**Exchange on Lakshmi Bandlamudi’s “Difference, dialogue, and development: a bakhtinian world” (Routledge, 2016)[[1]](#footnote-1)**

*Lakshmi Bandlamudi[[2]](#footnote-2)*

*Thomas Fink[[3]](#footnote-3)*

**Thomas Fink:** In *Difference, Dialogue, and Development*, you continue your already significant body of work on Mikhail Bakhtin’s dialogic philosophy and apply it to the area of developmental psychology. In the fourth chapter, you argue that Bakhtin’s notion of “carnivalization” provides a “catalyst for development” (62) of “consciousness… in all its multifacetedness,” especially in its foregrounding of “the mischievousness, the defiant, and the irrepressible nature in us” (85). You assert that “carnivalized consciousness” helps “us overcome fear, despair, and stagnation” (84), all of which are strong possibilities as those politically on the left and center contemplate the ascendancy of Donald Trump. Aside from the competing voices in the dialogic space of carnivalization, which are realized within a historically specific “Chronotope” (time space), parody of dominant dogmas via such strategies as what Bakhtin calls “double-voiced discourse” is a prominent feature. Later in the chapter, you also discuss problematic forms of carnivalization—and I’ll get to that in my next question—but first I’d like to hear you identify one or two developmentally salubrious carnivalesque phenomena in contemporary aesthetic culture, and then tell us why this kind of carnivalesque activity has a positive impact on global society.

**Lakshmi Bandlamudi:** Carnival has been a powerful weapon of the ancient, meant as a corrective tool when societies strayed far away from truth. This ancient arsenal was deployed effectively to peel layers of hypocrisies and shatter oppressive hierarchies and attack falsehood. Therefore, it is most faithful to truth. Bakhtin himself observes that laughter’s philosophical force has been steadily weakening as we enter the modern era. Unlike the earlier period where comedy and tragedy co-existed, the contemporary era has separated them into polarized entities and hence carnivalesque laughter that celebrated ambiguities and indeterminacies has lost its sting. Therefore, when you ask me to identify “developmentally salubrious carnivalesque phenomenon in contemporary aesthetic culture,” my immediate response to that is, I bemoan the loss of it and it is a loud cry to reclaim the weapon that has been a close companion to truth. Remember, certain aspects of reality are accessible only to laughter.

Open societies and open minds do not fear laughter because they are committed to facing inconvenient truths – the bitter truths – so that they can actively change the reality and transform. In our cultural life, it seems we have entered a very dangerous “post-truth” world and the ascendency of Donald Trump is a manifestation of that phenomenon. Carnivalesque chronotope is forever in a ‘fact-finding’ and ‘truth affirming’ mission and hence the ‘wise fool’ presents an inverted world to show that sanctimoniousness is being mistaken for sanctity. The ‘post-truth’ world, on the other hand shows total disregard for even visible and verifiable facts and hence any consideration for truth seems far-fetched. Unlike the ‘world of lies’ that knows the truth and conceals it with lies, the post-truth world freely distorts truth in ‘anything goes’ approach. Running away from truth is only an act of timidity, but distorting truth is perverse, psychotic and diabolical and in this atmosphere there is hardly any room for carnival. Comedy and satire is the first fatality as societies move towards dogmas and authoritarianism. Political cartoons used to be a regular feature in newspapers and in our present times they are virtually non-existent.

However, this does not mean that the picture is bleak. Political satire and stand up comedy shows still effectively create the carnivalesque space. But this genre reaches only the already converted and receptive audience. Carnival space and time must be far more pervasive in the society to have a positive impact.

It is also important to keep in mind that carnivalesque chronotope remains in the margins and hence is able to be vigilant to the workings of cultural conventions and when normative practices reach their peak and lose their original intent carnival exposes and corrects. Hence, carnival is not an enemy of cultural codes of conduct. What we are currently witnessing is the normalization and centralization of carnival – a crude form that only retains the raunchy language and anti-conventionalism and mindless anarchy and not the purposeful philosophical anarchy that carnival engages in, and therefore, carnival has lost its meaning and purpose.

**Fink:** I agree that various political satirists and stand-up comics “effectively create the carnivalesque space.” When I think of comics, Sarah Silverman, who has been criticized by those on both the left and right, within herself seems a carnival, as reactionary and progressive tropes and topoi circulate freely in her deadpan delivery, while Margaret Cho and Louis C.K. *seem* more clearly situated in a progressive agenda but have this effect in different ways. So yes, the carnivalesque brings out “inconvenient truths,” but I thought that the function is to circulate the products of competing discourses, including ones that one might consider uncomfortably false or “post-truth,” even horrible. For example, and I could be wrong about this, I read Silverman as performing parody as double-voiced discourse and not being literal when she stereotypes African-American cultural figures, and I read Cho, who is so affirmative in palpably literal public statements about gay men, as also using parody as double-voiced discourse when she presents stereotypical images of male gays. Louis C.K. sometimes sounds feminist and sometimes masculinist, but . Of course, African-American comics like Chris Rock and Chris Tucker frequently do extremely complex versions of double-voiced discourse.

 Am I wrong to think of “carnivalesque” in this way? And, to go back to your statement that “this genre reaches only the already converted and receptive audience,” what would political satirists and stand-up comics need to do to widen the audience for their cultural critique?

**Bandlamudi:** Your interpretation is very much valid and as you rightly point out, “the function is to circulate the products of competing discourses…” Culture is always heterogeneous with divergent viewpoints and competing ideologies and every school of thought is prone to its extremities and emptiness. Therefore dogmas come in many forms – there is the dogma of the right and there is the dogma of left too – and carnival space does not spare any group and that is what we sense in the comedy of Sarah Silverman and Bill Maher and others. When groups espouse an ideal and conduct themselves to the contrary, hypocrisy becomes glaringly visible and when the ideologies that they promote do not match the ground realities, the purported ideals have become stale and rotten and when methodologies to achieve your ideals fail to drive you towards your goal, then it is a lapse of intelligence and in all these cases carnivalesque laughter and salty language become much needed corrective measures. It mocks at false piety and cautions you from consuming stale ideas and ideals and points out the wrong direction of your methodologies.

Interestingly, even the methods to produce satire and comedy are so varied. Some resort to playing the “gullible fool” (in reality the wise fool) to ask the right questions. Jon Stewart would often resort to this tactic. Actually, many good writers use an innocent child, or a drunkard or an insane person as effective literary devices to pose inconvenient questions. Another method is to simply amplify and magnify reality to show the absurdities and Stephen Colbert’s character in his previous show did that brilliantly. The ventriloquist, Jeff Dunham combines both the strategies – he plays the gullible fool and his dummies say the outrageous.

Perhaps the motto in the carnivalesque space is “room for all” and yet “no one is spared” and that is how it keeps the competing discourses active and alive.

Since the carnival space is open to all and all are equal participants in the spectacle, we cannot rely exclusively on satirists and stand-up comedians to point out the absurd. It needs to be an integral part of the society. We are trapped in too much false seriousness and ultra sensitivity (everybody gets offended with everything) and in this kind of climate, frank discussions become almost impossible. For laughter to have its force and power, the society needs to be sensitive to interior truth and internal freedom and that is why the masks in the carnival that the buffoon wears is only to peel the layers of psychological masks that we put on. As long as the exteriority is emphasized, we put on an act and continue to live in falsehood of all kinds. When we become mindful of irony and irreconcilability of entities in our cultural life, then laughter becomes a liberating force – liberating us not *from* the murky world but *in* the messy world – and so even if things remain the same you can still feel triumphant with a good laugh.

**Fink:** In Chapter 5, “Authoring the Self—Answering the Other,” you note that “encounters with different others and foreign cultures only open up possibilities for creative understanding, but the individual must respond dialogically for this to happen” (103). You caution against the illusion that “a simple assemblage of divergent viewpoints and diverse cultures” equals “dialogicality, for each could remain untouched by the other or identities could become amorphous and cultures fragmented.” There are so many examples in foreign policy throughout U.S. history that exemplify our leadership “remain[ing] untouched by the other” while presuming to interpret it for us; Vietnam and Iraq are perhaps the most prominent cases in my lifetime. But I’m interested in what you mean by “identities becom[ing] amorphous” through false dialogue and whether there is an example or two that could make this clear. Also, what’s the crucial distinction between learning from an “other” and having one’s own culture “fragmented”?

**Bandlamudi:** In a multi-cultural world that we live in, where there are frequent encounters with other cultures and faiths, there are ample opportunities for dialogic understanding of self, culture and history. The contrast or face-to-face encounters between self and other and between multiple texts and time periods are necessary, as many aspects of them are invisible to us when viewed as isolated entities. The self needs the other as a mirror; a text needs other texts to show its innumerable semantic possibilities, and the past and the present need each other to understand both. Now, the question is whether the juxtaposition is mechanical or whether metamorphosis is achieved.

When aspects of self and culture that are hidden become visible in encounters with others, it is accompanied by some anxiety, which is understandable and very often individuals respond to this anxiety by either creating “romantic pasts” and “imaginary homelands,” or completely uproot themselves from their cultural past. In both these cases the self loses its structure and form and fails to take ownership of actions and thoughts in a changing culture. Take, for instance, the anti-immigrant feelings across Europe and sadly now in United States – the long term-term residents want to return to presumed notions of “nativism” and “original son of the soil,” and the immigrant groups in their inability or unwillingness to adjust to the new world dream of imaginary homelands and romantic pasts and both these trends lead to extremism and identities become shaky. There is virtually a break between self and ground realities of culture and that leaves no room for creative understanding of culture and history. Navigating through a multi-cultural world is more than donning costumes for a fancy dress party. When the self is unmindful of dynamic changes that occur in culture, the identity gets amorphous, weak and rigid.

About the last question, failure to learn from others leads to a divided nation or fragmented culture and that is what we are presently witnessing. It is a form of primitive tribalism in a global village and no group wants to hear the reality experienced by the other. Learning from others or listening to others actually holds a nation/culture together to achieve the ideal of “Unity in Diversity.”

**Fink:** I find your diagnosis of the current problem regarding perspectives on immigration extremely compelling.

In the poetry of A.K. Ramanujan, an eminent classical scholar who spent nearly half of his days in his native India and a little more than half as a professor at the University of Chicago, one sees an intriguing example of “learning from” and “listening to others”—that is, dialogism. In his work, written in English (for those readers who might ask), there are frequent efforts to be open to the multiplicity of suffering in the world, also knowing how difficult it is:

How can one write about Bosnia,

Biafra, Bangladesh, just to take

only the atrocities that begin with B,

alphabetize cruelties,

eating persimmons and sleeping safe

in the arms of a lover, a wet moon

in the mullioned window? (*Collected Poems*, Oxford UP, 1995, 247)

Yet this dialogism, sometimes disorienting, begins by being situated within the attempt at representation of the self, as in “Self-Portrait”: “I resemble everyone/ but myself,” and the speaker finds “in shop-windows,… the portrait of a stranger,/ date unknown,/ often signed in a corner/ by [his] father” (Ramanujan 23). As Jahan Ramazani and other critics have pointed out, Ramanujan’s bicultural perspective—in Ramazani’s terms, the need to “translate” between cultures for one who was, in fact, well known for his translations—deeply influences his poetry and the self-defamiliarizing gesture in the passage above, since he saw himself composed of so much otherness. In “A Report,” he catalogues the deaths and recontextualization (“rebirth”) of numerous individuals as cultural phenomena, and ends, nearly dizzy with a sense of such heterogeneity, with the question:

Yet what can I do, what shall I do, O

god of death and sweet waters under or next

to the salt and the flotsam, what can I do

but sleep, work at love and work, blunder,

sleep again refusing, lest I fall asunder,

to dream of a blue Mysore house in Chicago? (Ramanujan 249)

One might explore why he thinks he would “fall asunder” by dreaming of (or even having constructed) “a blue Mysore house in Chicago,” and, more significantly, what this poem’s concluding image has to say about dialogic enterprises. How might Ramanujan’s poetry have points of contact with the consideration of dialogue and development in your book?

**Bandlamudi:** A. K. Ramanujan is a versatile thinker and his works undoubtedly lend themselves well to dialogicality. Coming from a multi-lingual and heterochronous (co-existence of multiple temporalities) culture, he embodies what many scholars have described Indian consciousness as a “translating consciousness.” When you live in a diverse culture, operating in a parliament of languages, meanings must be negotiated and sometimes meanings are also lost in translation, or some concepts are simply untranslatable and that shows the limits of translation and translator. It is with full knowledge of this limitation that a deep thinker and poet like Ramanujan skillfully leaves his texts open-ended and suggestive to push the reader into an imaginative horizon, thus inviting the reader as a partner in a dialogue.

Bakhtin observes that when we look at our image in the mirror, even in the privacy of our home, we see how we see ourselves along with how others see us and our response to how we think others see us, and this triadic formulation is evident in A. K. Ramanujan’s “Self-Portrait.” He acknowledges his genesis, which is only a small part of his self (father’s signature in a corner), but larger than that is the collection of ‘others’ in the self-portrait, thereby affirming the presence of others within the self and not outside the self, and this is a core feature of dialogic self.

In his poem “Bosnia,” Ramanujan constructs a dialogue between what the body experiences – relishing persimmons, the thrill of being held in the lover’s arms and the moon bearing witness to the delightful scene (Tales from India – classical and folklore – are packed with images of moon as a witness, judge and a guide in the dark night, and often referred to as *Chandamama* – Uncle Moon…) – and what the tormented mind warns with its collection of atrocities going on in the world around. The mind is cautioning that feelings of safety and ecstasy are precarious; they could be robbed from you anytime. Pleasure and pain co-exist to be in an ongoing dialogue.

Ramanujan writes “A Report” on how evil (Hitler, Stalin) and noble (Gandhi, King) characters are born and reborn and unfortunately the former appear and reappear in large numbers at a much faster pace than the latter (some generations even miss seeing a noble character in their lifetime). Therefore, in the journey of life, there are many wrecks – shipwrecks – so he asks the “God of Death” (I think he is referring to Vishnu comfortably lying in a supine position on the cosmic ocean as he refers to the sweet waters under…) what he can do clinging to the flotsam with salt water in his mouth? He can neither do the great things that noble characters have done, nor can he be a passive spectator to the atrocities and all he can do is “sleep, work at love and work, blunder…” Even sleep becomes a luxury when you *cannot* reach the stars in the open sky and *cannot* live in an unjust world either. I hear multi-voicedness when he laments, “lest I fall asunder, to dream of a blue Mysore house in Chicago,” and his fear of being torn asunder relates to our earlier discussion on amorphous identities.

There is always a fear of annihilation as we traverse through a globalized world – many encounters, many strange encounters, occasional surprises that are pleasant, and many forms of evil…the list goes on – and under these circumstances, he may run to the familiar place – the “blue Mysore house” – to take shelter there, and this is what he fears and dreads because it is an act of timidity. Or on another level, he may feel the need to revisit his “blue Mysore house” even if it is in his dream in a bed in his Chicago home, because that is his anchoring point, from which he operates in this vast world. Taking an excursion into his past, into his cultural space gives him the firm standing in the world and averts fragmentation.

It would be instructive to introduce briefly the work of Ashis Nandy, an eminent culture theorist in India, who has written about self’s journey from a village to the city and this back and forth journey, literally and figuratively contributes immensely to creative thinking because of dialogicality between the two (evident in Ramanujan’s works). Whereas, a journey without the periodic return or never having undertaken the journey in either direction could lead to fragmentation of the self as there are no external factors to disrupt the comfort zone. Nandy uses “village” as a metaphor for interior self – village as idyllic, simple, transparent, cozy and comfortable where no one is a stranger – but the self also needs to wander in a larger metropolis that is ever changing, intimidating and lonely, exposing one to harsh realities. The movement from one to another is packed with ambiguities and awareness of one’s limitations. One could easily be lost in the metropolis, because anonymity is the feature of city life. An unambiguous journey from the village to the city uproots the individual. Interestingly, even as Bakhtin celebrates an open-ended world, he points out that periodic momentary rhythmic closures are needed so that the individual is not lost in the cultural flux forever. At the same time, the village cannot be romanticized, nor can it be a permanent shelter in your psychological landscape to escape the harsh realities of city life. This is the danger that Ramanujan seems acutely mindful of, and yet, he does not want to forsake the village (Mysore) or the city (a global city like Chicago); instead he goes back and forth – and the simple small village enters into a dialogue with the complicated large city – thus, expanding his psychological landscape. Ramanujan not only moves between cultural spaces, but also between temporal zones – the ancient past and contemporary present – and these time periods are also in an ongoing dialogue and that is what makes his works so wonderfully dialogic and creative.

**Fink:** I’ve been teaching some of Ramanujan’s poems in various classes for the last ten years or so, and you’ve given me a great deal to ponder when I teach them in the future. Thank you.

 In Chapter 6, “Dialogic Method for Human Sciences,” you acknowledge the primacy of “monologism, under certain conditions,” as “there are no multiple viewpoints on certain topics like sexual assault, slavery, genocide, and many more” (120). Agreed, of course. And yet, in practical terms, to reduce the number of sexual assaults, to take one example from this grim list, that occur in a given society through early preventative measures, what are the necessary dialogic strategies to persuade, let’s say, young heterosexual males steeped in patriarchal ideology to open themselves to feminist concepts and—here I’m using Albert Ellis’s Rational Emotive terms—dispute their irrational beliefs and by so doing, change aspects of persistent emotions and ultimately their behavior? By dialogic strategies, I think I mean that one has to enter the *Weltanschauung* of the young dialogic partner in some way that is not merely condescending or horrified but affirms some dimension of their thinking and existence. Or is it naïve to think that dialogism can make a dent?

**Bandlamudi:** Dialogue is both a mediator for growth and development and an indicator of development. It is a method and an ideal and we pursue that not in naiveté, but with an intent and commitment to give the other a fair hearing, knowing fully well that the courtesy extended may not be reciprocated. Rabid monologists, even the ones not prone to violence, not only have no desire to *hear* the other, but they feel the need to negate the other to affirm their self. Therefore, the dialogically inclined is undoubtedly risking quite a bit in trying to engage in a conversation with a stubborn monologist – who will not hesitate to trespass into your territory (after all, the opening is given by the one initiating the dialogue) – and demolish your words and ideas.

Monologists always seek or even demand an alibi for their actions and thoughts. They surround themselves with “yes men” – who will sing their praises. Unfortunately, that is what we are witnessing in our present government. We can attempt to enter the *weltanschauung* of the other, if it is a matter of philosophical differences or worldviews or different remedies for the same problem (I have been reading letters between John Adams and Thomas Jefferson, who were north pole and south pole of the revolutionary movement, but they were able to engage in a dialogue), but we cannot and must not enter the *weltanschauung* of a megalomaniac, or a person prone to violence or a bigoted person. One of the most frustrating parts of our current discourses on political matters is the false equivalency drawn so unproblematically and unjustifiably. For example, the groups that questioned the legitimacy of Obama’s Presidency to a large part were airing their racial prejudice, while the groups resisting Trump are horrified at his offensive remarks on virtually every group. They are not on the same plane.

However, individuals who are blind to their sexist and racist views and yet are somewhat open to change, may very well be brought to the dialogic space to bring slow and steady transformation, and you are right; we need to engage in persuasive tactics without harsh repudiation, so that their sensitivities and sensibilities are heightened. We also hear accusation of ‘elitism’ of the educated and sometimes I wonder how being educated has become a disqualification. Well, ignorance must not be mocked at (as educators, we agree on that), but ignorance must still be corrected. Therefore, the demand that the ill informed views get equal weight is absurd and dangerous. But, hardened criminals and authoritarian leaders are beyond repair. It would be naïve to think that they would even come to the negotiating table. There is a stanza in the *Upanishads* that is apropos to this discussion and the gist of it is, “Giving advice to an obstinate fool is like feeding milk to a sleeping serpent, because after consuming the milk it will only spew venom.” There is a great risk of exposure to toxicity when you think you can dialogue with an obstinate fool with diabolical plans. I think this captures the dilemma that good thinking people are facing in this political climate. Sad, but true.

**Fink:** One hopes that among faculty and staff in educational institutions, as well as at least some corporate situations, monologism has the potential to give way to dialogism. I am intrigued by your critique of the common institutional practice of “brainstorming” (126-8) in Chapter 7, the title of which speaks to monologism as “Differences as the Will to Power” and dialogism as “Freedom to Choose.” On the basis of its structure, brainstorming could be a dialogic situation *par excellence*. However, citing a book by Sunstein and Hastie, you hold that less powerful members’ fear of punishment by those at the top of the hierarchy and “the social pressure to conform” (126) tend to mar the efficacy of brainstorming to the point that it becomes evidence of “brainwashing.” To be fair, in some brainstorming sessions that I’ve participated in, the foundational understanding was that the purpose was *not* open-ended exploration of possible goals but the most pragmatic ways to arrive at a pre-established set of goals not open to question, and those dialogues tended to be quite useful. But if this is dialogism, it is dialogism lite. How can an institution—especially a corporate one, where it is very difficult to reach below the bottom line to find a line below it— possibly reach the level of meta-awareness and unbounded criticality that actual, unfettered dialogism demands?

**Bandlamudi:**   I find it interesting that you read one part of the title of chapter 7 – *Difference as the Will to Power* as monologism and the other part – *Freedom to Choose* as dialogism, because in my formulation it is continuum and the very essence of dialogicality. I am invoking Nietzsche’s assertion, “plurality of interpretations a sign of strength” – to argue that ceding your territory and making room for the different other is actually a sign of strength and power. It does not in any way diminish the stature of the self; on the contrary, it shows its confidence and willingness to let others disrupt your thought patterns. You may eventually fully accept or partially accept or fully reject others’ viewpoints, but the power is in hearing divergent viewpoints. Only in a world of differences that power can be displayed, whereas a monologic homogenized world is a forced creation and in such a world there is only brute force and not the confident power that is both assertive and accommodating.

**Fink:** Yes, when I said that, I was thinking of the will to power in a narrow sense, but you do make the argument—correctly, I believe—that there is a will to power that benefits others as well as the self.

**Bandlamudi:** I found the findings by Sunstein and Hastie in their book *Wiser* to be compelling and they reinforce the argument I was making. They demonstrate that in any institution, be it corporate, government or educational, with a top-down structure (where brainstorming is only a label and the reality is brainwashing) rarely makes any room for innovation, whereas institutions that are incredibly diverse (diversity in ideas, not ethnicity), where there is room for dissent, create the much needed space for innovation. The former operates on fixed formulas and standard procedures, whereas the latter dares to think outside the box and hence prepares a fertile soil for creativity.

About your point on “fixed goals” and having a discussion on ways to achieve them is perhaps dialogism lite (that is being very generous) in a very limited way, because the discussion is on methodologies and not on the theoretical premise. For example, administrators in education institutions place heavy demands on assessment (we are no strangers to this), and they come up with various metrics and templates to measure student progress, and the educators having first hand experience in the classroom, find the measuring instruments to be invalid, unreliable and misleading. Furthermore, the measuring scale is far removed from ground reality. Moreover, the impact of education cannot be displayed as a “before” and “after” profile of a diet plan. What can one contribute to his discussion when the paradigm itself is flawed? It is like an author creating his hero as a mechanical mouthpiece to express his worldviews and never permitting the hero to speak his mind. Such works of literature do not stand the test of time and offers no space for competing ideas. Sunstein and Hastie point out that institutions that open the doors for the eccentric – the ones who defy established formulas – are far more likely to bring new products into the market (industries and corporations) and novel solutions to sticky problems (government) and theoretical and philosophical breakthroughs (universities).

Perhaps, we need to reimagine old concepts in a new way – dialogic power, dialogic freedom and dialogic development – as far more potent and desirable because they are both human and humane.



1. Originally published: <https://dichtungyammer.wordpress.com/2017/03/19/exchange-on-lakshmi-bandlamudis-difference-dialogue-and-development-a-bakhtinian-world-routledge-2015/> . [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Lakshmi Bandlamudi is a Professor of Psychology at LaGuardia Community College, City University of New York. She is the author of *Dialogics of Self***,** *The Mahabharata and Culture: The History of Understanding and Understanding of History*, and several other papers focusing on dialogic consciousness. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Thomas Fink is a poet and literary critic. He is the author of nine books of poetry, two books of criticism, and a literature anthology, and he has co-edited two critical anthologies. He was featured in the 2007 edition of Scribner’s *The Best American Poetry.* Fink is a Professor of English at City University of New York—LaGuardia. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)