is a whiny, petty person, willing to stab people in the back. Thus, the sign’s reappropriation of the popular term connects these associations with Trump’s actions and behavior, such as his claim that “no politician in history has been treated worse” (Gambino, 2017) than him, his childish exchanges with North Korean leader King Jong Un, and the Republican Party’s cutting of Medicaid, which Trump’s working-class supporters are reliant on (Harwood, 2017). The gendered nature of the term “bitch” further attacks Trump’s “inadequate” masculinity, emphasized by the word “little” and its connection to the long running joke about his small hands and penis.

The sign combines this insult with a threat through the phrase “you can’t fuck with me” and the image of Trump’s head pinned down by a pair of Black, high-heeled feet. Together, they act as a warning that the Women’s March activists are not to be “messed with.” This threat is supported by Cardi B’s own clarification of her lyrics: “I can be humble but...if you push me, I can really stamp on your head” (Giulione, 2017). While the song incites violent behavior, its meaning within a humorous

placard is much more ambiguous. As Lockyer and Pickering (2005, p. 13) argue, the line between make-believe and reality is not clear in a joking context. This is because humor can be a form of exaggeration, but it can also be used to express real beliefs (Lockyer and Pickering, 2005). Thus, while some may view the sign's message as threatening and offensive, others may defend it as "just a joke" or benign violation humor (McGraw & Warren, 2010) that appears immoral but is essentially harmless because the words are "just" borrowed from a song and are not the actual words of the protestors.

This image garnered many affective responses because it was posted by Cardi B and circulated to her 17 million Instagram followers. B's cultural and symbolic capital afforded maximum exposure to the protest sign and this particular Women's March message. According to D. S. Meyer (1995, p. 182), one of the key benefits of celebrity-endorsed protest is "the increased mobilization of sup- port and publicity". Similarly, scholars have argued that music has the capacity to mobilize political action and collective identity (DeNora, 2000; Githens- Mazer, 2008). Such ideas are applicable to Cardi B's Instagram post, as it acquired over 1 million likes and nearly 13,000 comments. The comments were varied; some expressed support for Trump, arguing that he was "creating a fuck ton of jobs," while some expressed amusement through the crying laughing emoji. However, the dominant response expressed support for the sign's message and B's accompanying comment about the disrespectful treatment of women: "Yaaas" supported by the hands up in agreement emoji; "This is every- thing"; and "Yas girl, pussy power."

The sign's divisive humor perhaps resonated with Instagram users because it reflects a shift in feminist tone since the 2017 Women's March. The first event launched as a reaction to Trump's misogynistic behavior and the GOP's attempts to cut female health care. But, since then, we have been confronted with the Weinstein scandal and a myriad of sexual harassment cases highlighted by the #Metoo movement and #Timesup initiative. The shocking extent of abuse, identified across different industries, has accelerated and widened the objectives of the current women's movement, accompanied by widespread expressions of anger and the adoption of a combative tone. That tone is evident in this sign, where it takes the form of "rebellious humor that simultaneously mocks the powerful" (Billing, 2005, pp. 207, 208) and creates connective laughter among the unruly women of the March.

Unruly women do not conform to traditional norms of femininity that emphasize women's passivity, compliance, and agreeability (Fox, 1977; Tolman, Impett, Tracy, & Michael, 2006). Instead, their unruliness is characterized by aggression, humor, and their will to offend and challenge the patriarchal status quo (Peterson, 2017; Rowe, 1995). Once again, these characteristics draw our attention to Bakhtin's (1984) work on the "carnivalesque" as a form of grotesque resistance. For Bakhtin, the female body signifies the grotesque body because "woman is related to the material bodily lower stratum" (p. 24) through menstruation, pregnancy, and childbirth. This is a problematic label that high- lights the limitations associated with Bakhtin's (1984) claims that the carnival was a liberating event that embraced all people. "The female association with the lower bodily stratum connotes shame and filth, which works in contrast to the cerebral upper body that is associated with higher functions of thought and emotion" (Mizejewski, 2014, p. 100). It suggests that the female body was a victim of the carnival's subversive comedy, rather than an instigator of it. This argument resonates with the work of other scholars (Russo, 1994; Stallybrass & White, 1986), who argue that women were regularly subjected to physical and verbal abuse at the carnival.

The characteristics of unruliness and the grotesque appear to be grounded in misogyny, as they have been used to attack women who do not conform to traditional standards of femininity. However, Rowe (1995, p. 91) argues that "transgressing this line of acceptability can be a source of power for women, especially when the characteristics or unruliness are recoded and reframed to expose what they conceal": The oppression of women through the expectation that we stay silent, compliant, and

do not make a spectacle of ourselves. The women of the March use the semiotic resources of unruliness as part of affective strategies to claim visibility, voice, and agency and to reposition Trump as the grotesque body. Consequently, the male body that stands accused of mocking, attacking, and attempting to police the female body becomes the protestors' symbolic target of collective, angry, and offensive humor.

While Trump may be the sign's chief target, its humorous political message can also be read as an attack on all those who reinforce the patriarchal status quo. Its circulation on Instagram might be particularly valuable, then, because of the site's preoccupation with conventional beauty and body standards (Seligson, 2016). However, while Instagram may bolster traditional notions of femininity, its audience of 800 million active users and its visual-led content make it an attractive platform to challenge these conventions via online activism. Deluca and Peeples stress the power of visual communication in their theorization of the public screen. Their work attempts to expand our understanding of political debate beyond the emphasis on face-to-face rational dialogue of the public sphere (Habermas, 1974) by arguing that the use of spectacle across image-led media platforms can expand dialogue and make political issues more accessible (Deluca & Peeples, 2002). Consequently, Cardi B's post indicates that the circulation of feminist content within the feminized sphere of Instagram might have the potential to attract new supporters to the Women's March movement and create a space for users to deliberate its messages, beyond the temporal and spatial confinements of the marches themselves.

Conclusion

This article has unpacked some of the ways in which protest signs in the 2018 Women's March used offensive humor to challenge Trump and reflected on how they were recontextualized and circulated on Twitter and Instagram. Through the close analysis of three social media posts, we have explored how Trump was dismissed as an improper White, masculine subject, how he was degraded through an association with feces and the lower bodily stratum, and, finally, how he was repositioned as the infantile, feminized victim of unruly women. Emphasizing the ambiguity of offensive humor, we identified a recurring tension not only between its uniting and dividing functions but also between conservative and radical tendencies: Protesters and social media users attacked Trump's patriarchal and racist policies and practices through the use of gendered and raced insults that simultaneously reinforced established notions of ideal White masculinity. This duality worked in two key ways: First, protesters identified and punished Trump as a transgressive other while redrawing the boundaries of appropriate White masculinity. This discourse articulated offense at his transgressions of established norms for public sphere debate and "presidential" behavior while simultaneously giving offense back through the spectacle of unruly, carnivalesque protest. Second, participants repeatedly appropriated aggressive, humorous strategies of offense giving that have been associated with masculine cultures (Pujolar, 2000) and used to oppress female and non-White bodies (Thomas, 2015). Here, they reversed that hierarchy by repositioning Trump as the abject body; malformed, leaking, and prostrate.

We argue that the use of offensive humor in feminist protest in online and offline spaces can open up new opportunities for unruly dialogue and civic participation. Online networks are central to this practice, as humorous content grabs our attention and is shared through followers and hashtags (Day, 2011). This is "spreadable" (Jenkins, Ford, & Green, 2013) media content, which is privileged by popular platforms because it is entertaining and drives online traffic. As such, it "floats to the top" among representations of the 2018 Women's March and becomes part of the "popular memory" (Newman, 2014, p. 16) of the event. This pattern is evident in the frequent publication of news articles listing the "funniest" protest signs from the march, which promotes the value of humor and spectacle in protest communication.

The signs, at the protests and in their new online contexts, offer the pleasures of creative, transgressive humor and offense giving (Pujolar, 2000). This invites us to see the world differently through the carnivalesque lens of affective intensities, reversed hierarchies, and a grotesque aesthetic. Thus, in addition to laughter, offensive humor provides an effective intervention in the dominant regime by allowing unheard voices to be heard and to respond to the issues they face. But offensive humor as spectacle is not a tactic solely used by liberal protestors, it has also been used by right-wing Tea Party activists to draw attention to America's economic issues. Interestingly, bar one study (see Mayer et al., 2016) on the political content of Tea Party protest signs there is a deficit of research on conservative movements and humorous collective action strategies. Therefore, we believe that this would make a worthy topic of further research or comparative analysis of oppositional political movements.

Returning to the subject of the Women's March, we argue that offensive humor is a worthy political tool that readdresses traditional understandings of protest strategy in an attempt to publicize neglected political issues. This is because its attention grabbing power might introduce citizens who do not see themselves as "political" to relevant issues, thereby "preparing them for civic participation and political engagement" (Dahlgren cited in Reilly and Boler, 2014, p. 437). Furthermore, offensive humor appeals to like-minded others, thereby aligning bodies with feminist and antiracist counter politics in communities of resistance that include and transcend the geographically and temporally bound march events. This process can facilitate new insight and energize participants to continue their feminist and antiracist work in other spaces.

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