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The Problem with Clowns: Political Perpetrators and Their Comedic Critics

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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 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.