

**FRAMING IDENTITY :
THE PRESS IN
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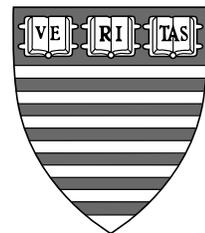
by

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FRAMING IDENTITY: THE PRESS IN CROWN HEIGHTS

Prologue ¹

On the evening of August 19, 1991, the Grand Rebbe of the Chabad Lubavitch was returning from his weekly visit to the cemetery. Each week Rabbi Menachem Schneerson, leader of the worldwide community of Lubavitch Hasidic Jews, visited the graves of his wife and his father-in-law, the former Grand Rebbe. The car he was in headed for the international headquarters of the Lubavitchers on Eastern Parkway in Crown Heights, a neighborhood in the heart of Brooklyn, New York. As usual, the car carrying the Rebbe was preceded by an unmarked car from the 71st Precinct of the New York City Police Department. The third and final car in the procession was a 1984 Mercury Grand Marquis station wagon driven by a Lubavitch man named Yosef Lifsh and carrying two other Lubavitch men.

At the same time in Crown Heights, two seven year-old Guyanese cousins of African descent were playing on President Street, a street on which a large number of African-Caribbean and African-Americans resided. Gavin Cato and his cousin, Angela Cato were playing close to the curb. Gavin was trying to fix the chain on his bicycle.

The motorcade escorting and carrying the Rebbe entered the intersection of Utica Avenue and President Street without incident and at an average city speed. But as the Mercury station wagon entered the intersection, a Chevrolet Malibu also entered proceeding in the same direction as the Rebbe's entourage. The Mercury collided with the Malibu, and veered out of control onto the sidewalk. The car driven by Lifsh struck the Cato cousins and pinned them beneath it. Eyewitnesses differed on the speed of the Mercury at the time of impact. Their estimates of the car's speed ranged from twenty-five to sixty-five miles per hour. Witnesses on the street said that the car drove through a red light; the car occupants reported that the light was yellow.

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Bystanders quickly formed a crowd around the car with the three Lubavitcher men, and several among them attempted to pull the car off of the Cato children and extricate them. Lifsh tried to help, but he was attacked by the crowd, consisting predominately of the Caribbean- and African-Americans who lived on the street. One of the Mercury's riders tried to call 911 on a portable phone, but he said that the crowd attacked him before he could complete the call. He was rescued by an unidentified bystander.

At 8:22 PM two police officers from the 71st Precinct were dispatched to the scene of the accident. At the same time an emergency ambulance from the City was sent to the accident site. Hasidic Jews who ran the Hatzoloh Ambulance Service, a privately funded, all-volunteer service founded by the Hasidic community in New York City, heard the the City's dispatcher and sent one of their ambulances to President Street.

The Hatzoloh ambulance arrived at the scene of the accident before the City ambulance. A police officer escorted the three Lubavitch men to the ambulance and directed the ambulance to remove the men from the scene of the accident before the crowd of one hundred fifty members beat them further. It left a few minutes later.

Another Hasidic man from the Hatzoloh service who had come to the scene of the accident by car carried a tech/trauma bag and helped City ambulance paramedics who were working with Angela Cato. Gavin Cato was placed in a City ambulance and rushed to Kings County Hospital. Shortly after his arrival, he was pronounced dead.

A rumor started to circulate among the crowd. It was rumored that the Hatzoloh ambulance crew had ignored the critically injured children and helped the Lubavitch occupants of the car. The rumor fed on a longstanding criticism by the Caribbean-American and African-American community who maintained that the ambulance catered exclusively to the Jewish community. They and the nearby Lubavitchers argued fiercely. Some of the young members of the crowd began to hurl rocks and bottles at the Lubavitchers. One Jewish woman, (described in the Girgenti report, as being Jewish rather than

Hasidic or Lubavitch) who approached the scene, accompanied by a black friend, encountered young rioters who threw bottles and rocks and screamed that “the Jews killed the kids.” Her friend was taunted for accompanying a Jewish woman. The crowds grew larger and the rioting increased beyond the control of the police. Prominent leaders of the Caribbean-American and African-American communities agreed that what lay at the bottom of the riots was the perception, stemming from 1969, that the Lubavitchers always received preferential treatment from the police.

The rioting occurred in an area that was densely populated by African-Americans, Caribbean-Americans, and Lubavitchers. As the disturbance grew, it was clear that there were too few police assigned to the scene to control the crowd. Meanwhile, the young African- and Caribbean-American youths that remained continued their rampage through the neighborhood, setting fires, destroying property, shattering windows, and throwing rocks and bottles. Groups of young males harassed, beat, or robbed Lubavitchers on the streets.

At 11:20 PM, a group of ten to fifteen young males surrounded and assaulted Yankel Rosenbaum, described in the Girgenti report as a twenty-nine year old Hasidic man. He was stabbed four times. Moments later, a youth of African descent named Lemrick Nelson, age sixteen, was apprehended and returned to the scene. Yankel Rosenbaum was taken to the same hospital in which Gavin Cato died. He died three hours later after identifying Lemrick Nelson as his assailant.

Framing the August 1991 Disturbances

How did the press frame the antagonists and the conflict that occurred in Crown Heights during and after the disturbances? What themes and story lines were used to organize the facts in news reports? How were both the antagonists and the events made meaningful? Did the frames that were used to organize the narrative provide an accurate picture of who and what was involved in what one journalist described as “Sarajevo on the Hudson”?

In the broadest sense, frames are conceptual tools which media and individuals rely on to convey, interpret, and evaluate information.² A news “frame” is a theme or story line that organizes the facts in a news report and gives them meaning. For a journalist, the frame might be a story angle, news peg or hook which is

determined by the facts deemed most important.³ For an individual, a frame might be knowledge previously acquired about a subject in light of which new information is evaluated and understood. With regard to the press, a frame is a lens that enables readers to interpret and assess news coverage in a way primarily determined by their previous experience and the narratives already in their minds, in conjunction with the interpretations and narratives of the reporter.

This study of newspaper coverage of the disturbances in Crown Heights focuses on the news frames of the antagonists and the conflict. The hypothesis is that news reporters failed to frame precisely the identity of the antagonists. Thus, the way they framed the conflict conveyed the wrong meaning. This study argues that if the press had framed the identity of the antagonists as African-American, Caribbean-American, and Lubavitch Hasidim, rather than as blacks and Jews, or blacks and whites, they would not have framed the conflict or the victims as primarily racial. Instead, they would have framed the Crown Heights affair as a conflict involving three distinct ethnic groups in which African- and Caribbean-Americans attacked not all “whites,” but Lubavitch Jews. It will be argued that this second interpretation emerges from an analysis of the rhetoric in the news articles themselves.

Why is it important to make this distinction? After all, the African- and Caribbean-Americans were racially black, and the Lubavitch Hasidim were white. Why would that not constitute a racial conflict? First, the rhetoric of the three groups indicates that the antagonists defined the conflict not as blacks versus whites, but as blacks versus Lubavitch Jews. This is a distinction that comes out of what the antagonists said to reporters. Rather than its being a racial conflict, the narrative shows that religion and culture were essential to the conflict. Yet, surprisingly, although reporters wrote stories in which this latter distinction is apparent, they continued to frame the incident solely in terms of race. Racial conflict and violence are not the same as anti-Semitism. Lubavitch Jews were targeted because they were *Jewish*, not because they were white. The underlying premise of the African- and Caribbean-American antagonists was that Lubavitch Jews, not whites, got preferential treatment from the City and from the police, and that Lubavitch Jews rather than whites had killed Gavin Cato.

In the last thirty years there has been an increasing literature on how the press frames

stories on different racial or ethnic groups.⁴ One of the most provocative studies is that of Erna Smith's on the 1992 Los Angeles riot. Smith studied how television framed and transmitted race in its riot coverage. She wanted to ascertain whether television news framed the riot in a way that accurately told viewers what happened and what it meant, or if they continued to be wed to the black-white frame that interpreted the riots as being a racial conflict. She found that as a result of television news having used race as the dominant frame, the reportage emphasized the involvement and impact of the violence on blacks and Koreans, but significantly downplayed the involvement of and impact on Latinos. While Latinos comprised more than half the rioters arrested in Los Angeles and perhaps one-third of the store owners who lost property in the violence, they were only the main focus of just more than one-tenth of the television news reports. Thus, the Los Angeles riot was not a black-white riot. It was a *minority* riot stemming from numerous factors that had affected each of those groups. Both local and network television news portrayed the 1992 Los Angeles riot similarly to the way they portrayed the Watts riots of 1967—as a black-white conflict.

Smith shows that if television had framed Los Angeles as a minority riot in 1992, it would have reported on the backdrop of heightened community tensions exacerbated by rapidly changing demographics, an economic downturn, growing poverty and crime rates, and a well-documented history of police abuses in minority communities.⁵ Thus, viewers in Los Angeles and across the country would have understood the riots in entirely different terms than race.

Similar to Smith's research, this study of how the press framed the antagonists and conflict of Crown Heights argues that if Crown Heights had been framed as a minority conflict, involving three distinct ethnic groups that were African-American, Caribbean-American, and Lubavitch Jews whose histories and patterns of relating to each other were far more complex than simple racial differences, and very different from the relationships that African-Americans have had with Jews who are not Lubavitchers, the press would have focused on the underlying causes of the conflict that had been simmering since 1969, and it would have interpreted the rioting and violence as acts that were primarily anti-Semitic rather than anti-white. Thus, in the case of Crown Heights, the racial frame presented to readers failed to convey to them what the

conflict was all about, and who was involved.

Crucially, the press failed to provide the background of the conflict which would have made it possible for readers to understand not only who the antagonists were, but what they were fighting about.

The Context of the Conflict in Crown Heights

Prior to World War II, Crown Heights was mostly white, with a growing urban middle class. After World War II, however, the neighborhood experienced a major change in its composition that continued through the 1980s and the early 1990s. A large influx of African-Americans and Caribbean peoples of African descent began to move into the neighborhood which primarily had been a middle-class Jewish neighborhood through the 1950s. Although there had been a Caribbean presence in Crown Heights since the 1920s, the numbers of Caribbean peoples from various countries increased dramatically beginning in the 1950s and 1960s, largely due to less restrictive immigration laws. By the 1980s, ethnic groups from the Caribbean were the most rapidly growing immigrant group in the neighborhood, an area of approximately four hundred blocks. By the early nineties, four out of every five of the 207,000 residents of Crown Heights were people of African descent, and most of them were African-American and Caribbean-American.

In 1991, the African-American community comprised a significant middle- and upper-middle class with many physicians, attorneys, business persons and educators, who were thoroughly entrenched in the neighborhood and quite active in neighborhood organizations, as well as poor people who were unemployed and lived in overcrowded housing.

Caribbean peoples from several countries were the most rapidly growing groups within the Crown Heights population. More than 18,000 persons who immigrated to New York from the West Indies, Guyana, Haiti, Barbados, Grenada, Trinidad, and Jamaica between 1983 and 1989 had chosen to live in Crown Heights. They represented eighty-two percent of all immigrants to the community during that period. A large segment of this population suffered high rates of unemployment, especially in the younger generation. They were in stark contrast to others of their countrymen who held down two or more jobs, largely in blue-collar and service industry positions, including the health profes-

sions, retail businesses, and civil service. Most importantly, despite the fact that many did not hold US citizenship, Caribbean-Americans were becoming the largest ethnic group of African descent in Crown Heights. The importance of this development was evident each year in the West Indian-American Carnival and Parade on Labor Day. As the participants marched on Eastern Parkway, they increasingly were being led by the Mayor of New York.

Almost all of the remaining whites are Orthodox Jews who belong to a sect within Judaism called Lubavitcher Hasidim. Orthodox Jews strictly adhere to the traditional teachings of the Torah and Jewish law. But Orthodoxy is not a monolith. There are several different traditions within the Orthodox community. Hasidic Jewry is separate from other traditions within the Orthodox community, and Lubavitch Hasidism is a tradition within Hasidism.

The movement began in the 1800s and was named after the Russian town which was the center of its activities. It spread throughout Eastern Europe. Hasidism is a rabbinical dynastic movement whose most revered leader is a rabbi distinguished by the title of Grand Rebbe. The Chabad Lubavitch is the formal name of the community. Followers of this tradition believe that the system of thought, moral teachings, and codes of behavior, implied by the Hebrew acronym "*chabad*," will promote spiritual growth in one's life.

The Lubavitchers have traditions and customs that distinguish their group from other Jewish groups. For example, many of the Lubavitch men wear beards, black hats, and black coats that are distinctive, not only from the garb of gentiles, but also from other Jews. Married Lubavitch women wear wigs or cover their hair, and are always clad in modest garb. Their families are usually large. Lubavitchers worship in their own synagogues separate from those of mainstream Jewry, have their own schools and recreation, restaurants, and social life. They are a very insular and close-knit community, not only maintaining separateness from gentiles, but also maintaining a community that in its daily life is almost completely separate from that of other Jews, including other sects of Hasidic Jews. It is not at all uncommon for Lubavitchers to have as little contact as possible with the outside community. This, and other behaviors maintain their separateness from other groups in the neighborhood. The maintenance of this self-imposed separation has been interpreted by other groups in Crown Heights, including some Jews,

as aloofness and arrogance. But Lubavitchers view themselves as leaders of an historic and divinely mandated mission on behalf of all Jewry.⁶ Many believe that the coming of the Messiah (Moshiach) is imminent, and that they must be prepared to receive him. The self-imposed separation from other communities is only a part of this larger process.

For many years, Lubavitchers worldwide as well as in Crown Heights were led by the Grand Rebbe, Menachem Schneerson. He died in June, 1994. Having fled the Holocaust, the Lubavitchers established their international headquarters on the same street on which their Caribbean neighbors parade—Eastern Parkway. Many of his followers, not only in Crown Heights, but also throughout the world, believed (and still believe) that Rabbi Schneerson was himself the Moshiach who would rule a re-deemed world.

Several aspects of Lubavitcher culture strain relations between them and their neighbors in Crown Heights. For example, they do not ride on the Sabbath—from sundown Friday to sundown Saturday—and Holy Days. Because of this, most of the 10,000 to 16,000 Lubavitchers in Crown Heights live in an area concentrated around Eastern Parkway, an area of about forty-two blocks. But despite the fact that African- and Caribbean-Americans outnumber the Lubavitchers in this neighborhood two to one, some streets around the Lubavitcher headquarters on Eastern Parkway are closed to traffic on Jewish Sabbaths and Holy Days. This is a source of great friction among the three groups.

Why do the Lubavitchers continue to reside in Crown Heights if they are so outnumbered by other groups, and if their tradition encourages separation from other groups? Why have they remained long after most whites have departed the area for the suburbs? The answer is complex, and it can be traced directly to the Rebbe. When the non-Lubavitch Jewish middle-class left the area and fled to the suburbs, Rabbi Schneerson announced in April 1969 that Jewish law prohibited neighborhood flight. According to the Girgenti report, the Rebbe admonished his followers to act responsibly toward one another, to maintain the integrity of the community they had built and not destroy the fabric of the Lubavitcher community by letting their property fall into the hands of outsiders. So, the Lubavitchers stayed in Crown Heights.

Because their acculturation is so different, and because they rarely mix with their Caribbean- and African-American neighbors, there has been

a series of persistent conflicts. African- and Caribbean-Americans, and the Lubavitchers have had clashes that are rooted in and marked by racial prejudice, anti-Semitism, and religious intolerance. The August 1991 disturbances were a manifestation of other confrontations on six major issues: fairness in the distribution of community resources; fairness in the distribution of housing; police accommodations to the Lubavitchers; the perception of a "double-standard" of the police in dealing with alleged crime; the Lubavitcher crime patrol; and the Hasidic ambulance service. The African- and Caribbean-American communities feel that they have been disadvantaged on all of these issues, and that the Lubavitchers receive preferential treatment. The Lubavitchers maintain that they must protect and exercise their rights as a minority in Crown Heights, including things that are pertinent to their religious tradition. For example, the Girgenti report cites the issue of housing. On this issue, leaders representing the African- and Caribbean-American communities contend that the majority of housing resources, dating back to the 1970s, have been allocated to the Lubavitchers. Furthermore, they feel antagonized by Lubavitcher efforts to acquire their property, believing that this is an attempt to "push" them out of the neighborhood. On this issue, the Lubavitchers contend that their community has special needs for housing because many of their families are large. They also contend that the religious restrictions regarding the use of vehicles makes it necessary for them to live in close proximity to their center of worship.

The Girgenti Commission found that the issue regarding police accommodations to the Lubavitchers is a particularly sensitive one for the African- and Caribbean-American communities. They contend that the Police Department and the City have demonstrated a conspicuous pattern of "preferential treatment" toward the Lubavitchers. The example they most often cite is the practice of closing public streets and barricading a service road during the Jewish Sabbath and on other Holy Days. This sometimes has resulted in bus and traffic rerouting, as well as identity checks of the residents in order to drive down the closed streets. The Lubavitchers answer their critics by contending that this helps them to exercise their religious freedom, and that it also protects the safety of thousands of worshipers who fill the streets on Sabbaths and Holy Days.

Thus, the Girgenti Commission found that

people of African descent in Crown Heights believe that the Lubavitchers have a disproportionate share of political clout and therefore receive preferential treatment from the City government. This resentment is exacerbated by the traditions and culture of the Lubavitchers, which is highly insular, and limits dialogue. For their part, the Lubavitchers contend that their distinctiveness and reticence makes them targets of robbery, bias crimes, and other forms of anti-Semitism. They maintain that they are a highly vulnerable minority group in the neighborhood.

Methodology of the Study

In order to examine the news frames of the Crown Heights conflict, articles were selected from the two newspapers which are the major newspaper of record and the largest circulation tabloid in the city—the *New York Times* and the *New York Post*. These newspapers were selected because it was expected that coverage from the *New York Times* would differ substantially from the coverage in the *New York Post* because tabloids have the reputation for sensationalism and exaggeration. However, no significant differences in this regard were found. For the remainder of this paper, therefore, the results of both newspapers are reported together.

Sixty articles were randomly selected for intensive rhetorical analysis. Thirty articles for each newspaper, from the beginning of the disturbances in 1991 through the release of the Girgenti report in July, 1993 comprised the database for the content analysis. During that time period three milestones in the Crown Heights disturbances occurred. August 19, 1991 was the date that the disturbances erupted after Gavin Cato had been killed accidentally by the car driven by Yosef Lifsh, and the date that Yankel Rosenbaum was murdered. Lemrick Nelson's acquittal for the murder of Yankel Rosenbaum occurred in October 1992. Finally, July 1993 was the time that the Girgenti Commission submitted its exhaustive two-volume report on the disturbances and the death of Yankel Rosenbaum to Governor Mario M. Cuomo.⁷ The Girgenti report is the official account of the Crown Heights disturbances.

Coding measured several factors. First, headlines and articles were analyzed to determine what type of frame was being presented by the reporter. From the beginning of the disturbances until early 1993, reporters framed Crown Heights as a racial conflict. But were their headlines and articles consistent with what we in the United

States have come to be familiar with as a racial frame: black-white? Or did the reporter frame the conflict as racial, but then provide text that was inconsistent with that frame, for example, information conveying an ethnic frame referring to the three distinct ethnic groups (African-Americans, Caribbean-Americans, and Lubavitch Hasidim) that were antagonists in the conflict? Was a frame that purportedly was racial actually a black-Jewish frame, or a black-Lubavitch frame—mixtures of race, religion, culture, and ethnicity? Each of these frames is different from the typical race frame because they represent different selections of facts. Frames elevate some facts and downplay others. Because of this, news coverage of the same event can communicate different underlying meanings. If the frame designated to explain an event is racial, but the underlying meanings in the text support an ethnic frame, as one example, the reader receives mixed messages about who was involved in a particular event. That is why it is important to note exactly what frame or frames actually are being conveyed by the text, as opposed to the headline or lead the reporter gives the article.

Once a determination was made about which frames were being conveyed, it was necessary to analyze the texts and measure their relative weights. This involved counting the number of times various categories of information were quoted from interviewees, or supplied as background by the reporter. For example, Lubavitchers sometimes referred to the Crown Heights disturbances as “a pogrom.” Using that term numerous times in an interview conveyed information that supported a frame quite different from the black-white racial frame. “Pogrom” supports an entirely different constellation of factors than “race riot.” So, the frequency with which terms such as “persecution,” “anti-Semitism,” “race,” “religion,” “preferential treatment,” and those referring to specific histories of intergroup relations was measured.

The content analysis employed a complex concept of an identity frame. An identity frame was defined as one that included not only race and ethnicity of a group, but also the tone (measured on a six-point scale: “1” positive, “2” mostly positive, “3” neutral, “4” balanced, “5” mostly negative, and “6” negative) used to describe or implicate the group in any activity, as well as group statements about themselves, journalists’ statements about the group, and statements by non-group members about another group. This broad definition enabled sensitivity to a greater range of information than might

have been possible with a definition of identity based solely on race or ethnicity.

The content analysis also sought evidence of bias toward one group or another in the articles to determine whether there were findings similar to those in Erna Smith’s study of the 1992 Los Angeles riot. In order to determine this, the tone of each article was rated on a six-point scale, with “1” as most sympathetic or positive, “2” as mostly positive, “3” as neutral, “4” as balanced, “5” as mostly negative, and “6” as perjorative or negative. For example, an article consisting of ten paragraphs, in which seven paragraphs depicted people of African descent as being engaged in criminal behavior in the Crown Heights disturbances was determined to be a “5” or a “6” in tone, depending on what the three remaining paragraphs said. Or in an article that continually referred to Lubavitch Hasidim as “victims” the tone was determined to be a “1” (most sympathetic) with regard to Lubavitch Hasidim.

Framing the Crown Heights Conflict in Racial Terms

To frame the incidents of Crown Heights as a “race war” or as “racial strife,” as the press did, not only conveyed the idea that blacks and whites were in conflict, but it also implied that there was a certain familiar array of antagonists and issues that have characterized racial confrontations in this country since the 1940s. The racial frame as used in the United States presupposes that there are parties who appear to be, or are identified as being, “black” and parties who appear to be, or are identified as being “white.” The antagonists in the racial frame are African-Americans and white Americans, and the familiar issues are discrimination, civil rights, etc.

The Girgenti Commission classified the Crown Heights disturbances as bias-related. They found an explicit element of bias in the many marches, demonstrations, and criminal activities which occurred during the four days of the disturbance. For example, the Commission cites the time that on one afternoon, marchers went through Crown Heights shouting “Death to Jews.” That night, youths in the area were chanting “Heil Hitler,” “Death to the Jews,” and “Kill the Jews” as they threw rocks at cars and homes owned by Lubavitchers. A person in the crowd was reported as yelling, “We don’t get any justice... We don’t get any justice, they’re killing our children. We have to stop this... Jews get

preferential treatment, we don't get any justice." Another person yelled, "Let's go to Kingston Avenue and get the Jews." As the young males of African descent surrounded Yankel Rosenbaum, they shouted, "Kill the Jew!" and "There's a Jew, get the Jew." Many callers to 911 stated that Jewish homes and property rather than others were under attack by rioters, and that roving bands were targeting Jewish persons.

The Police Department reviewed all complaints filed in the 71st Precinct during the disturbance period and identified twenty-seven bias-related incidents. Twenty-one were classified by the police as anti-Semitic, three were classified as anti-black, and three were classified as anti-white. According to the Girgenti report, during the trial, the prosecution offered evidence to prove that Yankel Rosenbaum was an innocent victim of a violent mob that attacked him because he was Jewish. The prosecution's case consisted primarily of police and forensic testimony. (Vol. II, p. 27) The Girgenti Commission concluded the following: "These data and the events associated with them clearly support the view that much of the violence and property damage was targeted at persons who were identified as members of the Hasidic [Lubavitch] community." (p. 129) This conclusion, defining the disturbances as being primarily anti-Semitic, rather than racial, was reached, despite the fact that the Commission also acknowledged Crown Heights to have been the "most widespread racial unrest to occur in New York City in more than a twenty-year period." (p. 133)

Erna Smith found that the problem with the "black-and-white" framing of the Rodney King case was not that it was wrong, but that the story line was too narrow for reporting on the multi-ethnic nature of the violence that followed the verdicts, and perhaps even the King case itself. For example, the Christopher report on the Los Angeles Police Department, conducted and completed before the state court verdicts in the King case, made clear that instances of police misconduct were as pervasive in L. A.'s Latino communities as in its black communities. Therefore, Smith argues that television news also might have trained its cameras on Latinos for their reaction to the verdicts. Instead television news did little to report on the reactions to the verdicts from the Latino community.⁸ Their frame was too narrowly defined to accommodate information that provided a more precise picture of other parties who should have been included in the frame.

The black-white racial frame that was used by the press to interpret and convey information

about Crown Heights was also too imprecise to accommodate information about the antagonists. The antagonists in Crown Heights were not only black and white, they were also African-American, Caribbean-American, and Lubavitch Hasidic. They were members of three distinct ethnic groups, all with intergroup histories and conflicts different among them than blacks and whites. Nevertheless, the press rarely deviated from the racial frame at the beginning of the disturbances to include these other factors. The press in Crown Heights framed the conflict as a confrontation between people of African descent and whites—that is, race. Data from both the *New York Times* and the *New York Post* reveal that initially there was a strong tendency on the part of these two newspapers to frame Crown Heights as a racial incident which precluded a more precise frame. Interestingly, the *Times* continued to use this frame long after the *Post* had abandoned it for the anti-Semitism frame.

Since journalists selected the racial frame, the expectation is that there would be many statements about race from blacks and whites who were interviewed. This was not the case. Individuals who were interviewed by reporters hardly ever brought up the subject of race in their discussions of the Crown Heights disturbances. When race was discussed, the statements were more often attributed to persons of African descent (identified in the article as "black") than to persons identified by the reporter as being white, a non-Lubavitch Jew, or a Lubavitcher. But statements about race from any group were rare. People of African descent discussed race in only 22 percent of the articles that were analyzed. Non-Lubavitch Jews discussed race in only 10 percent of the articles, and Lubavitchers discussed race in only 7 percent of the articles.⁹ When people of African descent talked about race, they tended to talk about their own race, rather than about racial conflict. A typical example of this type of statement is the following from an African- or Caribbean-American: "People are feeling that there is just no justice. They look to the St. John's rape case and they look to this."¹⁰ "People" and "they" refer to people of African descent. Non-Lubavitch Jews and Lubavitchers usually referred to their antagonists as "they" or "them." Whenever these two groups of Jews referred to their own groups, they called themselves "Jews" rather than "whites" or "white people."

While journalists framed the conflict in racial terms, they framed the antagonists differently. At the beginning of the disturbances, journalists

consistently framed the clashes in terms of race. For example, the title of one *New York Times* article from the third day of the disturbances was “Two Deaths Ignite Racial Clash In Tense Brooklyn Neighborhood.” Yet, the antagonists were not framed as black-white. Instead they were framed as “blacks and Hasidim” and as “blacks and Jews:”

On street corners, in interviews and at a harsh meeting in a local public school, blacks spoke of preferential treatment for the Hasidim. Jews spoke of blacks becoming criminals. City officials spoke of danger for a city gripped by racial antagonism... The circumstances of the car accident that killed Gavin Cato seemed perversely designed to scrape raw nerves. Perhaps some blacks resentful of a perceived favoritism toward Jews read much into the fact that the car was part of a motorcade for the international chief of the Lubavitcher movement and that it was escorted by an unmarked police car.¹¹

The use of “black” in this quotation fits the racial frame, but “Jews” and “Hasidim” were not identified as “white.” The *Post* also used the racial frame at the beginning of the disturbances, and the same contradiction between the frame used and the rhetoric within the article is apparent. For example, the headline on an article from August 21, 1991 was “Traffic Death Sparks Race Riot In Brooklyn.” Yet, the first paragraph of the article was as follows:

A runaway car driven by a Hasidic Jew killed a 7-year-old black boy and injured a 7-year-old black girl in Brooklyn’s Crown Heights last night—sparking a riot in the racially tense area...Cars were set afire and a Hasidic man was stabbed and critically injured, authorities said.¹²

Again, people of African descent were identified as blacks, but Lubavitch Hasidim were not identified as whites. The contradiction is even more evident further along in the article. About three-quarters into the article, the *Post* quoted a demonstrator identified as black as saying the following about the disturbances: “It’s not a racial thing. If the people in the car [the Lubavitch driver and his two passengers] had helped the kids, there wouldn’t have been a riot.”¹³ A Lubavitch man makes the same point with regard to race:

[Jacob Greenberg] noted that there are often blacks in the Jewish shopping district of

Kingston Avenue and in front of the headquarters of the Lubavitcher movement at 770 Eastern Parkway. ‘Blacks walk by and are not afraid to throw an anti-Semitic slur...What’s going on here is not a racial issue...’¹⁴

In both instances, the reporters were being told by participants that what was happening in Crown Heights was *not* a racial disturbance. Yet, even with this information in the first instance, the *Post* headline was “...Race Riot.” Another bystander who was interviewed made the following remark: “We can’t keep our eyes closed to this. The Jewish ambulance picked up the Jews and not the black kids.” He did not say “the white ambulance picked up the white men...” He specifically said Jews. In another article, the *New York Times* quoted the mob of 250 youths of African descent as follows:

“[They were] shouting ‘Jews! Jews! Jews!’ [and] jeered the driver of [a passing car], a Hasidic man, and then turned their anger on the police.”¹⁵

Yet, the next day the *Times* used the racial frame to place the disturbances within a larger context pertaining to the rest of the City:

The violence following an auto accident in Crown Heights reminds all New Yorkers that the city’s race relations remain dangerously strained despite the election of a Mayor who campaigned on his ability to ease such tensions.¹⁶

In the early days of the disturbances, journalists persisted in applying the racial frame, despite what they were being told by the antagonists.

The following example from the *New York Times* on August 23 is another illustration of the contradiction between the way that reporters framed the conflict and the antagonists, and the way that the antagonists themselves framed them. Although the headline is “Dinkins Vows Tough Tactics In Race Strife,” the rhetoric of the participants and bystanders indicates that they identified their antagonists as Jews, not whites:

Several groups of 50 to 100 black youths managed to march about. One group went toward the Lubavitcher headquarters...chanting “Heil Hitler!”... Angela Jones [a bystander], 28, said, ‘What I believe and what the people in this community believe is that Jewish people have political immunity.’¹⁷

Journalists from both newspapers framed Crown Heights as a racial disturbance throughout the early days of the disturbance, despite the rhetoric of the antagonists. In fact, journalists made statements pertaining to the subject of race in 40 percent of all the articles in the sample over the three-year period studied. In contrast to reporters, however, people of African descent and Lubavitchers rarely made statements that were racial.

There was consistency in the use of the term “blacks” to describe people of African descent, but the contradiction in terms occurred with the description of Jewish people. People who were identified as Hasidim, Lubavitchers, or Jews were not described as “white.” Would this have been the case if the white people who were involved in the disturbances were German, or Polish, or French? Probably not. Probably they would be described as “white.” But this was not the case for Lubavitchers or other Jews interviewed or written about in the Crown Heights disturbances. Framing Crown Heights in terms of race was not a frame that conveyed an accurate picture of the antagonists or the conflict to readers.

What about an anti-Semitism frame? That frame was attached to the conflict early on by the antagonists. Examples above have shown the use of the anti-Semitism frame by people of African descent who were both rioters and bystanders. It also was used by the Lubavitchers themselves to interpret the conflict. The following example is that of a Lubavitcher woman who was speaking to a reporter from the *New York Times* about the fate of Yankel Rosenbaum:

Coming from Australia, where violence like this is very rare and anti-Semitism is not so out in the open he [Rosenbaum] was oblivious to this kind of danger. He could not understand the friction between Jews and blacks in this country.¹⁸

She stated that the problem was anti-Semitism, and that the groups involved were “Jews and blacks,” rather than whites and blacks.

A few days later, the *New York Times* ran a story titled, “Jews Saying Restraint On Brooklyn Was Mistake.” It then discussed the reactions of leaders from the non-Lubavitch Jewish community to the disturbances:

After a week of silence, mainstream Jewish organizations have begun to call the racial violence in Crown Heights a dangerous manifes-

tation of anti-Semitism and not just a product of local Hasidic-black tensions... While the accident led to four nights of violence, Jewish organizations did not mention the word anti-Semitism in their [initial] official public statements... ‘Anti-Semitism is all over the place in Crown Heights,’ said the director [of the Anti-Defamation League of B’nai B’rith] Abe Foxman. ‘It is ugly, it is crude, it is classical and it is deadly. And the fact that it is American and it is black should not make it invisible or tolerable.’¹⁹

The date of this article is August 31, 1991, eleven days after the beginning of the disturbances. Perhaps the *New York Times* was only being cautious in its previous coverage of the conflict. Perhaps it was reluctant to frame the conflict as anti-Semitic until it was framed that way by someone who was not a Lubavitcher and not a member of the Crown Heights Caribbean and African-American communities, people who were directly involved in the conflict. The Anti-Defamation League of the B’nai B’rith is an organization that has a well-known reputation for working against discrimination towards not only Jews, but also against other minority groups, including those of African descent. It is possible that the *Times* was waiting for someone of Foxman’s stature to frame the conflict as anti-Semitic—an interpretation that would have coincided with the rhetoric used by the antagonists.

On September 3, 1991, the *New York Times* featured an Op-Ed article written by A. M. Rosenthal, the highly-regarded and respected former Executive Editor of the *Times* who now writes a column for the newspaper. The title of the article was “Pogrom in Brooklyn,” and within it, he framed the Crown Heights disturbances as anti-Semitic:

The anti-Semitic outrages of Crown Heights are aimed at the Jews of only one neighborhood in one city—for the moment... But American Jews who do not understand that the same kind of political thugs will try now to lead the same kind of street thugs to burn Jewish property and break Jewish bones in other cities are blind to reality, deaf to history—and suicidal.²⁰

Perhaps the anti-Semitic frame would be employed by the *New York Times* after the statements by Abe Foxman and the column by A. M. Rosenthal because of the credibility and stature of both men.

But on September 6, 1991, a reporter from the *New York Times* wrote an article on the tense

calm within Crown Heights, and stated the following:

The bustling streets of Crown Heights yesterday absorbed with outward calm the news that a Brooklyn grand jury did not indict a Hasidic man whose car struck and killed a black boy in the neighborhood last month. The accident ignited four nights of racial unrest...Blacks and whites in the community of 300,000 people—80 percent of them black, and a largely Lubavitcher white population—thronged the stores... Many whites and blacks said they were not surprised by the grand jury finding of no criminal wrongdoing.²¹

The only framing change in this article was that the Lubavitchers were classified as white.

Was there any change in the racial frame employed by the *New York Times* months later in 1992? One article from the sample shows that the racial frame was still being used by *Times* reporters even in 1992. When the alleged instigator of the riots was arrested, the *Times* reporter discussing the arrest stated the following:

Jews in Crown Heights said yesterday that they saw the arrest of Mr. Wesley as proof that their protests have kept the investigation into Mr. Rosenbaum's death active... But in the streets of Crown Heights yesterday, the arrest of Mr. Wesley served only to expose the scars left from the racial violence last summer.²²

Exactly one year after the eruption of the Crown Heights conflict, a reporter for the *Times* wrote an article on a report done by a community coalition on the disturbances, and used the racial frame:

With an edgy Crown Heights marking the anniversary of last summer's racially charged disturbances, a coalition of community leaders has taken a second look at the neighborhood and found a community suffering from high unemployment, AIDS, an overwhelming influx of immigrants and overtaxed city services.²³

On October 29, 1992, Lemrick Nelson, the man Yankel Rosenbaum had identified as his assailant, was acquitted in the slaying by a jury. The *New York Times* reporter who wrote about the acquittal discussed both the strategies of the defense and the prosecution in trying the case, and used both racial and anti-Semitic frames. The reporter wrote, "A black teen-ager portrayed by his lawyer as a 'sacrificial lamb' in a city afflicted with racial hatreds was acquitted of all charges yesterday..." and "The prosecutors—Sari

Kolatch and James Leeper—argued that their case was simple, straightforward and conclusive. After Gavin Cato was struck, they said, groups of angry black youths marched through Crown Heights throwing bottles, overturning cars and shouting anti-Jewish slurs..."²⁴ The following day, a *Times* reporter began an article on the anger of blacks and Jews concerning the Nelson verdict by stating the following:

A day after a black teen-ager was acquitted of killing a Hasidic scholar, the racial divide in Crown Heights, Brooklyn, grew into a yawning gulf, with the verdict only heightening the distrust and misunderstanding between blacks and Hasidim that erupted into racial violence in the summer of 1991.²⁵

In a column that appeared in the *New York Times* about a month after the Nelson acquittal, Martin Gottlieb discussed the case, and wrote the following:

This may come as little consolation to the 12 men and women who made up the Brooklyn jury that late last month voted to acquit Lemrick Nelson Jr., a 17-year-old black youth, in the fatal stabbing of Yankel Rosenbaum, a 29-year-old Hasidic scholar, during an anti-Semitic mob attack that enraged many people in New York City.²⁶

Gottlieb used the anti-Semitism frame to describe the disturbances, despite the fact that most of his column was devoted to a discussion of some of the racial issues that were involved with regard to the conduct of Nelson's trial.

The racial frame employed by the *New York Times* did not change significantly until 1993, shortly before the Girgenti Commission submitted its report to Governor Cuomo. An excerpt from an article on Mayor Dinkins's actions in Crown Heights shows this change:

The August 1991 violence in Crown Heights, a Brooklyn neighborhood that is home to Caribbean immigrants, blacks, and Hasidic Jews, created a deep rift between Mr. Dinkins, the city's first black mayor, and members of the Lubavitch Hasidic community...²⁷

The reporter distinguished the three ethnic communities involved in the conflict rather than framing them as blacks and whites, or blacks and Jews, but did not employ the anti-Semitism frame. In previous articles about Crown Heights, reporters from the *Times* had written about the various communities who

resided in the neighborhood. But, in 1993, there appeared to be a change in how the antagonists in the conflict are labeled. In 1993, "blacks" were distinguished as being Caribbean- and African-American. Why this change occurred was probably because of the contents of the Girgenti report. The Girgenti report extensively documented the ethnicity of each of the three groups involved in the conflict, and described their tenure in the neighborhood, as well as problems indigenous to the group, and with other groups. It is possible that reporters may have been privy to the report in the days preceding its release to the public, and noted the ethnic distinctions within it.

The day after the Girgenti report was made public, a reporter for the *New York Times* wrote an article on the response of Crown Heights residents, stating the following:

Like much of what goes on between the races in Crown Heights, blacks and Jews kept their opinions among themselves. Jews talked in the shopping district along Kingston Avenue with its kosher shops and Hebrew bookstores, and blacks gathered on Utica Avenue, with its Caribbean specialty shops and bodegas... Several leaders in the black community said the report represented another instance of 'preferential treatment' for Hasidic Jews, a claim echoing a refrain during the 1991 disturbances. Some black people said then that Jews got special consideration from city agencies, including the police, which provided the head of the Lubavitch movement, Rabbi Menachem M. Schneerson, with a police escort... Rabbi Yehuda Krinsky, the spokesman for the Lubavitch Hasidic Movement, the major Jewish group in Crown Heights, said the report 'corroborates the claims of the Jewish community, victims of the Crown Heights pogrom of August 1991.'²⁸

The article included references to the complexity of the community, but did not frame the disturbances as exclusively racial or anti-Semitic, despite the fact that the Girgenti Commission had framed the conflict as being anti-Semitic.

With regard to coverage of the Crown Heights conflict in the *New York Post*, a different pattern is evident from that of the *New York Times*. The column by Ed Koch that appeared on August 23, 1991 framed the conflict as anti-Semitic. Yet, the next day, *Post* reporters described the neighborhood as being "racially torn."²⁹ In another article from that same issue of the newspaper titled "Interest conflict for 2 on DA's Jewish panel," there appears a large photograph

of a row of Lubavitch boys, dressed in their traditional garb, and a Jewish boy of African descent wearing a yarmulke, dress suit and shirt, and tie. No reference was made to the boys in the article. Yet, there was a message inherent to the photograph that says there are Jews of African descent within the Orthodox community, and perhaps in the Lubavitcher community.

On August 27, 1991, *New York Post* columnist, Mike McAlary commented on Gavin Cato's funeral and Yankel Rosenbaum's death. In his column, he seemed to liken Rosenbaum's death to the racial murder of Yusef Hawkins in neighboring Bensonhurst:

The black cowards of Crown Heights advanced just as the white cowards of Bensonhurst had advanced on Yusuf [sic] Hawkins. In this case a knife descended. The blade tore into Rosenbaum's chest and back with the same barbarity of the bullet that ripped through Hawkins. Rosenbaum died the only martyr in the Crown Heights story. He died the moral equivalent of Yusuf [sic] Hawkins...[Al] Sharpton defends young men who murder a student for his skin color...The story of Crown Heights is steeped in stupidity. The other night, a group of guys was standing across from the Lubavitcher headquarters on Eastern Parkway screaming, 'Hitler had the right idea. He knew what he was doing. Exterminating the rats.'³⁰

In this column, the implication was that Yankel Rosenbaum's murder was an act of racial hatred and anti-Semitism. In an article a few days after McAlary's column appeared, *New York Post* journalists reported on the rhetoric that was used at Gavin Cato's funeral by the Reverend Al Sharpton, an African-American leader from another part of the city who had inserted himself as a spokesperson for the people of African descent:

The services featured several inflammatory eulogies by black leaders. The Rev. Al Sharpton called Jews 'diamond merchants'... Many blacks are enraged that Yosef Lifseh [sic], the driver of the car that struck Cato last Monday, was not arrested, alleging that the community's Jewish residents, members of the Lubavitch Hasidic sect, get preferential treatment from the police...³¹

The reporters specifically cite Sharpton's anti-Semitic rhetoric, while at the same time interpreting the rhetoric of the Rev. Herbert Daughtry, a community leader who also spoke at the funeral, to mean racial violence: "Then

Daughtry said: 'I want to predict this same thing [racial violence will happen] in Williamsburg.'" The words in brackets are the reporters' interpretation of how Daughtry was framing future violence between people of African descent and members of the Satmar Hasidic sect in Williamsburg, another Brooklyn community.

A *Post* editorial in the same issue framed the Crown Heights conflict as anti-Semitism. The entire editorial was about the "pogrom—mob violence, directed against Jews" in the Brooklyn neighborhood:

There's a word for what took place in Crown Heights last week—and threatens to happen again. That word is pogrom... It's an ugly word, one that reverberates through history. Pogroms were common in Russia under both the czars and commissars, as well as elsewhere in eastern Europe... But who ever would have associated the word with Brooklyn, N.Y. in 1991? Yet how else does one describe the lynching of Yankel Rosenbaum at the hands of a mob, amid chants of 'Kill the Jew,' 'Heil Hitler,' and 'The Nazis didn't finish the job?' Jews were stoned in the streets, and their houses in Crown Heights were singled out and damaged by thrown rocks and bottles... And what is one to make of the thinly veiled exhortations to violence and worse against Jews that are broadcast virtually daily by at least two black-oriented radio stations in the city? What is one to make of the Rev. Al Sharpton's casual dismissal of Hasidic Jews as 'diamond merchants' as he seeks to whip up the crowd... Where, one wonders, are the voices of decency? Why do New York's political leaders seem so reluctant to utter a single word against those fanning the flames of rabid anti-Semitism?³²

This editorial was as explicit in employing the anti-Semitic frame as A. M. Rosenthal's column in the *New York Times* which was published one day after this appeared in the *New York Post*. The next day, Ed Koch wrote a column on Crown Heights in which he again framed the conflict as anti-Semitism:

In Crown Heights over the last two weeks there has not simply been displays of anti-Semitism, but a modern-day pogrom. Or, if you don't like that word, call it a lynching. Last week, gangs of young blacks rushed through the streets yelling, 'Jews, Jews' and hunted down one young Jew, Yankel Rosenbaum... They stabbed him to death... Not since the last pogrom in Poland in 1946 has the Western world witnessed such an event... When Yusef Hawkins and Michael Griffith were murdered because they were black,

the clergy and public officials responded. Why don't they denounce this violence, committed against Jews because they are Jews?³³

On September 5, 1991, Eric Breindel wrote a column titled "Brooklyn Pogrom: Why the Silence?" In it, he stated the following:

As in Russia during the Czarist days, as in Europe under the Nazi occupation, the period before the High Holy Days saw a genuine pogrom...directed against the most visible—by virtue of dress and lifestyle—and the most defenseless Jews in New York... The Crown Heights pogrom, like most major pogroms, including the infamous Nazi Kristallnacht was whipped into a frenzy by professional agitators—some of them genuine anti-Semites; some of them more anti-white than anti-Semitic, but wholly aware of the incitement potential inherent in anti-Semitic rhetoric... Few in the media spoke out with honesty and clarity... But the public officials prepared to identify this pogrom as such were even fewer.³⁴

Breindel's column was followed a few days later by an article on Crown Heights that stated, "Weeks have passed since the outbreak of anti-Jewish rioting in Crown Heights..."³⁵ After this, most of the *New York Post* articles in the sample studied refer to an anti-Semitism frame, including those written at the time of Lemrick Nelson's acquittal in 1992, and at the time of the release of the Girgenti report in 1993.

The *New York Times* continued to frame the Crown Heights conflict and its antagonists as primarily racial, while the *New York Post* re-framed the conflict as anti-Semitic rather than racial after columns and editorials on the disturbances framed them as anti-Semitic. This was one of the few areas in which the *Times* and the *Post* differed.

In the newspaper articles that were studied, however, persons identified as blacks were quoted as using anti-Semitic rhetoric when they spoke about the Lubavitchers and the conflict in only 17 percent of the total sample. But in these articles, they clearly framed the Crown Heights conflict as people of African descent versus Lubavitch Jews, not whites. People identified as black by reporters hardly ever mentioned whites. They did not use rhetoric that would support the black-white frame initially used by reporters.

The percentage of articles in which blatantly anti-Semitic rhetoric was used by people of African descent was smaller than expected, however, in view of the fact that the rhetorical evidence the Girgenti Commission cites as being

used by people of African descent was almost entirely anti-Semitic. One explanation of this disparity is that people identified as black speaking to news reporters refrained from using anti-Semitic rhetoric in most instances. Or, another explanation may be that, although reporters heard those interviewed use anti-Semitic rhetoric, they chose not to quote those remarks. Since self-censorship is difficult to evaluate, even reporters themselves might not be able to tell which explanation applies. In any case, the only frame that was supported by quotations was anti-Semitism, rather than black-white.

In the *New York Times*, persons identified as black who were interviewed were quoted as using anti-Semitic rhetoric in only a small percentage of the articles over a three-year period. But in the *New York Post* sample, blacks who were interviewed employed anti-Semitic rhetoric more than in the *Times*, especially during the year in which the disturbances occurred. For example, in 1991, people of African descent were quoted in the *New York Times* as having employed anti-Semitic rhetoric in only 10 percent of the articles for that year, whereas for the same year in the *New York Post*, people of African descent used anti-Semitic rhetoric in 40 percent of the articles studied. This finding raises the question of whether reporters for the *New York Times* suppressed some of the anti-Semitic rhetoric used by persons identified as black in interviews about the conflict. A possible explanation for the suppression of anti-Semitic rhetoric used by persons of African descent could be that, in framing the disturbances as racial rather than as anti-Semitic, the *New York Times* reporters did not choose to report all of the anti-Semitic rhetoric that was used by people the identified as black. *Times* reporters may also have been reluctant to quote anti-Semitic rhetoric as unseemly or inflammatory in a volatile situation.

Framing the Conflict as an Ethnic Conflict

Both newspapers, however, tended to categorize persons of African descent as "blacks." While this term does describe the race of the participants in the conflict, they should have been defined more precisely as Caribbean- and African-Americans. Why is this the case? First, as the Girgenti report clearly states, Caribbean- and African-Americans comprised the black population of the neighborhood. They were not simply "black"; they were members of two

different ethnic groups that had very different histories and relationships with the Jewish community. The press misled readers when it referred to antagonists as simply blacks and Jews, or blacks and Hasidim. The reason is that a black-Jewish frame implies that the participants are African-Americans and Jews from the mainstream Jewish community. These two groups have a very different history of interaction than African-Americans and Lubavitch Hasidim, and Caribbean-Americans and Lubavitchers and mainstream Jews. African-Americans often have considered mainstream Jews allies in the fight for civil rights and against discrimination, in addition to whatever differences the two communities have had. For example, the Freedom Marches and sit-ins of the 1960s were situations in which large numbers of mainstream Jews walked, sat side-by-side, and were jailed with African-Americans. Both Jews and African-Americans died in the struggle for racial equality. Caribbean-Americans in Crown Heights do not have this history with the mainstream Jewish community. Their relationship with Jews in the United States has been with Lubavitchers primarily, and that relationship has been marked with discord, violence, racism, and anti-Semitism.

Secondly, Caribbean-Americans view themselves as separate from the African-American community. The neighborhood in which Gavin Cato was accidentally killed was a distinctly Caribbean-American community comprising several traditions and cultures, rather than African-American. It is likely that most of the rioters at the beginning of the disturbances were not African-American, but Caribbean-American. Young Gavin Cato and his cousin were Guyanese. These distinctions had to be made to provide readers with a more precise understanding of the conflict. This was not the same conflict that had been brewing in the African-American - Jewish-American communities over anti-Semitism in the African-American community. Crown Heights was different; it had different roots and different actors than the larger conflict between African-Americans and mainstream Jews. This was important for readers external to the neighborhood to know if they were to be able to distinguish between, for example, Crown Heights and the Professor Leonard Jeffries affair, or the increase of African-American anti-Semitism on college campuses.

Biased Coverage in the Press

While it is important to know how the antagonists were ethnically identified, it is equally significant to know the valence of these descriptions. Were the antagonists treated fairly? The study analyzed the tone of headlines and articles in both newspapers to see if there was bias toward any one of the groups involved in the conflict. Since a headline is usually the first frame that a reader confronts, it sets the tone for the article. It frames the article by bringing into relief the interpretation that will characterize the article.

Applying the six-point tone scale to headlines and articles, the study found that when people identified by reporters as blacks were mentioned in the headlines in 1991, the average tone of headlines in both newspapers toward those individuals was negative or mostly negative. Generally, as time went on, the tone of headlines regarding blacks improved. On the whole, the average headline and article tones for Lubavitchers and mainstream Jews were more positive than for people of African descent.

People identified as blacks generally received a more positive headline tone in the *New York Times* than in the *New York Post*. In the *Post*, however, the headlines for persons of African descent tended to be more negative than the articles themselves. The Lubavitchers in the *Post* did not receive scores such that the reader would necessarily label them clear “victims” and “blacks” clear “villains.”

The average tone of articles in the *New York Times* towards people identified by reporters as blacks tended to be more negative than the headlines. Whereas people of African descent received an average score of 2.2 for headlines in the *Times*³⁶, they received an average score of 1.9³⁷ on a six-point scale for article tone.

The headline and article tones for people identified by reporters as blacks were lower than those for Lubavitchers or mainstream Jews. Blacks were identified by the police and reported by the press as being the group that started the disturbances and carried on the rampage, with sporadic encounters with the Lubavitchers or other Jews such as the Jewish Defense League. This conforms to the account given in the Girenti report.

Framing the Antagonists as Victims

Crown Heights was a conflict in which the antagonists described themselves as victims, and in which journalists wrote about victims. The

definition of “victim” varied, depending on who was discussing a group. People of African descent considered themselves victims because they believed that the Lubavitchers received preferential treatment from the City and the police, and because the Lubavitchers had organization and leadership that they lacked. In the following excerpt, they spoke to a reporter about their community compared to the Lubavitcher community, and the reporter summarized the differences:

[Rabbi Shmuel Butman] said Jewish community leaders have met in an emergency council all week long to coordinate their response to the crisis. Blacks said that they have no similar vehicle for leadership. Blacks in Crown Heights include many from Caribbean nations like Haiti, Guyana, Trinidad and Jamaica whose cultures and even languages differ from one another's and from those of American blacks... In contrast to the divisiveness among blacks, the Hasidic Jews have Yiddish and Hebrew as common tongues and devotion to Orthodox tradition as a unifying force. They also have a stronger sense of hope. Followers of Rabbi Schneerson believe that they are on the verge of the Messianic era, and that recent world events—the collapse of communism in Eastern Europe, the failure of the coup in the Soviet Union, the swift allied victory in the Persian Gulf—are all signs of a coming redemption.³⁸

People of African descent framed themselves as victims not only of the Lubavitchers, but also of “the system.” They expressed the belief that they had no voice and no justice in society.

It was expected in this study that Lubavitchers would frame themselves as victims more than people of African descent because of the mob violence that was directed against the Lubavitcher community. For example, they equated the rampage and stoning of Jewish homes with an East European pogrom. But contrary to expectations, people of African descent depicted themselves as victims slightly more often than Lubavitchers. Stories in which Caribbean- or African-Americans depicted themselves as victims appeared more frequently in the total sample (30 percent) than did stories in which the Lubavitchers portrayed themselves as victims (20 percent).

Conclusion

This study of news coverage from a sample of articles in the *New York Times* and the *New York Post* shows that there was a contradiction

between the frame that reporters from both newspapers used at the beginning of the disturbances and the rhetoric used by the antagonists. Reporters were framing the disturbances as racial, when the frame employed by the antagonists was anti-Semitism. Shortly after the disturbances occurred, some columnists from both newspapers framed the disturbances as anti-Semitic, rather than racial. In the case of the *New York Times*, the column written by A. M. Rosenthal framing Crown Heights as a case of anti-Semitism was a lone voice for much of the *Times* coverage on the case. The *Times* continued to employ the racial frame right up to the release of the Girgenti report in July, 1993. The *New York Post* exhibited a different pattern from that of the *New York Times*. Shortly after publication of columns and editorials framing the conflict as anti-Semitic, most of the *Post* articles in the three-year sample employed the anti-Semitism frame. The study also shows that both newspapers rarely framed the antagonists as three separate ethnic groups, a factor that perhaps failed to convey a precise picture of who was involved and what was at issue in the conflict.

The inability or unwillingness of the press to frame the disturbances as anti-Semitism right at the beginning of the conflict poses an interesting problem. As Erna Smith showed in her study of the 1992 Los Angeles riots, television's framing the riots as racial rather than as a minority riot conveyed an imprecise understanding of the riots to television viewers. In Crown Heights, the press initially seemed reluctant to employ the anti-Semitism frame, despite the rhetoric from the antagonists they interviewed.

William McGowan wrote a column for the *New York Post* that was published in the newspaper just as the Girgenti report was being released to the public. In a column titled, "Journalism and Diversity: How did racially sensitive newsrooms affect reporting of the Crown Heights riots?", he offers the following perspectives:

...The diversity agenda seems to have encouraged the press to follow a preconceived script—one that turned out to be at odds with the facts. News coverage left little doubt that the basic story of Crown Heights was one of black mobs attacking Jews in retaliation for Gavin Cato's death: The [New York] Times described a group of black youths chanting "Heil Hitler!" in front of Lubavitcher headquarters. Still, news analyses and columns searched for a 'context' for the riots... [For example] *Newsday's* Jimmy Breslin

declared: 'I am having a lot of trouble believing that all the fury...was between blacks and Jews' ...Reporters analyzed the events as a long-running feud between two groups equally at fault. The *Times*, for example, declared "The Bitterness Flows in Two Directions"... That focus obscured the raw anti-Semitism fueling the riots...

Is there a connection between the diversity agenda and the kind of consistently flawed reporting that characterized coverage of Crown Heights? Most city editors scoff at such a linkage... It seems clear, as a senior *Times* Metro reporter told *Esquire*, that the diversity agenda inside newsrooms [is one in which] editors are 'terrified' to offend any of the victimized minority groups.³⁹

Does McGowan's view of newsroom diversity explain early coverage of Crown Heights, and the subsequent persistence of the *New York Times* to continue to employ the racial frame? It is possible that his is part of a very complex explanation of the use of the racial frame by the press.

This study proposes an additional explanation. Perhaps a response to the question of why the press seemed reluctant to leave the racial frame and employ the anti-Semitism frame to explain and interpret Crown Heights for readers is that most of the press still views people of African descent on one dimension only—that is, by skin color. Whatever else may be present, for example, different ethnicity, differences in culture, or even anti-Semitism, is lost in the face of color. The people of African descent in Crown Heights were framed in the lens of skin color. But Lubavitchers and mainstream Jews, instead of being framed as white, were identified by their religious and cultural background. Journalists seemed to miss this contradiction in the racial frame as they struggled to bring Crown Heights to the public. Reporters initially were wed to the racial frame, despite what their ears and eyes witnessed. This inability to conceive of persons of African descent as having interaction more complex than racial conflicts with people whose skin color is white is symptomatic of a larger problem in American society itself—one which fails to define and understand individuals and communities of color as persons who have a complete range of humanity in their being, both the good and the bad. Until the singular perspective of race changes in journalism and admits these complexities, this failure in understanding can be expected to persist.

Endnotes

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9. The test of significance for all the statistics in this study was the Cochran Q Test. With regard to the statistics comparing the percentage of articles in which people of African descent discussed race to the percentage of articles in which non-Lubavitch Jews discussed race, $p < .05$. In the comparison of the same factor with regard to people of African descent and Lubavitchers, $p < .005$.
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