

Blogging the Unspeakable: Racial Politics, Bakhtin, and the Carnavalesque

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The 2006 Democratic primary in New York's 11th Congressional District saw opposition from the blogosphere to David Yassky, a White legislator running for election in a district created under the Voting Rights Act of 1965. Drawing on Mikhail Bakhtin's account of carnival, this study uses a qualitative approach to examine how the racial discourse was constructed on two political blogs within a carnivalesque framework. At the same time, this study notes the uniqueness of the discourse between the White bloggers as well as between the Trinidad-born bloggers and their White counterparts. While the bloggers injected themselves into the spectacle of the campaign hoping to impact the election, there were inherent limitations in this new medium.

Keywords: Mikhail Bakhtin, Voting Rights Act, race, whiteness, picong, blogs, spectacle, political blogging, carnivalesque, politics

Introduction

Non-Blacks representing Black-majority districts are rare in the U.S. Congress. Even so, Whites have been elected and have served lengthy terms in these districts: Peter Rodino (1949–1989, D-NJ 10th) and Lindy Boggs (1973–1991, D-LA 2nd). Currently, Steve Cohen from Tennessee's 9th District is the only non-Black member in the 113th Congress (2013–2015) representing a Black-majority district. Cohen's battle with racial and anti-Semitic innuendos in his first primary bid for Congress in 2006 could not compare to the 2006 Democratic primary in New York's Black-majority 11th Congressional District (CD-

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11) in central Brooklyn when New York City Council member David Yassky, who is White, moved into the district, just in time for the 2006 election, challenging four Black candidates.²

This race was historic. Only two people have represented the district since its creation in 1968 in response to a lawsuit (*Cooper v. Power*, 1966)³ brought under the 1965 Voting Rights Act (VRA): Shirley Chisholm, the first Black woman elected to Congress in 1968, and Major Owens, who was elected in 1982 upon Chisholm's retirement. However, after winning the general election in November 2004, Owens announced in December that he would not seek re-election in 2006. It was then that the field became wide open, and for the first time in 38 years, a White man entered the Democratic primary. His candidacy revived some of the most contentious issues of the VRA: race baiting, racially polarized politics, and racial gerrymandering in the blogosphere dominated by White, male, liberal bloggers from two political blogs: *The Daily Gotham* and *Room Eight: New York Politics*. As one blogger put it, "Nothing in the political atmosphere in Brooklyn [New York] could have led Yassky to anticipate that he would be caught up in the middle of a racial storm with citywide and national overtones" (Gumbs, June 21, 2006).

Ever since Key's (1949) pioneering study *Southern Politics in State and Nation* explored the influence of race on political behavior in U.S. southern politics, a plethora of scholars have picked up the mantle to explain White racial attitudes and voting behaviors toward Black candidates across the nation (Bullock, 1984; Calfano & Paolino, 2009; Carsey, 1995; Citrin, Green, & Sears, 1990; Edge, 2010; Hahn, Klingman, & Pachon, 1976; Hutchings & Valentino, 2004; Reeves, 1997; Sears & Kinder, 1971; Sigelman, Sigelman, Walkosz, & Nitz 1995; Sonenshein, 1994; Terkildsen, 1993; Williams, 1990). Issues of race, ethnicity, and politics have also emerged in studies on Black electoral politics (Gurin, Hatchett, & Jackson, 1989); Black voter participation, empowerment, and political efficacy (Gilliam & Kaufmann, 1998; Tate, 1991); racial polarization (Howell, 2000); and the media and racial politics (Caliendo & McIlwain, 2006). Yet, despite the considerable attention on race and politics, little research has explored White challengers in Black-majority districts, especially during the era of social media. Therefore, this study focuses on political blogging and how bloggers on *The Daily Gotham* and *Room Eight* constructed ideas of race and ethnicity during the 2006 Democratic primary in New York City (NYC) when one of the five candidates was White. Since blogging is a relatively new public sphere for political debate, many questions remain unanswered about the conversations that take place when a candidate's race/ethnicity is a factor in an election.

² In May 2006, New York State assemblyman N. Nick Perry dropped out, leaving three Black candidates in the race.

³ Journalist and civil rights activist Andrew W. Cooper's landmark lawsuit challenged the dividing of one of the nation's largest and most densely populated Black communities, the Bedford-Stuyvesant section of Brooklyn, which minimized the strength of the Black vote. On May 10, 1967, a federal court ruled that the racial gerrymandering of the area violated the VRA. As a result, the 12th Congressional District was redrawn, leading to the election of Shirley Chisholm. Following the 1990 decennial, the district was reapportioned as the 11th District, which absorbed much of the old 12th District, maintaining a majority-Black voting age population.

More specifically, this study examines the blog posts of nine bloggers—five on *The Daily Gotham* (Michael Bouldin, Daniel Millstone, mole333, Liza Sabater, and Rwallnery) and four on *Room Eight* (EnWhySeaWonk, Gatemouth, Maurice Gumbs, and Rock Hackshaw)—consisting of 238 blog entries, of which 108 discussed racial or ethnic attributes (such as the race of the candidates and voters, multiracial identity, nationality, discourse of language coded through a racial lens, and race and religious insults) from January 3, 2006, to September 16, 2006. Text analysis was conducted using a multitiered approach with three phases of reading and interpretation. The first reading used what Stuart Hall (1975) describes as “a long preliminary soak,” by absorbing as much as possible in the postings of each blogger. In the second reading, a sample of the blogs was reread to determine a preliminary set of themes. The third and final reading led to a deeper level of analysis in which the assumptions in the text, themes, and patterns from the previous stages of analysis were critically reviewed and placed within a larger cultural and political context.

Political Blogging, Bakhtin’s Carnival, and the Media Spectacle

Political blogging bears a striking resemblance to elements of Russian literary theorist Mikhail Bakhtin’s notion of carnival culture. For Bakhtin, carnival culture belongs to the traditions and ritual practices of medieval folk culture, manifesting itself through ritual spectacles (carnival pageants, comic shows of the marketplace), comic verbal compositions (parodies both oral and written), and various genres of billingsgate (curses, oaths, popular blazons) (Bakhtin, 1984b, p. 5). Carnival is a time of laughter and openness leading to a type of communication that is aimed at creating an “atmosphere of freedom, frankness and familiarity” (1984b, pp. 15–16). The carnival, therefore, provides “a place for working out, in a concretely sensuous, half-real and half-play-acted form, a new mode of interrelationship between individuals” (1984a, p. 123). This essay argues that the blog is the 21st-century carnival square—the marketplace—where people mingle, negotiate, laugh, tease, chastise, and organize while asserting their values and ideologies. Like Bakhtin’s carnival, the blog “brings together, unifies, weds, and combines the sacred with the profane, the lofty with the low, the great with the insignificant, and the wise with the stupid” (Bakhtin, 1984a, p. 123). It is precisely this mix of people participating in an online community relatively free of “officialdom”—across social strata where the borders between actors and spectators are blurred and where praise and abuse operate side by side—that blogging permits. For political bloggers, entering the virtual square, whether masked or unmasked, provides a liberating experience and a rebirthing of political engagement.

Characteristic of Bakhtin’s carnival is a world turned “upside down” or “inside out,” where life becomes unpredictable. It is in this carnivalesque atmosphere that bloggers can unmask the sacred and subvert what is authoritative, rigid, or serious through discussions and opinion postings. Moreover, verbal etiquette and discipline are relaxed, and indecent words and expressions may be used (Bakhtin, 1993). However, Bakhtin cautions that the “Carnival is not a spectacle seen by the people; they live in it, and everyone participates because the very idea embraces all people” (1984b, p. 7). Because people live in the spectacle culture of the carnival, there are no passive spectators—writers, readers, blurkers are all active participants. Yet, as

social actors [they] are rarely “innocent” and social roles are rarely fixed and shared in any simple fashion. Instead, social actors are usually driven by complex interests, which lead them to push and pull at one another at every next turn. (Washabaugh, para. 5)

In this vein, marked by an unmanaged social gathering across geographical space that is free, open, nonhierarchical, rarely neat, and user-driven, bloggers can turn U.S. cultural politics upside down by tackling the unspeakable subject of race.

The question remains as to how much of Bakhtin’s concept of the carnival found its way onto the political blogs covering the 2006 Democratic primary in CD-11. Brottman (2005) explains that, throughout a carnivalesque discourse, “Aberrant layers of history and culture come to replace or intrude upon more conventional cultural models, creatively transforming both language and culture into a vast, multi-layered new dialogue” (p. 2). This new dialogue, facilitated through social networking, “is politically important because it expands the range of voices that can be heard in a national debate, ensuring that no one voice can speak with unquestioned authority” (Jenkins & Thorburn 2003, p. 2). It is within this landscape, marked by a burgeoning virtual reality, that political blogs emerged and have now become one of several types of social media (e.g., Facebook and Twitter) that are a mainstay of political campaigning. While blog authors are opinionated, often partisan, and can attack each other or political elites, there is still an audience that places faith in their credibility and trusts the information that they publish (Johnson & Kaye, 2004).

Up until 2006, candidates used six distinguishable media strategies to reach the electorate in CD-11: door-to-door canvassing, campaign stops at small and large community gatherings (e.g., the West Indian American Day Carnival, religious services planned campaign events, and subway stops), mailings and candidate poster blitzes, robo-calling, and occasional radio ads. But with the introduction of two relatively new political blogs, *The Daily Gotham* and *Room Eight*, a new site for political discourse entered the scene, adding one more spectacle to the 2006 Democratic primary election campaign. Kellner (2008) defines media spectacle as “events that are technologically mediated, in which media forms like broadcasting, print media, or the Internet process events in a spectacular form” (p. 1). Deploying a number of intersecting and competing narratives similar to those often found in the pseudo-reality genre of CourtTV/truTV, bloggers saw themselves as dispensing justice as they tussled over competing race narratives and the legal arm of the VRA. However, the spectacle became even more intense since there is minimal Republican presence in the district; therefore, the primary election is a *fait accompli* for its winner in the general election.

The District, the Bloggers, and Their Masks

The 11th Congressional District was once about 80% Black. During the post-1990 decennial redistricting, a small percentage of Whites were added to the district. Following the 2000 decennial census, more Whites were added from the northern, more affluent residential areas known as the “brownstone” district. By the 2006 election, 59% of CD-11 was Black, 29% White, 12% Hispanic/Latino, and about 4% Asian (U.S. Census Bureau, 2009). The demographic realities of the district also show that

about "39% of the residents in the 11th CD are foreign-born immigrants from Eastern Europe, Southeast Asia, Sub-Saharan Africa, the Middle East, and especially the Caribbean" (Clarke, 2009).

When it came to demographics, blogger profiles were consistent with several variables for the typical U.S. blogger: predominately male, highly educated (all had postgraduate degrees), and with higher incomes than the average American (see Sobel, 2010). The one variable in which there was a sharp difference between the national blogger demographics and the bloggers in this study was age. Technorati's State of the Blogosphere 2010 report states that 65% of bloggers are age 18 to 44, whereas in this study about 67% were between 44 and 68 years of age. Of the nine bloggers, six were White men, two were Caribbean-born Black men, and one was a woman who self-identified as a "Puerto Rican, physically 'black' woman" as well as a "Puerto Rican biracial woman." Blogging appears to have been a part-time activity in that four bloggers were attorneys, one a retired teacher, one a college lecturer, one a research biologist, and two were new media/marketing consultants. But even with their academic or work histories, reputations are irrelevant in the suspended world of carnival.

Particular to carnival culture is the donning of costumes and masks that parody everyday life with some symbolic potential. The mask (e.g., an avatar) that bloggers use to build blog authority, self-brand, conceal identity, create and reify meaning, or make some symbolic statement is akin to the adornments and lavish costumes that have been the hallmark of carnival from medieval times to the present. For instance, mole333's avatar is a self-constructed Viking. He wears a dark overtunic (modernized with white starfish) and an undershirt, and his hair is patterned on how some Vikings wore theirs—shoulder length with a full groomed beard and mustache (Glaesel, 2010). He adds tinted eyeglasses, a red collar, and, as if prepared for war, he holds a battle-ax close to his chest pointed outward. EnWhySeaWonk (AKA Wonk) initially used only a pseudonym. But in March/April 2006, he began to use the German *Ampelmännche* (developed in East Germany as a pedestrian traffic light symbol) with an upright pink triangle on its sleeve. The pink triangle, once a symbol of Nazi persecution of gay men, was turned upside down and reclaimed by the gay community in the 1980s as a mark of activism vowing never to return to the atrocities of the past. Playing with cross-race dressing, Gatemouth took his moniker from two Black bluesmen, Clarence "Gatemouth" Brown and Arnold Dwight "Gatemouth" Moore, which allows him (Gatemouth) to say, "Whatever came to his mind without regard to who would get pissed off" (Perez, 2010). Adding to the pseudonym, Gatemouth's avatar is a caricature of Brown from his 1976 album cover *Blackjack*. Apparently, the ambivalence stemming from a White man masquerading as a Black blues singer came under question as to whether he was "half-Black." In a post titled, "Gate's Salty Blues" (a cut from Clarence "Gatemouth" Brown's album *Rock My Blues Away*), he responds:

Well, I'd be perfectly honest if I told you I combed my hair with a pick, I'm darker than Johnny Otis, my ancestors were sometimes called schvartze, my grandfather was the splitting image of Flip Wilson, and I own a "Got-Melanin" t-shirt. And in the immortal words of former City Comptroller Mario Proccacino, "my heart is as black as yours."
(March 20, 2006)

Some bloggers were less elaborate in creating their online presence. For example, Rwallnery blended the first initial of his given name with his surname plus "ny" (New York) and a computer-

generated face of the Statue of Liberty. Rock Hackshaw uses a head-and-shoulder portrait of himself poised as Rodin's *The Thinker*, whereas Millstone (the oldest blogger) uses a photograph taken in his youth.

As online diarists, they were not shy in promoting causes or candidates. During the campaign, they used the blogs to endorse candidates, announce forums, critique bloggers with opposing views, arbitrate disputes, query endorsements, discuss the issues, and debate the disfranchisement of Blacks and the role of race in the election.

Branding the Candidates

From the beginning of the campaign, bloggers created a carnivalesque atmosphere on the blogs through comic verbal compositions, various genres of billingsgate language (e.g., degradation, mockery, curses, jokes), and the ritual act of "crowning" a new leader and the "decrowning" of the political elites. Bakhtin (1984b) suggests, "Crowning/decrowning is a dualistic ambivalent ritual, expressing the inevitability and at the same time the creative power of the shift-and-renewal, the joyful relativity of all structures and order, of all authority and all (hierarchical) position" (pp. 124-125). Inherently, Bakhtin would argue that "crowning already contains the idea of immanent decrowning: it is ambivalent from the very start" (pp. 124-125). With congressional elections held every two years, the choice of a new leader symbolizes the temporary and transitory nature of power. With the incumbent Major Owens stepping down after 23 years, the stakes were high in CD-11 as a new representative was about to be crowned. And for the first time, bloggers took center stage in attempting to influence the election.

Within the carnivalesque atmosphere, most bloggers framed the candidates into a binary: the multiple antagonists versus a single protagonist. The antagonists represented a group of political elites that most bloggers felt needed decrowning. Alternatively, the protagonist was a multiracial outsider candidate out to challenge the "politics as usual" practices of the Kings County (Brooklyn) Democratic Party (KCDP) machinery and was viewed as the heir apparent needing to be crowned.

The Black antagonists were New York State Assembly members Carl Andrews and N. Nick Perry and New York City Council member Yvette Clarke. Andrews was framed by several bloggers as the "machine hack" and the "underboss" because of his relationship with Clarence Norman, the former chair of the KCDP and a member of the New York State Assembly, who had been convicted in September 2005 on three felony counts and one misdemeanor for soliciting and receiving illegal campaign contributions (Hartocollis, 2005). Before dropping out of the race, Jamaican-born Perry was framed as the "loser candidate" and the "machine's (KCDP) sponge cake." Described by Gatemouth as "clueless," a "work-in-progress," and an "empty pants-suit of suspect lineage" was Clarke, a second-generation Caribbean American (April 13, 2006).

The final antagonist was David Yassky, who was framed by most of the bloggers as the "White opportunist" out to bamboozle the electorate and take a congressional seat created under the VRA that rightfully belonged to Blacks. Blogger Gumbs writes, "Whether he wins or loses, David Yassky will always

be remembered by name as the White candidate who tried to hijack a Congressional seat that belonged to 'people of color'" (June 21, 2006). Bouldin adds,

Yassky presents us Democrats with a unique and unforeseen challenge. We are being asked to elevate the incandescent ambition of one man over a central piece of legacy; that is what the councilman's amoral calculus of power demands of us. Yassky's campaign is nothing less than an Utter. Fucking. Disgrace. (May 17, 2006)

Blog publisher Liza Sabater went on to describe Yassky as "a divisive, opportunistic, republican-lite Democrat that ought to be ashamed for cleaving a majority colored district (African American, Puerto Rican and Caribbean blacks) for his political gain" (June 29, 2006).

As for the protagonist, bloggers on *The Daily Gotham* embraced Chris Owens, a health care administrator, and the son of a White Jewish mother and a Black father, the incumbent Major Owens, to carry the "progressive" brand. Blogger mole333 suggests:

It is mere coincidence that the main Daily Gotham writers are all supporters of Chris Owens. Or, perhaps, it is more that Liza sought out progressive voices for DG and Owens really is the most convincingly progressive candidate. Hence the site's admitted bias. (May 24, 2006)

Complementing the progressive brand, Owens was also cast as the "Magic Negro,"⁴ a stock character found in postmodern cinema and popularized in films such as *Guess Who's Coming to Dinner*, *Bruce Almighty*, *Million Dollar Baby*, *The Legend of Bagger Vance*, *The Green Mile*, and *The Matrix*. This Black character, usually male, is depicted as an exception with "magical" powers that make it easier for Whites to feel comfortable as the character helps identify what's going wrong and then fixes it (Kempley, 2003).

With both Harvard and Princeton degrees, Owens was often described by the generation X *Gotham* bloggers (e.g., mole333, Bouldin) as a "preacher" who was capable of "talk[ing] across racial lines" and, because of his multiracial heritage, had the power to be a "cross-racial unifier" in a racially divided district. Blogger mole333 further describes him as "so articulate, answer[ing] questions extemporaneously and brilliantly framing and delivering a message, the very thing that Democrats are so criticized for not being able to do, no one else in the race beats him" (August 25, 2006). Owens therefore emerged as the fusion candidate—of biracial parentage, born on the island of Puerto Rico, holding

⁴ Interestingly, Owens and presidential candidate Barack Obama shared the "Magic Negro" label. In Owens's case, the label was not used among the White bloggers, but the attributes were and are discussed in this article. In Obama's case, cultural critic David Ehrenstein penned an op-ed in the *Los Angeles Times* on March 19, 2007, in which he introduced the "Magic Negro" label and its attributes. Shortly after, the label became a focal point when conservative political satirist Paul Shanklin wrote and recorded for the Rush Limbaugh show his rendition of "Barack the Magic Negro" to the tune of "Puff, the Magic Dragon." The song then became part of Shanklin's 2008 CD *We Hate the USA*.

progressive views, and with Harvard and Princeton pedigrees—that speaks to a different type of upbringing and a different way of speaking about the issues when compared to the monoracial candidates.

However, not all bloggers, especially those on *Room Eight*, were in agreement with Owens's progressive labeling or the extent to which he used his multiracial identity. As Gatemouth writes:

Essentially, Owens takes the "progressive agenda" and wraps it in a racial Ponzi scheme. When reporters are in the room, Chris generally soft pedals the racial aspect of his message, merely reminding folks that he'd be in the Congressional Black Caucus, which he calls "the conscience of the Congress." (April 14, 2006)

Political Blogging, Race Dilemmas, and Identity Politics

Little is known about the relationship between race and political blogs, leading Kolko, Nakamura, and Rodman (2000) to conclude that, in a virtual culture,

The subject of race seems to be one of those binary switches: either it's completely "off" (i.e., race is an invisible concept because it's simultaneously unmarked and undiscussed), or it's completely "on" (i.e., it's a controversial flashpoint for angry debate and overheated rhetoric). (p. 1)

Perhaps the most insightful discussion on the topic is the idea that once the race switch is "on," it is often "characterized by a perverse reversal of the notion, that 'the personal is the political,' insofar as they involve the reduction of pressing political issues of race and racism to purely personal arguments and ad hominem attacks" (Kolko et al., 2000, p. 1).

In CD-11, the race switch was on and became the prism through which much of the election discourse was viewed. But, given the misperceptions about race in the United States, its unstable qualities, and how it is politically contested, multiple perspectives and dialogues were occurring on the blogs about race. For Bakhtin, all human experience is dialogic. The goal of dialogue is creative understanding, which "is not necessarily an easy process of reconciling ideas. It can involve conflict and struggle, but the conflict is for the other rather than against him/her." But even in struggle, understanding occurs, resulting in "mutual change and enrichment" (Bakhtin, 1986, p. 142). Conflict and struggle over race seemed to govern most of the postings by the White bloggers as they attempted to write about a political campaign and deal with their own understandings and misunderstandings of race in the election.

Even though blogger Sabater emphasized, "The color of one's skin or culture has very little to do with race and ethnicity" (August 25, 2006), skin color became a racial signifier and one of the most noticeable topics among the White bloggers. This was particularly evident when it came to Yassky. His Whiteness was often seen as a negative as the White bloggers punctuated their descriptions of him with the word *White* to emphasize his outsider status and to delegitimize him as a candidate in a VRA district (e.g., the White guy; the White candidate; or the White Brooklyn Heights Jew). The word *Black* was used

in more general ways—to describe a geographic area (90% Black), to describe candidates and their support base, or in reference to the VRA.

On the other hand, the same White bloggers (mostly on *The Daily Gotham*) who supported Owens and whose multiracial identity resonated with them were still in a conundrum as to where he belonged on the racial/ethnic continuum. Occasionally, he was described as “Black” or African American when lumped in with Andrews and Clarke, but more often was described as “half-Black,” “half-White,” and even “1/2 Jewish.” This seeming struggle has led Smedley (1999) to suggest that one of the most “tragic aspects of the racial worldview has been the seeming dilemma of people whose parents are identified as being of different ‘races’” (p. 696). Adding to the dilemma is that the physical markers of race are always open to interpretation. Since race is in the eye of the beholder, Smedley argues, “Mixed people will still be treated as black if their phenotypes caused them to be so perceived by others” (p. 697). As Rwallnery notes, “It strikes me as odd that Chris would be considered any more a black candidate than a white candidate. Is it because he looks more black than white?” (August 25, 2006). Chiding the other bloggers, Gatemouth adds, “If being black makes Owens more qualified than Yassky, does this mean that Andrews, Clarke and Perry [considered monoracial] are twice as qualified as Owens? Just asking” (April 12, 2006).

Bondi (1993) points out, “The notion of identity is explicitly one of process, performance and provisional and as such is unstable, fluid, and malleable” (p. 97). To try to reconcile Owens’s mixed identities, bloggers began to turn the discourse inside out by introducing their own identity issues. For example, mole333 writes, “Suffice to say that just like Chris is half black yet is black. I am half Jewish but I am Jewish” (August 25, 2006). Bloggers also coded Owens as half White and Jewish. Rwallnery declares, “Chris is half white, his mom is Jewish” (May 17, 2006).

Consequently, Owens’s identity was malleable as bloggers deployed two simultaneous discourses. First, Owens was placed within a Black/White binary. At one end of the binary, bloggers considered Owens being “half” Black as legitimizing him to take over a VRA seat. On the other end, bloggers also coded him as “half” White. And since Whiteness operates in a state of racelessness, Owens had a raceless identity, which made him part of their in-group. In both instances, bloggers, especially those on *The Daily Gotham*, viewed Owens’s multiracial identity very positively. For Sabater, his multiracial identity meant, “He can move beyond being a black politician to being a progressive politician who happens to be black” and was therefore able to “represent everybody in his district, not just black people” (June 29, 2006). The other candidates’ monoracial identities were often considered a liability when juxtaposed to Owens’s since they did not have the racial credentials to move across racial lines. As mole333 notes, “Yassky gets his support almost exclusively from the white and Orthodox Jewish communities,” Andrews “the Southern black community [exclusively] and is not well liked outside that group,” and Clarke “from the Caribbean community is barely noticed outside that core group” (August 25, 2006). Group identity also entered the fray when discussing race. “What appears to be about race is really about identity—identity can sometimes diverge from actual race” (mole333, August 25, 2006).

Although much of what was posted on the blogs was expressed in binary terms of Black and White, the added element of class was also apparent. When Rwallnery refers to Clarke as the “Caribbean candidate” who “could count on a very strong ethnic vote,” Sabater responds,

Caribbean is not a race. Not even an ethnicity at that. It just identifies people from a geographic region. The dirty little secret that most US Americans don't get is that to talk about "being Caribbean" is to talk about CLASS not race." (August 25, 2006)

While Sabater is correct that class is a factor in Caribbean societies, she fails to acknowledge the intersection of race, class, and color when dealing with Caribbean societies (Waters, 1999).

Laughter and Race-ing the Blame: The White-on-White Narrative

Yassky's class also became a point of contention among the White bloggers as they emphasized his race-based privilege stemming from his birthright—his family's wealth and their relationship to powerful, rich White New York real estate developers and lawyers. As Jensen (2003) states, "In a white supremacist culture, all white people have privilege, whether or not they are overtly racist themselves. There are general patterns, but such privilege plays out differently depending on context and other aspects of one's identity" (p. 80). Dalton (2008) reiterates that most Whites "tend not to think of themselves in racial terms. They know they are white, of course, but that translates into being not black. . . . Whiteness, in and of itself, has little meaning" (p. 15). The question is why do most Whites not see themselves in racial terms? Dalton argues, "Race obliviousness is the natural consequence of being in the driver's seat. . . . For most whites, race—or more precisely, their own race—is simply part of the unseen, unproblematic background" (2008, p. 16). While it can be argued that Yassky failed to recognize his White privilege, the White bloggers also failed to recognize their own privilege.

The bloggers' intra- and intergroup discussions on race also involved their relationships with each other and to the candidates, their positions, and personal indiscretions. At the beginning of the campaign, the discussions, often heated, were between the main bloggers on *The Daily Gotham*, who were fiercely anti-Yassky and pro-Owens, and those on *Room Eight*, who assumed more of a Bakhtin's carnival-world stance, peppering their narratives with laughter as they mocked and refuted the narratives of the *Gotham* bloggers. Wonk, the only blogger to endorse Clarke, kept needling Owens to drop out of the race if he was concerned about "a white Brooklyn Heights Jew taking over his father's seat." To launch his "Drop Out Chris" movement, he employs a comic motif parodying each candidate as a suit of cards: Clarke, the Queen of Hearts; Andrews, the King of Diamonds; Yassky, the King of Spades; and Owens, the Joker—the clown, the laugh (June 26, 2006). In this post, Wonk assumes the rights to parody, to treat the candidates as actors, and to rage at one actor, Owens. Instead of the individual putting on the mask in the true carnival spirit, the Internet allows anyone to mask the "other."

While most White bloggers took one of two positions regarding Yassky's candidacy—drop out because it is our duty as White liberals to endorse the spirit of the VRA by keeping CD-11 Black, or the election should be about issues and not race—Wonk took an oppositional position, calling for Owens to step aside. He refrains from making it racial and concentrates instead on experience and campaign coffers. Wonk, very much an outsider among the other bloggers, is Bakhtin's fool. Historically fools have inspired displeasure and disgust as well as surprise and delight in their commentary or performance. For Bouldin, displeasure is seen in a post admonishing Wonk, "If you want to do the politics of the pique, *chick*

[emphasis added], get to work on style and substance both, cuz' this aint it. I'm vastly amused" (June 27, 2006). Over the course of the next 24 hours, pro-Owens bloggers Bouldin and mole333 continued to post comments on *Room Eight* in a head-on rhetorical battle with Wonk, reintroducing the race element.

I hesitate to psychologize, but it seems to me that this is all white liberal pique about someone daring to mention that race is an issue. That's just impolite in our enlightened age, and some people are distraught enough to bust their pointy little heads through the screens of their new MacBooks at this bad taste. That's what I mean by politics of the pique: angry white liberals seeing their nice Kumbayah world disturbed by yesterday's issue, race and then shooting the messenger. Which is kinda what you [Wonk] and Gatemouth are doing; though, to be fair, with him there is also an ethnic solidarity [Jewish] thing going on. (Bouldin, June 27, 2006)

Gatemouth continued to provoke the pro-Owens bloggers by admonishing candidate Owens for fueling the "real ugliness on the race issue" and by being "the most blatant race-baiter in the race." At the same time, he points out that, while he found both Yassky and Owens had "met minimum standards to be fit for office," Yassky's Whiteness still troubled him:

I was reluctant to support him [Yassky] because he is a white candidate in a black majority district. I sort of feel ashamed about this, but my reluctance to support him is a pragmatic judgment, not a moral one. Yassky's whiteness is going to hang from him like a target and every two years he is going to face another racial crusade. (Gatemouth, April 12, 2006)

Overall, Yassky was blamed for playing "pigment politics," for "inadvertently stirring up latent racism," and for banking on racial polarization because of his support "almost exclusively from whites and Jews" (mole333, September 13, 2006). Blogger Bouldin went on to suggest that Yassky was embracing a campaign in "pitting Jew against Gentile, black against white, a minority of district voters against the majority, in a country where the district majority in turn is a minority" (May 17, 2006). The next day, in a post titled "Yassky/Nosky/Newsy," Bouldin writes, "Heh. Looks like I'm not the only one who's put off by the Matzoh Man's run in the 11th District. Check out StopYassky.com and take a closer look at the super-doooper-competent lovechild of Adonis and King Midas" (May 18, 2006). In labeling Yassky the "Matzoh Man," Bouldin hits him with a double insult—being Jewish and a cracker.

Laughter and Race-ing the Blame: The Black-on-Black Narrative

It was the Caribbean-born bloggers who turned the discourse upside down as they changed the racial dynamics from Yassky's to a Black-on-Black issue, highlighting what they saw as a form of hegemonic xenophobia from U.S.-born Black elected officials directed toward the new Caribbean populations vying for political office (Hackshaw, June 13, 2006). Therefore, Yassky's entry into the race gave these bloggers an opportunity to voice their discontent through laughter and debasement, including "curses, oaths, slang, humour, popular tricks and jokes, scatological forms, in fact all the 'low' and 'dirty' sorts of folk humour" (Stallybrass & White, 2002, p. 280).

Writing about the intersection of politics and the cultural struggles of new immigrants, Hackshaw presents a number of Caribbean-born candidates, beginning in 1982, who ran for city and state office in predominately Black districts in Brooklyn against a White opponent and in every case failed to receive support from the U.S.-born Black political elites. For Hackshaw, the objections of these same Black political elites to Yassky's candidacy were tantamount to the acts of racism that the Caribbean community had experienced. This led Gumbs to accuse New York State Assembly member Al Vann and New York City Council member Annette Robinson of being "guilty of racism as defined by the United Nations" (June 22, 2006). Following up, Hackshaw took on New York City Council member Charles Barron's objection to Yassky's candidacy, stating that Barron's obsession with "'race' trumps his common-sense." He continues:

Charles is full of shit as the rest, relative to this issue. The same blinders that he accurately accuses white men of having (relative to racism), is the same blinders he is wearing now. Racism is racism, whether it's coming from black or white (Hackshaw, June 16, 2006).

As first-generation immigrants, Gumbs and Hackshaw carried their Trinidadian culture to the United States, including their rhetorical style, which often set them apart from their White counterparts. In some ways, they epitomize Bakhtin's carnival and the carnivalesque through their cultural journey. Emigrating from an island in which carnival has become a salient feature of its cultural identity since the late 18th century to CD-11 in Brooklyn, which boasts the largest Caribbean carnival celebration in the United States, Gumbs and Hackshaw's rhetorical skills are clearly situated within a carnival ethos. But more importantly, it rests within the long tradition of "picong" a Trinidadian rhetorical style (akin to Bakhtin's billingsgate) known for its abusive language, comical banter, taunt and ridicule (Ilona, 2005, pp. 49-50). As Jones and Liverpool (2007) demonstrated, Trinidad humor is noted for being able to "humble" and "brutalize" as well as "heighten enjoyment" and "educate" (p. 259).

It is in the blogosphere that Gumbs and Hackshaw brought biting laughter to center stage as they explore race while subverting the Black political elites' objection to Yassky's candidacy. For example, New York City Council member Al Vann was playfully given the name "Mr. Rip Van Winkle" by Hackshaw, who also brutalized him as he wrote about Vann's Black Democratic colleagues in Brooklyn as the "Vann Klan." Here Hackshaw draws on picong when he intentionally and satirically replaces *C* with *K*, signifying the Ku Klux Klan.

In a subsequent post, "Turning Up the Heat: A Look at Mr. Rip Van Winkle (Al Vann)," Hackshaw again resorts to billingsgate language when he states that he is going to "hit" his "favorite targets: the somnambulant black elected officials of Brooklyn." He will aim "to shoot and duck (maybe)" as he declares "open season on Vann," relishing on "how he and his sycophants handle the heat" (June 13, 2006). When Al Sharpton got into the fray by asking New York senators Hillary Rodham Clinton and Charles Schumer and Attorney General Eliot Spitzer to use their influence to get Yassky to withdraw, Hackshaw describes Sharpton as a "political pimp" and a "political whore" and renames him "Sharptongue," adding that, when he shows up, "You can imagine the race-based drivel that will follow. As we used to say in Trinidad, 'Lord have mercy, please send down Percy'" (June 16, 2006). Here Hackshaw is evoking a common colloquial

expression, insider language, confusing to the African American and White community but well known in Trinidad and in other parts of the Caribbean as a call for help when facing a frustrating situation.

With Clarke in the race and given her mother's (Jamaican-born former New York City Council member Una Clarke) large political presence in the Caribbean community, candidates sought to attach themselves to this demographic base. When Andrews announced the creation of "Caribbeans for Carl Andrews," Gumbs adds "American" after Caribbean and then refers to the group by the acronym CACA (excrement), posting on May 25, 2006, that "CACA Endorses Carl Andrews. WHY?" In a cynical and manipulative way Gumbs is using one of Bakhtin's most vivid images of the grotesque body in which excrement is an essential feature of the "material bodily lower stratum" by degrading and debasing Andrews through the slinging of excrement at him but also at the Caribbean group who got involved in a game of the absurd by asking the question, "WHY?"

The day before the primary election, Gumbs again debased Andrews in a post titled, "Carl Andrews. Who's Your Daddy? It's ABC [Anyone But Carl] Time." He writes, "If my choice tomorrow is between a White man who is smart enough to be independent [Yassky] and a dumb Black man [Andrews] who is controlled by clever White men, my choice is 'Whitey' any day of the week." Gumbs argues that while Andrews is running as a legitimate representative of the Black community, an "all-White" lobbying and public affairs firm, Bolton St. Johns, controls him and had become his "daddy." He then moves the argument by questioning White support for Andrews as a form of racism and Blackness gone awry as he chastises unions for "supporting an inferior Black candidate for selfish reasons." Stating that their action "is nothing less than an act of racism." Furthermore, if Andrews is elected, "he will be the old White stereotype of the unqualified, incompetent Black man who is placed in a position only because of his race and color" (September 11, 2006).

Gumbs and Hackshaw saw themselves embroiled in a struggle for recognition of their unique culture (being Black and also Caribbean) and their exclusion from the social and political systems. To confront their exclusion, they used the blogs to facilitate voice where they are free to analyze their situation by expressing their discontent through a counternarrative strategy of resistance where nothing was sacred. As social actors, they create a grotesque carnivalesque posture as they mocked the African American political elites and spokespersons without any guarded filters.

Conclusion

Primary elections have become tumultuous media spectacles, in which social networking such as blogging (and more recently Twitter and Facebook) have opened up a participatory culture that was the hallmark of Bakhtin's carnival. Blogging, which was a new phenomenon in the 2006 elections in CD-11, became one more spectacle to enter the scene where the contemporary carnival can be performed daily in a public venue. As narrators, bloggers crossed boundaries (through blog rolls) to draw readers and other bloggers into the text. Bloggers in this study exhibited a number of Bakhtin's carnivalesque features: laughter and parody; the use of masks and costumes (avatars), which allowed some bloggers to assume various personae; breaking down of the formal rules of engagement, providing free and familiar contact between bloggers and their readers; playfulness; billingsgate language; and ridicule of those in power.

Although bloggers insisted that the racial discourse was a distraction, they never failed to return to it, whether in jest or gravity. As Bouldin notes, "I think the conversation about race and the VRA is one that the situation dictates. It does not benefit any one candidate, and frankly, I think it would have begun no matter which white candidate entered the race" (June 24, 2006). Therefore, race was not muted into the background but emerged as the dominant trope as White bloggers openly challenged the right of a White candidate to seek election in a largely Black congressional district. Blogger Millstone echoed this notion: "It's one thing to oppose a candidate because his policies are flawed and quite another because his skin is the wrong color" (September 5, 2005).

Most notable were the inter- and intragroup differences between bloggers on *The Daily Gotham* and *Room Eight*. For the loudest voices on *The Daily Gotham*, mole333 and Bouldin, race mattered as they wrote about Yassky's Whiteness from a position of racial dominance bent on disrupting the intent of the VRA by potentially denying Blacks a seat in Congress. They saw race as a legitimate factor in this election because of the history of Black disenfranchisement. For these bloggers, blogging seems to serve as an emancipatory release (a rebirthing) as they perceived themselves coming out on the right side of history. The other White male bloggers on *The Daily Gotham* (Rwallnery and Daniel Millstone) understood race from a color-blind perspective, believing that the election should be race-neutral. These intragroup dynamics between the bloggers on *The Daily Gotham* created a charged space, which led to a series of accusations and attacks between the two sides, with Rwallnery, for example, suggesting that Bouldin was racist for not being race-neutral or Bouldin and mole333 accusing Rwallnery of practicing "reverse racism" against them. Overall, what stood out most was the way in which Owens's mixed-race identity continued to be problematized even after the election, when Rwallnery seemed to be apologizing for referring to Owens as "black." "I am white and I supported a black candidate (well mixed race, it was Owens)" (September 14, 2006). Owens's class, mixed-race identity, and progressive stance made him the favorite among bloggers on *The Daily Gotham*.

Distinctive in their narrative were the bloggers on *Room Eight* who took more of a carnivalesque posture as they cajoled, played with, and mocked the White male bloggers from *The Daily Gotham* as well as the candidates and their hyperbole on race. As for the Caribbean bloggers on *Room Eight*, they pushed the envelope even further by subverting the discussion away from Yassky to challenge the hegemony and xenophobic politics operating against Caribbean political aspirants by the U.S.-born Black political elites through parody and satire.

In the end, the pro-Owens bloggers were not able to swing the election. Clarke, whom all but Wonk wrote off, won the Democratic primary and went on to win the general election in November 2006. Yassky trailed Clarke, taking the second position, with Andrews a distant third. Owens, whom seven of the nine bloggers endorsed, came in last. A number of factors could have attributed to this outcome. First, the lack of Internet access and a blogging culture in the majority Black areas of the district. Second, the majority of White bloggers banked (as did Owens) on the more affluent areas of the district, in which political blogging was beginning to take hold, providing a large White voter turnout in Owens's favor. But more importantly, the bloggers who thought they could have made a difference for candidate Owens

missed the groundwork (boots on the ground) that was being orchestrated by the other candidates, especially Clarke.

While it could be argued that the bloggers misread the political landscape and their power to impact the election in favor of their candidate, it does not negate the fact that the carnival ethos had moved to the virtual world, and in this carnival environment, race came to the forefront in the CD-11 midterm election. Ultimately, in a free and unrestricted way full of debasing, laughter, and mockery, sometimes obscenities, and the mock crowning (Owens) and decrowning (Andrews, Clarke, Yassky) of political aspirants, bloggers took on each other and the candidates in an open and unpredictable discourse in which race was at the forefront.

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