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TikTok Videos, Carnavalesque Provocations for Teachers: Political Responses to Populism's Right-Wing

Pedagogical Provocations

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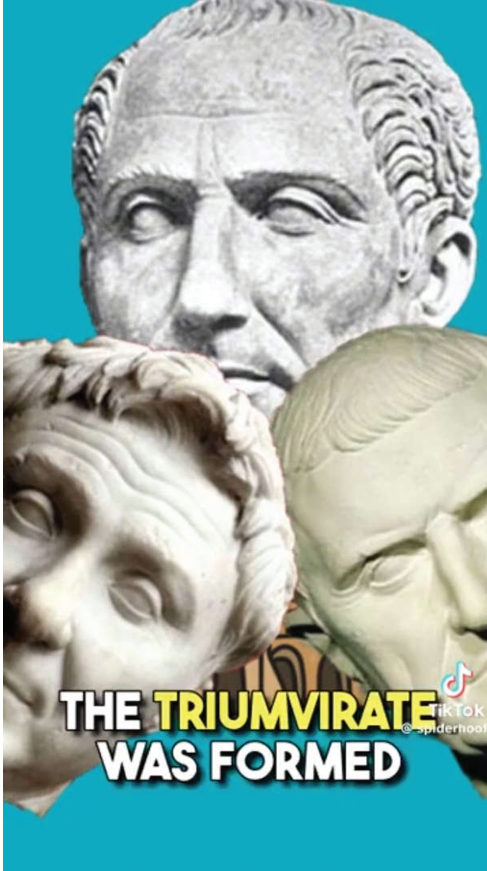
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Abstract

This article explores how TikTok videos, situated in a postdigital space and means of engagement, visibilise divergent responses to right-wing, populist political governments with anti-liberal, anti-socialist policies, offering video-based provocations for teachers. Even traditionally left-wing havens are shifting to right-wing populism, seemingly exemplified by the Aotearoa Coalition Government, implicating the prevalence of this phenomena. Due to education being an ideological battlefield, teachers are heavily implicated by such shifts, encouraging a visibilising of spaces and strategies for their responses. In this article, Mikhail Bakhtin's dialogic philosophy, with special attention to his concept of carnivalesque, is brought into conversation with TikTok videos, facilitating a means to conceptualise and analyse this postdigital, divergent underground as a mirthing means of speaking back. These mocking, visual responses to right-wing governments are then signalled as provocations for teachers experiencing a rise of populist policies. This article concludes by suggesting how teachers may utilise TikTok videos to politically speak back in divergent ways to right-wing governments, encouraging creative and diverse engagements in this postdigital platform.

Keywords

pedagogical provocations – TikTok – Mikhail Bakhtin – carnivalesque – political – populist – teachers – public square



FEATURE

Fiona Westbrook's article comprises seven videos, which can be viewed [here](#).

1 Introduction

This article explores TikTok videos as divergent, postdigital responses to right-wing political governments with anti-liberal, anti-socialist policies (Cooke, 2023; Perera, 2023), signalling provocations for teachers. Shifts toward authoritarianism, and populist, right-wing governments are globally increasing (Paidipaty, 2023), with a decline of democracy (Gorokhovskaia & Grothe, 2024). Minorities and 'perceived foes', such as the-liberal-left and indigenous communities, are experiencing increasing marginalisation and silencing because of this phenomena, with attacks on divergent voices to these right-wing ideologies (Gorokhovskaia & Grothe, 2024; Westbrook, 2024b).

Even Aotearoa New Zealand (hereafter, Aotearoa), described as a “haven of liberal politics” (Di Maio, 2018, p. 1), are experiencing this turn; the 2023 election ushered in the country’s most conservative government in decades (Frost, 2023). The political shift in this country, from a strong hold of socialism to a right-wing entrenchment, reflects the globalised turn to populism, offering an important site to examine this process, and divergent responses.

A space said to be dominated by right-wing, populist voices and values are social networks, where the use of derisive humour is weaponised to mobilise anti-socialism (Zienkiewicz, 2020). The mantra ‘The Left Can’t Meme’ contends that social networking visualities and spaces are ineffectually utilised by divergent left-wing, socialist political voices (Dafaure, 2020). This narrative contends ‘The Left’s humourless, overly serious, ‘political correctness’ ineffectively speaks into these forums and mediums’ (Kearney, 2019). A significant concern for the perceived superiority of populism’s utilisation of social networks, is how these spaces and visual forms deploy populist movements, marginalising opposing voices (Way, 2021). Satire is implicated in these encounters, with mirthful visualities in social networks entrenching and mobilising populist, far-right views and values (Zienkiewicz, 2020). Contending this narrative that ‘The Left Can’t Meme’, or engage in satirical counter narratives, this article highlights examples from the left where social networking visualities enabled opposing, divergent voices to flourish through postdigital, mirthful jesting. This investigation signals how and where marginalised voices, such as those within education, might speak up.

Education, and its workforce, is particularly targeted by shifts to the right because the sector is an ideological battlefield, making it frequently targeted by incoming politicians and governments (Gomendio & Wert, 2023). Furthermore, the marginalisation of teachers’ voices is amplified due to their de-professionalisation, with the lowering of their status consequently diminishing the upholding of their views in official spaces (Troiano, 2018). Consequently, the turn towards right-wing populism at a governmental level may be especially challenging for teachers facing anti-liberal, anti-socialist policies; these encounters encourage investigations and provocations that visibilise teachers’ divergent, counter narratives.

Mikhail Bakhtin’s (1981, 1984b, 1984a) dialogic philosophy, and concept of carnivalesque are utilised to investigate and analyse the potentials of TikTok’s postdigital, visual forms. Dialogism and carnivalesque contemplate the possibilities of satire as a divergent means of response in challenging times. This philosophy is inseparable from the strife Bakhtin experienced in Soviet Russia (White & Peters, 2011). It, therefore, enables an analysis of the ‘unique opportunities’ prompted as a consequence of political and social

unrest (Holquist, 1984); this approach makes it insightful for the current epoch's globalised decline of democracy and rise of authoritarianism, which infers troubled times. Adopting a possibilistic approach, TikTok as a postdigital means of divergent response to the right-wing is explored. From a carnivalesque conceptualisation, this article then signals how teachers may utilise this postdigital platform, and its jesting video genre, to politically speak back in divergent ways to right-wing governments and political ideologies.

2 TikTok: a Postdigital Space for Engagement

TikTok offers a postdigital platform ubiquitously integrated into the online/offline lives of users, defining interpretation and response (Carr et al., 2020). Social networks are interconnected 'somehow' with everyone, interweaving, postdigital dynamics whereby the binary of offline versus online has evolved into an interwoven, condensed reality (Carr et al., 2020; Sinclair & Hayes, 2019). Therefore, social networks are increasingly mundane, through the permeation of the "digital throughout day-to-day life" (Oliver, 2020, p. 24). Carr et al (2020) describes how "some issues are amplified, others diminished or omitted, everything now plays out somehow through social media" (p. 41). Social networks are, therefore, a significant space and means of political and social response because of the postdigital condition.

TikTok videos enable users to respond in divergent, postdigital ways, fostering a visually situated space and means for 'political expression' and 'social movements' (Hurley, 2022; Literat & Kligler-Vilenchik, 2023). Characterised as the 'most successful video app in the world' (Smith, 2023, p. 1), TikTok is entrenched in the postdigital condition given it is pervasively ingrained into the everyday lives of the over one billion monthly users (Andreson, 2020; Björk, 2021). The genre of this viral, video sharing platform is informal and organic with a spontaneous, intimate quality (Andrews, 2020), rejecting authoritative 'buttoned-up, overly polished content' (Newberry, 2023, p. 71). Such visual form and content arguably encourage divergent, subversive responses that may be of use to teachers. Eliciting an underground culture, TikTok videos foster postdigital communities through a highly personalised feed that defines the conditions of social life through algorithmic technologies (Newsberry 2023).

Content focused on relevance, not friends, can enable communities to connect through shared political interests, beliefs and ideologies (Gilmore et al., 2023; Leinhauser, 2022; MacKinnon et al., 2021). In this way, the postdigital is fostered through the omnipresence of technology, social life, and social networks, altering how spaces and means of response are garnered and

engendered. Furthermore, due to the algorithmic focus of discovering new content, as opposed to only seeing viral videos, TikTok has been labelled “an equal playing field for creators” (Oladipo, 2023, p. 7). Hence, this postdigital space, and the visual means of engagement it fosters, may visibilise that which resonates with people, as opposed to entrenching authoritative discourses, linked to the siege and death of democracy (Cole, 2022). Postdigital interactions and forms of response may, therefore, be a significant space for divergent voices to democratically engage in dialogue.

Simultaneously, postdigital fluidity has raised critical concerns for how social networks ubiquitously amplify truths and realities (Jiang & Vetter 2020; Rose 2020). Populist anti-liberal and anti-social rhetoric has spread through the commonplace intermeshing of online and offline encounters (Maginess 2021). Whilst this condition has been linked to the spreading of misinformation and disinformation in the post-truth era, spurring populist rhetoric (Jiang & Vetter, 2020), it also offers a space and means for divergent voices to speak up. Acknowledging these contentions, this article contemplates the potentials of postdigital platforms and their visualities to foster divergent political voices. Such possibilities are significant given the way the postdigital interweaves technology, social life, and social networks. Notably, the use of parody within social networks as a divergent, subversive entreaty is not novel (Westbrook & White in press; Sinclair 2020; Westbrook, 2024b). This article expands on these visual dialogues by turning to the potentials of TikTok’s mocking video-genre, and what such responses offer, to divergently contend populist governments’ rhetoric.

3 Populism, Right-Wing Governments

The last two decades have experienced a significant, globalised rise in populist, radical right-wing parties (Galais & Pérez-Rajó, 2023), who can become key players through coalition governments (Askim et al., 2022), seemingly observable in Aotearoa. Populism, has been described as the antagonistic divide of the supposed “will of the people” and the corrupt “political and bureaucratic elite” (Askim et al., 2022, p. 730), with a focus on personalistic appeals to voters that can reflect racialised, anti-immigrant and wasteful spending narratives (Bågenholm et al., 2021). Populist parties, therefore, espouse “anti-liberal to anti-socialist” sentiments (Galais & Pérez-Rajó, 2023, p. 492), that aim to provoke “gut-level affective responses” (Schumacher et al., 2022, p. 851). A phenomenon arguably observed in the Aotearoa Coalition Government, who were elected at the end of 2023, replacing

the left-wing labour party led by Jacinda Ardern, a celebrated, socialist political figure (Lim, 2023).

Similar to other populist parties, the newly appointed Aotearoa Coalition entities ACT and NZ First, propagated election and governance dog whistles (covertly, codified speech that is often derogatory to a subset audience, whilst nodding to those who reflect and affirm similar ideologies; Quaranto, 2022). ACT, led by David Seymour, arguably engaged in dog whistles through the racialised election slogan and signage 'End Division by Race'. An apparent reference to the additional assistance Māori (the indigenous peoples of Aotearoa, also referred to as Tangata Whenua, translatable as people of the land) receive. ACT's electoral slogans hinted at a populist perception Māori unfairly receive additional resources, ignoring how this allocation is due to the ongoing impacts of colonisation (Moewaka Barnes & McCreanor, 2019). Such racialised sentiments are arguably similar to the populist reply All Lives Matter, in response to the Black Lives Matter movement (West et al., 2021); a retort that overlooks the conditions giving rise to such needs.

The second party forming the Aotearoa Coalition that may reflect populist sentiments is NZ First, led by Winston Peters, espousing rhetoric comparable to Donald Trump, such as the corruption of the media (Jack, 2023; Wilson, 2023). This connection speaks to the importing of populism, as a globalised phenomenon brought into conversation with localised contexts, implicating the prevalence of this movement, which interweaves similar narratives and policy directions. The intermeshing of globalised populism arguably calls on the equally interwoven postdigital, such as TikTok, when conceptualising means and spaces of divergent response.

Utilising the Aotearoa Coalition Government as a possible example of the rise of populism, even in traditionally liberal, left-wing countries, an exploration of policies, and political directions that are elicited from right-wing parties are traversed in this article. As is an examination of how coalition governments, comprised of populist parties can seek sweeping policy changes, often fostering threat-elicited-fear-responses that encourage a move toward authoritarianism, which consequently diminishes democracy's upholding of divergent voices (Forgas et al., 2021). Exemplifying such encounters, shortly after coming to government the Aotearoa Coalition released a 100-Day Plan they described as 'ambitious', with '49 actions to deliver in the next 100 days' (Luxon, 2023, p. 5); actions that appeared to highlight a far-right, populist ideology, with a focus on sweeping changes to the educational sector, deregulation, and racialised policies.

3.1 *The Aotearoa Example: a Populist Coalition*

The 100-Day Plan of the Aotearoa Coalition Government was criticised as disestablishing Tangata Whenua rights and services, as well as ending progressive policies that sought socialist, public goods (First Union, 2024; Woods, 2024). One of the first initiatives to be signalled by the Aotearoa Coalition was a challenge to Te Tiriti o Waitangi (the Treaty of Waitangi, a founding document of Aotearoa, initially drawn up between Māori and the British crown). In addition to the planned diminishment of te reo (the Māori language) names of government departments. Whereby services like Waka Kotahi NZ Transport Agency, would strip back to an English first title. Further policies planned to disestablish the Māori Health Authority, simultaneously repealing legislation designed to make Aotearoa tobacco smoke-free by 2025 (Luxon, 2023). A shift in policy that will disproportionately affect Māori and Pasifika peoples (Smokefree, 2023). This part of the plan was titled a thinly veiled means to pay for tax cuts; an electoral promise not fiscally accounted for at the time (O'Callaghan, 2023).

Other policy repeals of note from the 100-Day Plan were reversals to the ban on live animal exports, ending legislation for hate speech and repealing the Fair Pay Agreement (Murray, 2023; Wilson, 2023). These policy directions imply populist aims to reduce welfare, deteriorating the provision of public goods, transferred to 'favoured constituents', financially emphasising 'threat agendas', often targeted at minorities, such as Tangata Whenua (Bågenholm et al., 2021, p. 254; Forgas et al., 2021).

For the educational sector, the Coalition's planned policies seemed to further cement right-wing populism. The 100-Day Plan included the removal and replacement of gender, sexuality, and relationship-based education guidelines (Eeden, 2023). For instance, shifting sporting curriculum so it is "not compromised by rules relating to gender" (Coalition Agreement, as cited in Eeden 2023, p. 4). In addition to a shift in history curriculum that aims to restore balance (Madden-Smith, 2023), with the Coalition stating current curriculum "pushes a number of left-wing narratives" (as cited in Murray, p. 26). Narratives they claim include the "villains and victors" teaching of colonisation (Scott 2023), a sentiment, and planned educational reform that rejects the impacts settlers had on Tangata Whenua, and the consequences of racialised policies, such as the banning, and punished use of te reo. The Coalition has also signalled the removal of Mātauranga Māori (Māori knowledge that broadly includes this culture's values, traditions, philosophies, understandings, worldviews and concepts; Tākai n.d.) from science curriculum (Scott, 2023, p. 21).

Other indicated policies further amplify right-wing deregulation, such as curriculum documents becoming "pick and choose" to "prevent the

'curriculum wars' of the United States" (Scott, 2023, p. 21). Another example is the reintroduction of charter schools that foster privatisation models, and a refocusing on 'academic achievement' that enshrines reading and writing (Eeden, 2023; Luxon, 2023; Murray, 2023). The Coalition Government has also indicated the introduction of early childhood, before school checks, measuring the ability of four-to-five-year-olds to read their name and hold a pencil correctly, with poorly performing centres set to lose their funding. The range and depth of these reforms highlight the considerable extent to which education can be impacted by right-wing, seemingly populist governments, who seek to reshape the country through the earliest years of schooling (Dexter, 2024; Luxon, 2023). The ideology driving these changes, and the extent of the reforms, may instil a populist, authoritative monologue that silences divergent voices. For teachers with counter views, spaces and means of opposing responses, therefore, appear of increasing relevance, giving voice to counter views and offering spaces for communities to establish countercultures that enshrine divergent values, upholding democratic encounters of pluralism.

For teachers, populist policy concerns may be further elevated due to existing sector crises (Seah, 2023). Already overworked and under-resourced (Seah, 2023; Teaching Council of Aotearoa New Zealand, 2023), teachers are raising concerns about the heightened impact of populist ideologies and policy directions under their adverse conditions (1 News, 2023). Within Aotearoa, the announced educational reforms have been categorised by teachers as promulgating "conspiracy-based thinking' (p. 10) that is "dangerously close' to culture war rhetoric" (Dexter, 2023, p. 16). The Coalition's 100-Day Plan has also prompted concerns from the early childhood sector, given they are already subject to poor conditions, pay and recognition (United Workers Union, 2021), amongst an increasing living crisis (Stats NZ, 2023). The Fair Pay Act marked for repeal by the Coalition will likely further exacerbate disenfranchising conditions, which is highly problematic for early childhood teachers as an underpaid profession, prompting protests (Ridout, 2023).

Although specific to Aotearoa, similar educational, teaching and living crises are being reflected globally (Boscaini, 2023; May & Kelly, 2022; Specia, 2023; Wiggins, 2023; Will, 2023). This phenomenon infers the intersecting challenges of teachers being both a target of populist government policies, whilst already facing challenging conditions that complicates divergent means and spaces of response. Given the prevalence of these dual threats, a philosophically rich conceptualisation and analysis of the spaces and means of speaking back in divergent ways, which may foster democratic dialogues is offered in this article, delving deeply into the possibilities that might arise from the current epoch's challenges to pluralistic voices.

4 Bakhtinian Carnavalesque and Authoritative Discourse

A reading of Bakhtin, and his concept carnivalesque, can be elicited as a means of investigating and suggesting provocations for divergent political response (Westbrook, 2024a). Living during a time of considerable political and ideological unrest, Bakhtinian philosophy poses the many ways authority can be replied to, as “no conclusion is ever capable of definitively putting an end to dialogue”; Bakhtin “offer[s] a new path for political philosophy” (Koczanowicz, 2016, p. 32). For this reason, dialogism is fruitful for investigating the rise of populism, with carnivalesque’s mirthful and absurdist satire being particularly pertinent.

References to *political* are seldom in Bakhtin’s text,¹ except when discussing carnivalesque, making it a seminal concept for political dialogues (Gardiner, 2004). An example of this entreaty is perceptible in his explanation of carnivalesque as “directed at all conditions of human and political existence” (Bakhtin, 1984b, p. 11). Affirming this assertion, Holquist (1984) contended Bakhtin’s attention with this concept is to the “relations between body, language, and political practice above all, political” (xxi). Entrenched within this form of dialogic response, carnivalesque permits investigations of how peoples might respond to political issues impacting their lives, such as the Coalition Governments 100-Day Plan and future policies. Notably, this genre enables those typically silenced to speak up, enshrining divergent voices.

Outlining the potential of carnivalesque responses, Bakhtin (1984b) expresses how “a political crisis was nothing more than a tempest in a teapot, the crowning and uncrowning of a clown” (p. 138). He, therefore, offers a means to conceptualise and investigate the agentic ways people might suspend authority, such as that of a populist-right-wing government, to speak up in divergent ways.

Central to carnivalesque responses is mocking, tongue-in-cheek, parodying, and grotesque laughter. Bakhtin (1984b) described how

laughter was its relation to the people’s unofficial truth. The serious aspects of class culture are official and authoritarian ... Laughter, on the contrary, overcomes fear, for it knows no inhibitions, no limitations ... It was the victory of laughter over fear.

BAKHTIN, 1984, p. 90

¹ This overt mentioning is perhaps unsurprising given Bakhtin’s placement within the Soviet Union, with Stalin undertaking a brutal campaign of terror against even minor infractions to his power (Gratchev, 2019).

Laughter, often that which mocks, parodies, or is grotesque, fosters a free and frank dialogue that uncrowns, or degrades authority and fear by crowning those who are typically outside of such status (Bakhtin, 1984b). This inverting of who has authority to speak up and who is ridiculed opens up divergent and inconvenient dialogues to overturn whose truth is granted alliance (Westbrook & White, in press). TikTok videos that mockingly poke fun at authority can, therefore, be perceived as a carnivalesque uncrowning, or that which reverses any notion of 'legitimised' and hierarchical ideologies and ranks.

Whilst the far-right movements are apt at such satire (Kearney, 2019), this article turns to dialogues within TikTok to examine divergent voices to the rising authority of populism. Bakhtin (1984b) described carnivalesque as the second life of the people, or a powerful counterculture where those who are typically voiceless speak up in mockingly divergent ways, prompting an underground subversion. Consequently, the 'typical' hierarchical world order, with its entrenched fears, is suspended for the underground voices and views of the people, offering a complete freedom within a festival of laughter, even if only temporarily (Davies, 2015).

Furthermore, carnivalesque offers an investigation of the comically and grotesquely reframed official rituals and ideologies, enabling TikTok videos to invert the highest levels of seriousness and profaned thought. Bakhtin described how this flipping occurs, because laughter that mocks, ridicules and parodies shifts 'top to bottom, from front to rear' (Bakhtin, 1984b, p. 11), renewing and revitalising by enabling no topic to be beyond reproach. Sinclair (2020) contends that such parody is an "important aspect of postdigital media literacy" (p. 61), offering an antidote and generator of fake news, depending on whose truth is being uncrowned. By taking nothing seriously, absurdist, satirical voices can pose divergent views, fostering many voiced, democratic political dialogues. Hence, parodic, and satirical visual entreaties appear especially relevant within the postdigital era (Sinclair 2020), amplifying the potentials of TikTok videos, given the possibilities of their mirthful genre.

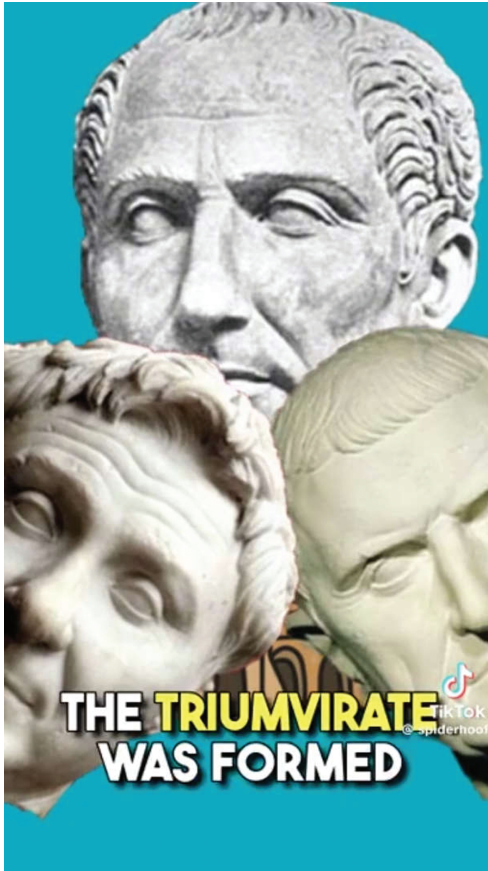
As already signalled, mirthful genres within postdigital spaces and forms are not without tension. Satire, especially when taken too seriously and reified, can have detrimental effects (see Holm, 2023; Phiddian, 2024). Yet, Bakhtin highlights how it can also be a "powerful art form" enabling divergent voices to respond to social and political issues, through the mirthful and the absurd (LeBoeuf, 2007, p. 3). These dynamics emphasise the tensivity within social networks, highlighting these active, interwoven spaces as full of potential and problematic challenges, which ought not to be overlooked.

Significantly, carnivalesque responses are incited due to the presence of authoritative discourse (Bakhtin, 1984b), such as populist rhetoric. Counter to carnivalesque's subversion, authoritative discourse impresses dominant narratives, positions and ideas that are perceived to be "hierarchically higher" (Bakhtin, 1981, p. 342). Imbued with legitimacy, this "word of the fathers" has an infused authority that seeks to bind others to an espoused truth that is deemed profane and thus indisputable (Bakhtin, 1981, p. 342). Entrenched within "political power, an institution, a person – and it stands and falls with that authority" (Bakhtin, 1981, p. 343), populist governments can be viewed as entrenching authoritative discourses. This is because they draw from canonical scripts to convince others to affirm their anti-liberal, and anti-socialist ideologies, and approaches. Notably, as interwoven language styles, authoritative discourses can incite carnivalesque responses.

Indicating the relationship between authority and carnivalesque jesting, Bakhtin (1984b) utilised the example of French peasants during the Renaissance, which appears reflective of TikTok-populist-un/crownings. He illustrated how carnivalesque erupted near the church, indicating how underground, countercultures are prompted in response to autocratic authority and official seriousness (White, 2017). As such, carnivalesque is fostered because authority, such as populist, right-wing governments exist, prompting divergent, underground opposition. Hence, carnivalesque offers a means to investigate how those who may typically feel silenced, respond in jesting ways to imposed authority. This article brings these entreaties to TikTok videos, analysing how the postdigital mirthing responses to populist, right-wing government grants voice to those with opposing, disenfranchised, ideologies. Returning to the example of the Aotearoa Coalition Government, this carnivalesque jesting, and the uncrowning of authoritative, hierarchal truths is analysed in the responding TikTok videos, employing Westbrook's (2023) visual methods of Bakhtinian analysis.

5 Tiktok Jestng

TikTok videos emerged shortly after the 100-Day Plan steeped in carnivalesque jesting, facilitating an underground, postdigital counterculture of divergent voices to the new government's ideologies and policies. One video ridiculing the Coalition's tenuous three party alliance hinted at the likelihood of this government's ill-fated future (see Video 1).



VIDEO 1

Christopher Luxon, David Seymour and Winston Peters. (See [here](#).)

SPIDERHOOF, 2023

The Video 1 TikTok draws parallels between Caesar's demise and the presence of Winston Peters, who publicly shunned and shamed his previous Labour-Coalition Government (McKay, 2022), inferring future 'stabblings' within the current Coalition. Consequently, this government's alliance, like Caesar's, is signalled as volatile and unstable. Hence, Video 1 seemingly highlights the underside of the Coalition relationship as tenuous. As such, this TikTok video potentially suspends and, therefore, uncrowns notions the government will be able to govern Aotearoa as a united collective, with a foreboding forecasted for their future abilities to 'rule'.

Another TikTok, Video 2, includes a news clip of ACT's David Seymour talking to the media as he is being heckled. The background noise is filled with multiple car horns, layered with a non-visible 'heckler' who can be heard vehemently yelling at the ACT leader exclamations, such as 'who do you think you are?'

TE AO MAORI | NEWS

David Seymour heckled as car convoy passes Parliament

By Felix Desmarais, Digital Political Reporter



ACT leader and minister David Seymour said he doesn't think protests during a morning of 'Nationwide Māori Action' are "going to win people over".

TikTok
@incoominativ036

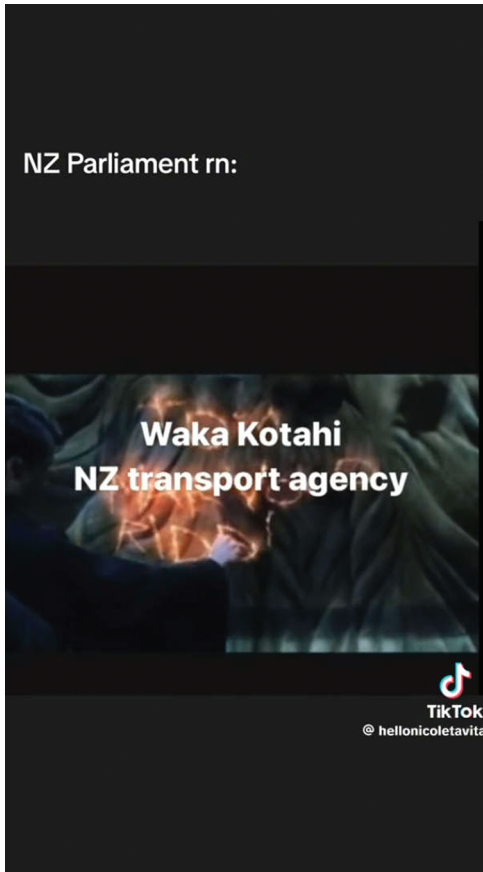
VIDEO 2

Who is the heckler? I'd love to buy him a beer 🍷❤️💜💙. (See [here](#).)

NOTMYPRIMEMINISTER, 2023D

The title for this TikTok video is 'Who is the heckler? I'd love to buy him a beer', implying a celebration of divergent anti-Coalition responses and sentiment that contend the policies of this government. In doing so, the heckler and TikTok sharer of this video seemingly crown one another the opposing voice of the people, highlighting the presence of divergent voices, whilst uncrowning populist rhetoric. As such, Video 2 appears to give voice to those from the underground by inverting the authority from the arguably populist, political entities, visibilising counter jesting responses.

Numerous TikTok videos also mockingly ridiculed the Coalition's aversion to te reo, and the plans to change signage so as to minimise and potentially remove Māori language across Aotearoa. Video 3 utilises the Harry Potter anagram, in which 'Tom Marvolo Riddle' is unveiled to be 'I am Lord Voldemort' (see Video 3).



VIDEO 3

When Chris Luxury Luxon is beefing over a name when many NZers literally cant afford beef. (See [here](#).)
HELLONICOLETAVITA, 2023

By playfully shifting this anagram from “Waka Kotahi NZ Transport Agency” to “NZ Transport Agency Waka Kotahi”, the underwhelming change is visibilised, prompting a look at the underside of this policy, and its inferred racist overtones. Such a carnivalesque response seemingly laughs at the Coalition’s lacklustre, potentially populist policies that will result in little change for Aotearoa, inverting their plans as nonsensical. Furthermore, by inferring the foolishness of this signage change, the video suggests such minimal changes are unlikely to take away the presence of te reo in Aotearoa. Consequently, these carnivalesque responses jestingly speak back to the arguably planned marginalisation of Māori language and culture, uncrowning these policy attempts.

A further TikTok video enshrines derisive mirth, illustrated by a woman hysterically crying at signs displayed in te reo and English (see Video 4).



VIDEO 4

Actual quote. (See [here](#).)

RIVERS, 2023

Video 4 appears to further mockingly ‘poke fun’ at the absurdism of the Coalition Government’s ideology and those who voted for this discourse. This response implicates the foolishness of anti-te reo, right-wing, populist voters’ ideologies. Given this challenge to whose truth is granted allegiance, alignments with populist policies are perhaps also uncrowned. It is inferred that such discourses breed misery, given the way some have taken issue with the seemingly innocuous use of te reo on public signage. The Western value of rationalism, espoused by right-wing parties, utilised as a defence for pro-English policies, is inverted for an irrationally, emotive response by this government and its voter’s ideology. The video’s divergent voice, therefore, appears to pose alternative truths, uncrowning the Coalition government’s reduction of te reo by seemingly inferring such acts to be irrational.

Another TikTok video ridicules NZ First’s Winston Peters for his role in seeking to remove and reduce te reo throughout Aotearoa (see Video 5).



VIDEO 5

Retire Winston Peters 🤔. (See [here](#).)

NOTMYPRIMEMINISTER, 2023C

Assembling a compilation of clips in Video 5, those from the underground overturn this politician's attempts to explain the marginalisation of te reo. Disassembling the misinterpretation of 'waka' through a splicing of clips that are mirthful and informational, the video turns rationalist arguments, which assert te reo is not relevant, on their head. This inverting of populist verses carnivalesque truths upholds the expertise and voice of those who diverge from the Coalition's ideologies and policies. Therefore, this video can give voice to those from the underground who might not otherwise have a space and means to speak back to politicians and authoritative ideologies.

Another series of TikToks took jesting aim at the Coalition Government's budget, visibly ridiculing the election promises of the parties' assertions they are a fiscally responsible government. One example is a video that superimposes two known jesting television personalities upon this government's plan to 'rebuild the economy' (see Video 6).

ELECTION 2023 •

Election 2023: National unveils 100- point plan to 'rebuild economy '

2 hours
I'll tell you a joke
about the economy.



VIDEO 6

They can't even do a tax plan
without having leaking holes.
(See [here](#).)

NOTMYPRIMEMINISTER, 2023B

The inability to stop laughing at the Coalition's economic promises in Video 6, infers the depth and breadth of underground, derisive laughter spurred by this government's policies. With this response having the potential to infectiously spread to further citizens, who may join in the ridiculing of the Coalition's policies as foolish, similarly to how such laughter sometimes contagiously spreads. Hence, such carnivalesque mockery fosters a potential victory of laughter over fear at the right-wing politics of the Coalition.

In a further example, the Coalition Finance Minister, Nicola Willis, can be seen riding an electric scooter with the subtitled wording 'Nicola falling over her modelling spreadsheets' (see Video 7).



VIDEO 7

 #NZpolitics. (See [here](#).)

NOTMYPRIMEMINISTER, 2023A

The spliced clips in Video 7 eagerly point out this Minister's fall, suggesting a jesting from the underground, with the people watching the foolishness of the Coalition, literally and figuratively pointing to their uncrowning, as can be observed in the TikTok video. Such responses appear to invert the authority and legitimacy of the Coalition Government, potentially overcoming the fears of their populist policies. In turn, crowning ideologies this government seeks to silence. Based on this analysis, TikTok videos can be perceived as fostering a postdigital, public square for speaking back in divergent ways.

6 TikTok Videos as a Postdigital Public Square

Bakhtin (1984a) explained the 'central arena' for carnivalesque was the public square, which this article extends to TikTok videos as a postdigital

entreaty. The public square is an everyday space of dialogue and community for the people who inhabit and have a sense of belonging to it. In *Rabelais and His World* Bakhtin analyses the way the author François Rabelais (1494–1553) illustrates carnivalesque during the French Renaissance for peasants, leading Bakhtin to identify this space as the literal town square or marketplace. Similarly, as a postdigital site and means of response, TikTok videos offer an arguable community place. Within this site, people create, watch and share short clips, with an emphasis on how these creations “uniquely affect how sociality unfolds and networks develop on the platform” (Zulli & Zulli, 2022, p. 1873). Social networking platforms, such as TikTok, enable individuals and groups to share personal experiences, communicating opinions and views (Benecke and Verwey, 2020). Consequently, TikTok videos have the potential to support dialogues of “continual renewal and growth” (Bakhtin, 1984b, p. 250), given the way this space enables divergent forms of creativity and innovation in a multiplicity of interwoven offline and online encounters (McCashin & Murphy, 2023).

Although criticisable given its heavy algorithmic driven content (Karizat et al., 2021), and claims of data harvesting (Taylor, 2023), TikTok’s foci on video editing as opposed to interpersonal connections enables a visual playground (Zulli & Zulli, 2022) that ‘liberates’ and reconfigures users from official truths (Kurzrock, 2019). The collective consciousness of TikTok might infer “all [are] equal during carnival”, and that potentially its users can be “freed from the authority of all hierarchical positions (social estate, rank, age, property)” (Bakhtin, 1984b, p. 123). Outside of official doctrines, Bakhtin (1984b) continued, one “crosse[s] the footlights to merge with the life of the marketplace and enjoy[s] similar privileges and freedom” (p. 267). When applied to TikTok, a postdigital public square appears to emerge, where underground ideologies and communities, who may otherwise feel silenced, can visibilise their divergent speaking back to a populist governments’ authoritative discourse. Hence, the postdigital era fosters new opportunities, reclaiming the “digital sphere as a commons” (Jandrić et al., 2018, p. 169) or Bakhtinian public square. As one of the most downloaded apps (Anderson, 2020), divergent voices and visualities can commune within this platform, facilitating a potentially significant site for underground political dialogues that converge across technology, social life and social networking. In such spaces, members are able to birth and rebirth ideas and values, in addition to seeking the death of others (Bakhtin 1984b). Hence, users appear to utilise TikTok videos to facilitate a public square where visually imbued, divergent responses to issues can be suspended and challenged, potentially renewing official doctrines and cultures.

7 Provocations for Teachers from the Underground

Bringing the jesting, carnivalesque TikTok videos analysed into conversation with this platform as a postdigital public square, this article offers provocations for how teachers might respond to populist, authoritative discourse, such as those inferred by the Aotearoa Coalition Government. TikTok videos are signalled as challenging right-wing governments, which can foster concerning populist, anti-liberal and anti-socialist, racialised, and anti-indigenous rights policies and ideologies, through divergent voices (Paidipaty, 2023). Given education, and thus teachers, are often some of the most targeted sectors for these reforms (Gomendio & Wert, 2023), TikTok videos appear important for the subversion to this rhetoric. Postdigital activism, such as that which may take place in TikTok, leverages dialogues through the divergent dissent and opinion formations constrained by traditional views and filters, generating opportunities for debate and deliberation (Benecke & Verwey, 2020; Ralston, 2023). Therefore, this visuality may enable teachers a means and space for divergent responses to populist governments, in ways that uncrowns authoritative discourses, posing alternative truths reflective of democratic dialogues.

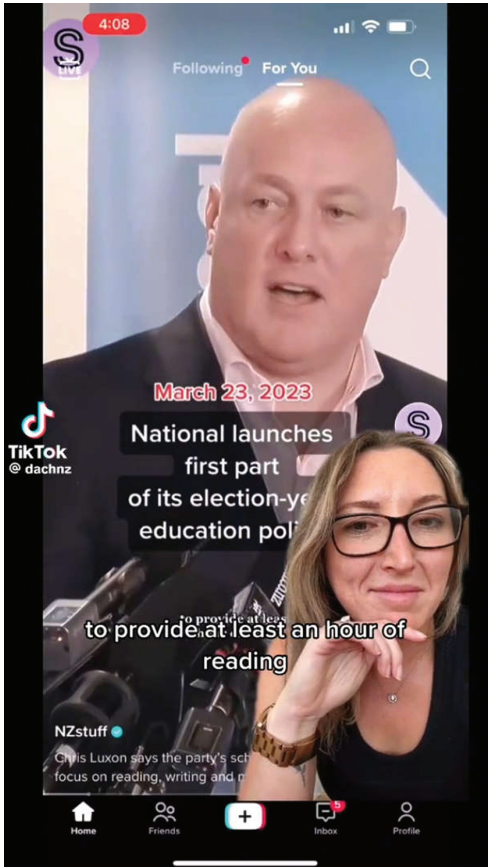
Although tensioned (Karizat et al., 2021), TikTok videos offer a localised and globalised network to engage in comradeship with community members, reflecting the tenants of the public square. Consequently, it offers teachers a space to engage in community with peers, fostering an underground movement of divergent subversion. TikTok videos are not resigned to the binary divide of online versus offline. Rather, the postdigital condition of this space, and jesting means of speaking back, may foster an increasing possibilistic response to populist rhetoric across the multiple locales such sentiments are imported to. Benecke & Verwey (2020) argue that online activism may cross boundaries, establishing “collective identity and equality between individuals and groups and provide anonymity which may result in franker debates that also enable social change” (p. 144). TikTok videos can thus enable the diverse identities, arguably reflective of the teaching workforce, to facilitate more inclusive and community fostered dialogues through divergent, visually entrenched responses (Benecke & Verwey, 2020). These possibilities are not freed from the concerns of TikTok and other social networks that can spread populism, misinformation, and disinformation (Zienkiewicz, 2020; Way, 2021). However, this article contends these dialogues mutually exist alongside jesting oppositional voices, rejecting ‘The Left Can’t Meme’ mantra to highlight divergent and diverse responses.

TikTok, with its 1.1 billion users (Dellatto, 2021), offers a postdigital platform where a continual growth and renewing of visibilised narratives is perhaps offered to teachers. Bakhtin (1984b) described how carnivalesque “contained not in the biological individual, not in the bourgeois ego, but in the people, a people who are continually growing and renewed” (p. 19). TikTok videos ubiquitous, divergent subversion, through its plurality of users, may foster an inverting of the legitimacy of populist, right-wing sentiments, which may perish imposed “conspiracy-based thinking” (Dexter, 2023, p. 10), for the expertise of teachers. Therefore, this carnivalesque topsy-turvy may give voice and visibility to those within education, enabling teachers to have their say affirmed with peers over their sector, in ways that could subvert problematic, populist, authoritative discourses (Westbrook, 2024a). This diversity may counter the decline of democratic dialogues by disrupting political polarisation.

A key facet of TikTok as a postdigital public square, beyond its community fostering, is how laughter, especially that which degrades, epitomises this platform, potentially facilitating teachers’ carnivalesque responses. Satire in social networks might visibilise divergent responses by upholding pluralistic views and values. Bakhtin (1984b) described how “laughter degrades and materializes” (p. 20). He continued by saying, “to degrade is to bury, to sow, and to kill simultaneously, in order to bring forth something more and better” (p. 21). Laughter is, therefore, not a trivialised response. But rather a significant act, that if harnessed and visibilised through TikTok videos, may enable teachers to sow new ideologies, kill sentiments, and foster ‘something better’ for their sector. Such is the potential of mirthful laughter when harnessed from the underground, unofficial spaces that are naturally encountered within this platform. This form of laughter also poses controversy, especially for those not ‘in on the joke’, misunderstanding the intent and presence of satire, and who is being laughed at (Sinclair, 2020). Yet, through a Bakhtinian lens the potentials of this genre continue to be emphasised, even as the contentions are acknowledged. For instance, carnivalesque jesting can facilitate pedagogies of discomfort, prompting divergent views important to educations’ diverse communities and challenges (Westbrook et al., 2021).

Hence, this platform is signalled as an important site of response, which could be harnessed by teachers who feel silenced, and are looking for spaces and strategies to speak back, subverting perceptions of being unheard and invisible. Westbrook (2024a) contended such degrading laughter “offers the possibility to imagine better futures, ones that may be aligned with the aspirations of early childhood teachers, resisting the dilution of these values

by political narratives” (pp. 12–13). Given that TikTok videos are seemingly steeped in such debasing laughter, it may be an increasingly important visuality for teachers to politically respond via, as demonstrated in the following video (see Video 8).



VIDEO 8

Thanks Chris for this enlightening speech. (See [here](#).)

EMZ | TEACHER WELLBEING 🌟💛
ON TIKTOK, 2023

Such carnivalesque topsy-turveying responses encourage a further mobilisation of this postdigital public square, prompting consideration of how TikTok videos might be increasingly harnessed by teachers to further incite their divergent, underground responses.

TikTok’s potential as a space for political contestation challenges notions this platform is merely a viral trend machine for trivial content, repositioning it as a postdigital public square for teachers’ political response. Although starting as a dance platform, ByteDance, TikTok has evolved into a political site where populist, authoritative discourses can be subverted and mobilised (Andrews,

2020). This carnivalesque potential prompts consideration of how TikTok videos may be encouraged and further disseminated as a means of response by, and for, teachers. Such an entreaty is not without tensions given the darker side of social networks (Karizat et al., 2021). In addition to teachers problematising of underground humour as a legitimate means of response (indicated in early childhood teachers' visceral reactions to memes as unprofessional resources; see Westbrook et al., 2021). However, even with these controversies, TikTok videos appear uniquely situated, within a postdigital public square, to foster a dissident underground, which through degrading laughter might renew narratives within and beyond the educational sector. Consequently, even though contentious, this article encourages teachers to consider engaging in TikTok videos within this postdigital platform in creative and diverse ways.

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