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DECONSTRUCTING AMERICAN LAUGHTER:
THE POWER OF CARNIVALESQUE HUMOR
TO EMPOWER THE VOICES OF THE OPPRESSED

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Deconstructing American Laughter

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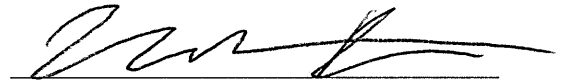
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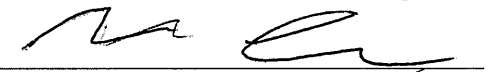
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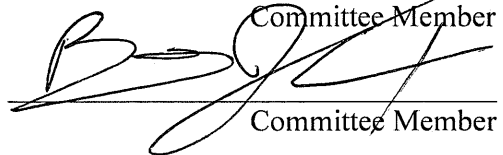
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ABSTRACT

Mikhail Bakhtin's theory of the carnivalesque, as seen in his book *Rabelais and His World*, highlights how laughter has the power to break through the restrictions and fear within oppressive, official cultures, giving power to the people. While Bakhtin's theory takes root within medieval France, the elements of the carnivalesque have thrived within cultures throughout the world where the voices of the oppressed fight to break through. This thesis analyzes American stories of the oppressed with a carnivalesque lens to see how their voices shine through in the promise of rebirth and rejuvenation with the power of laughter. Tabitha Tenney's *Female Quixotism* (1808) establishes a carnivalesque ambivalence to its picaresque humor and regenerative abuses, generating a back-and-forth discussion of the official and unofficial culture and creating a chance for the issues of feminism and power to be seen from multiple lens when certain voices might have been suffocated otherwise. Toni Morrison's *Beloved* (1987) contains moments of carnival joy and togetherness that can shine light in the darkness and even creates scenes of grotesqueness that send forth the promise of rebirth and rejuvenation, creating hope and the chance of an empowered future. Through the show *Reservation Dogs* (2021), Sterlin Harjo and Taika Waititi break down official images of Indigenous Americans created by the official culture, subvert expectations, and turn power structures on their head through comedy and laughter, creating a powerful coming-of-age story that can resonate with many. This thesis will seek to explore the carnivalesque elements of American laughter through various genres, examining how it fights through the seriousness of America's official culture, empowers the voices of the oppressed, and encourages the understanding of how humor can coincide with the serious to create healing and shed light on important issues.

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INTRODUCTION

“So what you did instead was laugh at him, at the absurdity, at the monumental crudeness of it. That way you gave back yourself to yourself. You know what I mean? You distanced yourself from the implication of the act. That’s what laughter does. You take it back. You take your life back. You take your integrity back.”

-Toni Morrison, in an interview to David Streitfeld (“The Laureates’s Life Song”)

Toni Morrison’s comment to David Streitfeld of *The Washington Post* creates the same freedom and power that is seen through the carnivalesque theory of laughter and comedy. This theory of life takes hold within her writing, used in a way to dispel the racial aggression towards her family and herself. It is through her writing that she creates a powerful voice to combat the racism against her community and highlight the terrors of the past.

We can see her theory of laughter coincide with Mikael Bakhtin’s theory on the carnivalesque, when, in his book *Rabelais and His World*, he states that “laughter liberates not only from external censorship but first of all from the great interior censor; it liberates from the fear that developed in man during thousands of years: fear of the sacred, of prohibitions, of the past, of power” (94). For Bakhtin, laughter has the power to break through restrictions and fear, giving power to the people. His theory was rooted within medieval France, but its elements, the core of the carnivalesque, has thrived within cultures throughout the world where the voices of the oppressed fight to break through.

Many authors have used the carnivalesque to explore postcolonial cultures, such as Trinidadian author Sam Selvon with his novel *The Lonely Londoners*, which, as Giselle Rampaul discusses in her chapter “Voice as a Carnavalesque Strategy in West Indian Literature: Sam Selvon’s *The Lonely Londoners* and *Moses Ascending*,” explores the lives of East Indian immigrants to London and their diasporic relationship with the world around them. Even with all

of the struggles that each man experiences in *The Lonely Londoners*, there are moments of togetherness and carnivalesque celebration. Supriya M. Nair notes in her chapter “Medusa’s Laugh” in *Pathologies of Paradise: Caribbean Detours*, that there is something to be seen with the combination of oppression and laughter, as “tragedy, comedy, and satire are often boon companions in the most unexpected ways” (148). These postcolonial spaces were taken by the British and French societies, and it can be easily understood how the carnivalesque became integrated into their storytelling as these cultures have close ties to the world that Bakhtin explored within his studies of the carnivalesque. American voices, though tied to British, French, and Spanish colonization, have their own unique culture. Through America’s treatment and colonization of Indigenous Americans and the rampant racism, classism, and sexism within the United States, there are many different voices struggling to be heard.¹ This separation from the Eurocentric allows for different cultural perspectives on carnivalesque elements.

The carnivalesque laughter of the oppressed in America holds criticism for the official culture and its overbearing voice, yet this laughter is not of harsh satires and pure degradation. As Kenneth Lash notes in “A Theory of the Comic as Insight,” “whereas satire has eyes only for rebuke, humor has a heart as well, and unites us, through sympathy, with the object of our laughter” (115). The laughter and humor that is the spark of this thesis does not deal in the form of satire that participates in harsh attacks, for these satires attack without growth, meaning, or in an attempt to enrich our understanding of the world. Instead, these harsh satires focus on mocking, punching down at others with no form of uplifting critique or hope. Through the

¹ As stated by the National Museum of the American Indian, American Indian, Indian, Native American, Indigenous, and Native are all acceptable terms, though whenever possible, it is preferred to use specific tribal names. The terms American Indian and Indigenous American are preferred by many. For the purpose of this paper, Indigenous or Indigenous American will be used if not referring to a specific tribe and then will defer to what term is used in specific articles and books when discussing those articles and books.

carnavalesque, laughter does not just mock and criticize, but it renews, revitalizes, and gives birth to a new life.

Another poignant element of laughter is its ability to not only provide freedom and renewal, but to burn through fear and reveal truth. Laughter can defeat “divine and human power...authoritarian commandments and prohibitions,” and draw forth new perspectives of the world (Bakhtin 91). These truths break through the official voices and allow the unofficial culture to emerge from the restrictions of the structured official culture. Through this emergence, the voices and the struggles of those that were forced to be hidden can be heard. It is through these truths and freedoms that the carnivalesque in American literature must be analyzed, beyond just the moments of humor and laughter, but in the shadows and darkness that can surround such joy as well. Elizabeth Benacka notes how the commonsense nature of Yankee humor turned into increased skepticism over time, often focusing on political issues. From the early humor of Benjamin Franklin and Mark Twain, who created characters such as the Yankee, a derogatory term turned into a character type closely tied to laughter and sarcasm, to the modern humor of *Saturday Night Live* and *Bojack Horseman*, American humor has often had a “double-voiced [nature]...[gesturing] toward an increasing amount of skepticism regarding current events” (Benacka 23). While many of these forms of humor push down on other groups, instead of raising up, there are those that succeed when they deconstruct in order to rebuild. This thesis will look into the stories of the oppressed throughout the American ages with a carnivalesque lens to see how their voices shine through in freedom and rejuvenation using the power of laughter.

The Elemental Building Blocks of the Carnavalesque

Laughter exists in many forms, but to grasp the theories of laughter that created the carnivalesque, there must be an understanding of the formation of the culture of the time. Rabelais, the man whose literary works Bakhtin based his carnivalesque study on, existed in a time of strong, theological power. Many of the festivals of Rabelais's time tied directly to the Christian beliefs that drove the reigning power, with the carnival laughter "[freeing] them completely from all religious and ecclesiastic dogmatism" (Bakhtin 7). While this laughter had a relationship to the religious sphere, it was not suffocated by religion, instead mocking the Church and being a part of its own sphere of existence.

The organizations in power desired seriousness and solemnity, creating forms of repression. These organizations did not approve of the laughter of the people and formed the official culture, which ruled through fear and intimidation, looking down on those who tried to embrace laughter and mime into the religious form. Bakhtin notes:

The very contents of medieval ideology—asceticism, sober providentialism, sin, atonement, suffering, as well as the character of the feudal regime, with its oppression and intimidation—all these elements determined this tone of icy petrified seriousness. It was supposedly the only tone fit to express the true, the good, and all that was essential and meaningful. (73)

The official culture and its seriousness kept a unified voice, hiding away anything that appeared different. This oppression required the people to find their own voice or to break away from the solemnity of the established order in order to express themselves as human beings.

In opposition to what the official culture attempted to preach, the folk culture of Rabelais's time believed in the philosophies of laughter, where it "heals and regenerates...linked

to the ultimate philosophical questions concerning the ‘regulation of life’” (Bakhtin 70). Within the unofficial culture, laughter was freedom and truth, giving the unofficial culture the voice of the community along with the freedom of creativity and expression. This freedom and laughter was reflected in the unofficial culture’s literature and various festivals that surrounded important religious holidays.² While the established order fought hard with fear and somber tones, the laughter of folk humor dispelled such forms, for “laughter created no dogmas and could not become authoritarian; it did not convey fear but a feeling of strength” (Bakhtin 95). The hypocrisy of the official culture was well known and called out through the unofficial culture’s laughter, creating truths. Whenever the established order attempted to control the forms of laughter that were publicly expressed, their laughter could never hold, for it only ever degraded and silenced.

The community that the unofficial culture is built upon and how the people of that community interact with each other is important to the carnivalesque. When carnivalesque elements are expressed in private, it is not seen as regenerative, for the carnivalesque must stand for the people as a whole. When these elements are enacted alone, “nothing is left but a series of artificial, meaningless metaphors” (Bakhtin 282). The themes of the carnivalesque—renewal, rebirth, and regeneration—cannot exist in a singular form that cannot connect to others; by being a part of the community, there is the ability to create the continuation of death and life. Because of this, scenes of community interaction are important to analyze in order to obtain a deeper understanding of the people and how the unofficial order splits from the official order. While American culture prides itself on independence, these moments of connectivity, unity, and healing within a community become all the more important.

² Such holidays include the “Feast of the Ass” or the “Feast of Fools.”

While grotesque imagery tends to be considered something people should look down on or shy away from, the carnivalesque encourages and celebrates the grotesque body. The carnivalesque looks at the grotesque body as something that “swallows and generates, gives and takes” (Bakhtin 339). The open mouth, the big eyes, and the act of swallowing are all actions that create absorption into the body to then travel down the body and out again, creating the cycle of death through absorption and rebirth through the casting out. Even elements such as urine and dung are important to the carnivalesque since they are connected to the cosmic and earth, yet “born of the body itself. It transforms cosmic terror into a gay carnival monster” (335). The grotesque offers up truths that are hidden through the official culture, but displayed in a humorous way that creates power instead of fear.

American Literature’s Official and Unofficial Culture

As the United States grew and became its own nation, Americans began to create their own identity and culture. This culture was, in part, created through Americans’ attempt to separate themselves from British and European identities, as well as prove their worth and strength as their own nation. Because of this, Americans focused on strong, Puritan beliefs, rejecting anything that was considered frivolous and luxurious. Much of the literature from the late 18th and early 19th century was considered immoral if not based in fact. Novels touched on this concept of immorality by stating that their stories were based on true events. This rigidity in structure demanded that there be two sides to American life—a serious one and a hidden, informal one. From this, we can see the carnivalesque identities of the official and unofficial

cultures formed. The official order in its rigidity and seriousness was reflective in America's need to sound impressive and powerful, worthy of their own name and freedom.

While the form of the official culture can be considered consistent, for though there have been many amendments to the government, its need for seriousness and rigidity remains firm, the unofficial culture is reflected in many different viewpoints. There are a multitude of cultures within America, and each one of these cultures, along with their interactions with other surrounding cultures, must be taken into consideration when trying to analyze the carnivalesque form. Each text looked at in this thesis will have its cultural standing and community values taken into account when understanding and analyzing their unofficial culture.

Chapter One looks at *Female Quixotism* by Tabitha Gilman Tenney and her reflections on gender, class, and education during the growth of America during the turn of the 19th century. The growing American voice took on many tones during this time, finding a balance between pure criticism and having ambivalent laughter—the ability to critique others while also taking a critical eye at themselves. Her work parodies Miguel de Cervantes's *Don Quixote*, a carnivalesque story in of itself, and her use of subversion and the picaresque creates a humor that is ambivalent and thought provoking. This allows for the true ambivalent nature of the carnivalesque to shine through, to weave itself into American storytelling, and allow for a more powerful understanding of the work and depth of the voices that have fought so hard for their place to be heard. Tenney's work is debated throughout scholarly articles on Tenney's intentions and if she truly attempted freedoms for women, but this thesis will look at *Female Quixotism* through a picaresque lens of telling truths from both sides. The questioning of Tenney's work highlights the power of the official order during the early ages of America as a country.

Chapter Two explores another unofficial culture through Black literary traditions and how the carnivalesque takes shape within other genres of literature, specifically with Toni Morrison's *Beloved*. Morrison's gothic tale of a haunted house still portrays moments of carnivalesque joy and hope. This is a darker approach to liberation that highlights how the ideals of the carnivalesque can succeed even through fear and horror. There is a heavy weight over the actions of Sethe, Schoolteacher, and Paul D which requires the laughter to be set in the background, important and seen, but not overshadowing the gothic heaviness that honors the processing of major historical trauma.

Chapter Three focuses on the subversion of expectations and the strength within community and laughter with Sterlin Harjo and Taika Waititi's *Reservation Dogs*. Here, we continue to see the combination of the picaresque and the carnivalesque work together to bring entertainment to the masses while also showcasing the struggles that the Indigenous community go through on a daily basis. *Reservation Dogs* takes on a picaresque style of storytelling that is in line with *Female Quixotism* while also approaching the seriousness that *Beloved* calls forth. It is not afraid to revel in the humor, laughter, and subversive power of the unofficial culture while also displaying the harsh realities of the official culture.

This thesis seeks to explore the various elements of American laughter and the power held within it to uplift the voices of the oppressed. The carnivalesque highlights the power and healing properties within laughter, while also creating an even ground for everyone to stand on so that no voice can continue to overshadow another. Historical understanding of American culture highlights the desire to maintain seriousness over important issues, but this thesis sheds light on the importance and power that laughter and humor have in these moments as well.

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CHAPTER ONE – THE POWER OF AMBIVALENT LAUGHTER IN TABITHA TENNEY’S *FEMALE QUIXOTISM*

Tabitha Tenney produces a picture of the perspectives of romanticism and feminism within the turn of the 19th century in her novel *Female Quixotism: Exhibited in the Romantic Opinions and Extravagant Adventures of Dorcasina*, using themes of ambivalence, satire, and degradation. This novel incorporates Bakhtin’s understanding of the official culture and its relationship to laughter and satire—instead of a laughter that is regenerative and ambivalent, the official culture creates humor that is purely degrading and parodic. The official culture cannot understand that there must be rejuvenation along with degradation, that with each fall there must also be a rise. The serious tones within the official culture are due to its lack of self-evaluation and acceptance of critique, often restricting or banning laughter in favor of more serious tones, keeping away from the critical yet freeing sounds of laughter.³ It is in direct opposition to the carnivalesque, with the carnivalesque taking the approach that laughter is ambivalent, and nothing can escape a critical eye.

Tenney explores the genre of the picaresque to convey her comedic commentary, though critics debate on if the use of the picaresque to display critique can be seen as derogatory or as uplifting. There are those such as James Mandrell, who, in his article “Questions of Genre and Gender: Contemporary American Versions of the Feminine Picaresque,” sees the picaresque as “conservative, if not reactionary”, believing that “the genre tends to confirm the marginality of the protagonist” (151). His critique lies in the picaresque’s ability to create an “other” and that the picaresque not only encourages continuing to push people into the form of an “other,” but to

³ For a better understanding of the history of laughter and how it specifically dealt with the Christian theology of the medieval era, see Bakhtin’s first chapter “The History of Laughter” in *Rabelais and His World*.

regularly degrade them and to see them as a person who cannot connect to the world around them. While his article also focuses on female empowerment in picaresque settings, the writings he looks at are all from male authors. Maren Lickhardt, Gregor Schuhen, and Hans Rudolf Velten question the picaresque and “why the transgressive and subversive potential of the picaresque narrative challenges and criticizes the feudal hierarchy of the social strata without subverting and transgressing gender norms” (7). They see depictions of women and their roles in society within the picaresque as degrading, with the picaresque refusing to challenge the role of women and instead focusing on the issues of class.

Because of the picaresque’s ability to not have to take definitive sides and because of its ambivalent humor, many critiques have questioned Tenney’s reasoning behind her writing. Much of her story has similar elements to the official culture within America at the time. Her husband, Samuel Tenney, was a Federalist, staunchly supporting the extension of the Alien and Sedition Acts.⁴ However, it would be erroneous to assume Tenney agreed with some, if not all, of her husband’s opinions, as W.C. Harris points out in her article “‘Women Love to Have Their Own Way’: Delusion, Volition, and ‘Freaks’ of Sight in Tabitha Tenney’s *Female Quixotism*.” To do so would be assuming she is an extension of her husband, which would only continue to demean the voice of a woman as an individual. W.C. Harris makes many arguments that showcase how Tenney’s voice should be seen as separate from her husband’s Federalist point of view, while also acknowledging how modern views can skew our knowledge of the time. There are other authors, such as Linda Frost in her article “The Body Politic in Tabitha Tenney’s *Female Quixotism*,” who argue that many of Tenney’s characters uphold the Federalist ideals.

⁴ Further research on Tenney’s biography and her relation to her husband can be found in Cathy Davidson’s chapter. “The Picaresque and the Margins of Political Discourse” in *Revolution and the World: The Rise of the Novel in America* and W.C. Harris’s article “‘Women Love to Have Their Own Way’: Delusion, Volition, and ‘Freaks’ of Sight in Tabitha Tenney’s *Female Quixotism*.”

Many of Dorcasina's suitors are "reminiscent of the same figures that threatened the Federalists' stronghold on the American government; clearly self-interested, largely from the lower class, mostly servants or criminals, they are (stereo)typically illiterate, poor, and certainly not in a position to inherit property from their own families" (114). While this argument has many values, this chapter will focus on the ambivalence of the story, acknowledging the critiques on both sides of the table and how they work within the official and unofficial culture of the carnivalesque.

While *Female Quixotism* looks to encourage the perspectives of pushing aside femininity as frivolous, it is through its generation of a back-and-forth discussion of the official and unofficial culture that the story creates power. This power produces an opportunity for the issues of feminism to be seen from multiple lenses when certain voices might have been suffocated otherwise. This multifaceted perspective can take place parallel to any other desired lens for, as Cathy Davidson notes in her book *Revolution and the World: The Rise of the Novel in America*, the picaresque can explore contradictory ideas without the author ever having to take a specific position on the topic, if the picaresque even chooses to take a position, and that "the picaresque can always disguise any social stand it does take by hiding behind its own comic business" (248). This ambivalent attitude allows the picaresque to break through the overbearing official culture and all its censorship while still offering critiques to the system. It is in the same range as the carnivalesque, which also requires ambivalence within its humor. Nobody is free from humorous critique within the carnivalesque. It is not afraid to look at all with a critical eye, breaking down the official culture and breaking down the problems within the unofficial culture. This chapter will argue that with Bakhtin's perspective on the carnivalesque, especially through

its use of rejuvenation alongside degradation, there is a positive strength in women's voices within the picaresque, even within a time that often discouraged dissenting voices.

The Restrictions of the American Voice

Many early American voices had to fight through the power of the official culture to be heard. Despite the cultural ideals of freedom and independence, many people still felt that their voices were suppressed, with the official culture using laws such as the Alien and Sedition Acts to apply restrictions to speech and cause many to fear retribution for their voiced opinions.⁵

While the Alien and Sedition Acts were supposed to focus on voices that opposed the government on a serious level, the Acts threatened to punish those who offered any form of critique. Satire and critical thoughts around the government became dangerous zones for people to walk through because they did not want to be seen as enemies of the government. Despite this fear, authors still found a way to use their art and make their voices heard.

Because of the political strife that kept many Americans afraid of retribution, both women and men had to dance around restrictions to speak their mind. Many Federalists supported a strange balance of freedoms and restrictions, believing that freedoms granted to the people did not necessarily mean that people should exercise those freedoms. Instead, the Federalists believed that people should appreciate the idea that they had the legal ability to have power without ever taking advantage of it. They maintained a classist view, upholding a level of hypocrisy that many people came to resent.⁶ The American author's voice, if it wished to speak

⁵Davidson goes into detail on the fears and challenges for journalists and authors during the Alien and Sedition Acts, along with the politics surrounding them in her chapter "The Picaresque and the Margins of Political Discourse" in *Revolution and the World: The Rise of the Novel in America*.

⁶ Davidson gives examples of Federalist and Anti-Federalist viewpoints that are worthy of further research in her chapter "The Picaresque and the Margins of Political Discourse."

above the restrictions, would have to tread carefully, requiring their readers to look beyond the surface level of their writing and understand a secondary message. To create these messages would require a well-crafted official culture to parallel the culture within their stories while slowly offering critiques and perspectives of the unofficial culture. The ambivalent voice within the carnivalesque offered up this opportunity to break out of the stiff official culture and yet still create a connection between the real world and that of fiction.

One of the other forms that the official culture took within both Tenney's world and that of *Female Quixotism*, is its strict indomitable view around fiction and romance. Jean Nienkamp and Andrea Collins explain in their introduction to Tenney's novel how America had a Puritan background that upheld the belief that "fiction was immoral because it was tantamount to lying" coupled with how the "people in Federalist America prided themselves on their no-frills practicality, and they often associated entertainments with frivolous European luxuriousness" (i). Within this form of the official culture, women were discouraged from reading for pleasure, with people viewing fiction and romance as absurd. According to Linda Kerber in her book *Women of the Republic: Intellect and Ideology in Revolutionary America*, many women felt that they had to defend their reading of fiction, often with the forms of fiction that they read being realistic so as not to create more of an outrage.⁷ The reading of romance was especially looked down upon, with many people discouraging their relatives and children from reading such fiction. These warnings were even heard spoken by authors of fiction, as seen with Mercy Otis Warren, warning her niece about how novels would affect her marriage (Kerber 240). Many novels also took the time to warn women against reading and the reading of romance. *Female Quixotism*, while making multiple comments about the dangers of reading, did not stand alone in its use of

⁷ Specifically within her chapter "'We Own That Ladies Sometimes Read': Women's Reading in the Early Republic."

creating characters to act as a cautionary tale in how women could behave if swept away by reading. Many saw that fiction and romance would lead to a woman being ruled by her emotions and passions instead of clear-sighted logic. This restrictive, censored world encouraged women to settle for practical marriages, emotional ties or not. Reading romances set women up to wanting passionate relationships that did not benefit the social order.

Female Quixotism, a novel that follows a woman named Dorcasina as she falls for the tricks of multiple men, believing herself to be in love with them, and going through comedic mishaps because of it, displays women as those who have very few powers. Despite the freedoms given to Dorcasina by her father, such as allowing her to read whatever she wants, she is mocked and looked down on for those very freedoms, with many people believing them to be the root of her silly behavior. Many of the men who had the potential to marry Dorcasina, “notwithstanding the temptation of her money, and her agreeable person, were too prudent to think of seeking her in marriage; wisely foreseeing the inconveniencies which would result from having a wife whose mind was fraught with ideas of life” (Tenney 14). Many of the men cannot look past her passion for reading, despite the allowance she receives from her father, which would then go to them, and despite the fact that she is a kind and caring individual. Instead, they focus on the fear they have around Dorcasina reading and having wild concepts about how the world should work. Those who are swayed by her money use her romanticization of the world against her, laughing at her gullible mind.

Since Dorcasina’s world is supposed to reflect the real world, with the narrator at the beginning stating, “I presume you will no longer doubt its being a true uncolored history...” (3), Tenney works to establish that the unofficial and official cultures of the American world and the world of *Female Quixotism* should be seen as one and the same. One way this is done is through

the critique of reading fiction. While many men look down on Dorcasina's life and decide that her actions are silly, there are even women in her life who believe in the restrictive lifestyle of the official culture. One of her closest friends, Mrs. Stanly, decides to send her daughter, Harriot, away to boarding school, instructing her daughter's governess to never let her daughter read novels, "so great was her aversion to them, from seeing their effects on a person, who in other respects, was worthy of being held up as a perfect pattern of goodness, discretion and virtue" (Tenney 16). Despite Mrs. Stanly's love for her friend, she cannot agree with her reading, seeing it as a stain upon Dorcasina's character. Harriot, who as a child is upset with this rule, agrees with her mother on the goodness behind keeping her away from novels after seeing how Dorcasina acts around others.

Despite Tenney claiming her story to be about a real woman, she immediately creates a parallel to Miguel de Cervantes's *Don Quixote*, a novel that is very carnivalesque in its own nature.⁸ The opening letter within *Female Quixotism* is used to defend the story as being realistic yet also states that "when you compare [this story] with the most extravagant parts of the authentic history of the celebrated hero of La Mancha, the renowned Don Quixote...", indicating that the story of Don Quixote is real. Readers, however, know Don Quixote to be a fictional character, and thus, know to take this story as fiction. By having this unrealistic connection, Tenney mocks the current societal view of attempting to make a story reasonable by defending its realness. This moment of juxtaposed realities reflects the back-and-forth nature of *Female Quixotism*, causing people to struggle to figure out what messages to take away and who has the real power in the story, thus creating higher levels of critical thinking.

⁸ Examples of *Don Quixote*'s carnivalesque nature can be found in *Rabelais and His World* by Bakhtin as well as *The Laughter of the Saints: Parodies of Holiness in Late Medieval and Renaissance Spain* by Ryan D. Giles.

Despite the restrictions in voice and the generally negative commentary towards reading, white women during the time of the American Revolution had a potentially promising future. Rosemarie Zagari makes note of this potential in her book *Revolutionary Backlash: Women and Politics in the Early American Republic*, stating that “in many ways the story of postrevolutionary America is the story of how American women and men sought to define—and ultimately to limit and restrict—the expansive ideals they had so successfully deployed against Britain” (Zagari 4). While women still had plenty of restrictions placed upon them, they had opportunities to let their voices be known. There were people who had a greater appreciation for women and their accomplishments, and it was these appreciations and hopes for freedom that offered up opportunities for women to speak loudly and be heard. Women knew that with their chance to have some power behind their voice, they could use various methods to showcase their strength and their struggles. Using the blossoming opportunities given to women to embrace these small powers, Tenney creates a story that reflects the critiques of the world, using the picaresque style to create a carnivalesque sense of humor that is both ambivalent and critical.

The tone of the world Tenney lived in was one of seriousness and properness, making the comedy and romance within her story all the more powerful. The importance of understanding Tenney’s world is set through Tenney’s narrator’s insistence that the story is a true one. To understand the political world that Tenney lived in is to understand the power behind humor and its ability to create subtle critiques while maintaining a tone that kept critical eyes from watching her story too closely.

Ambivalence as a Bridge

Though the official culture has a strict view of the world and how it should act, the unofficial culture looks at the world differently, able to find critiques for all. By laughing at others and at themselves, the unofficial culture “expresses the point of view of the whole world; he who is laughing also belongs to it” (Bakhtin 12). This ambivalence has always been a key factor in the carnivalesque, and it is used in *Female Quixotism* to create a conversation between the official and unofficial culture, allowing multiple perspectives to shine.

Women in *Female Quixotism*, despite many of them living within the official culture, maintain a level of ambivalence towards marriage, defending those who strayed outside of the standard way of life. Instead of valuing a married status above all else, the wisdom to stay away from unpleasant matches proves to be stronger for these women. While Dorcasina’s adventures eventually lead her into spinsterhood, her situation is not one that is looked down on. Mrs. Stanly scolds her daughter, Harriot, for talking down on old maids, saying “I know several worthy and amiable women of that class, who live single rather than marry barely for the sake of having a husband. They are, in my opinion, much more respectable than women, who, merely to avoid the imputation of being old maids, will marry the first man that offers himself” (Tenney 180). During most of the story, Dorcasina proves herself to be foolish in her desired matches, with the women looking down on her for her romantic antics along with her refusal to marry who they consider to be respectable men; however, she becomes wise and admirable when she decides to give up on her romanticized ideals and allow herself to maintain her own power and position. Dorcasina analyzes herself with ambivalence, able to see the flaws in her previous behavior while still allowing herself to read her fictional stories. With such power, Dorcasina decides to use her money to help those who might have fallen, just as she had, and raise them back up. She

makes a plan for herself in a letter to Harriot, choosing to remove herself from apathy and be a charitable, considerate woman. "It is, therefore, my intention to seek out proper objects of charity, principally among those who, by misfortunes, and without any blameable misconduct of their own, have been reduced from opulent or easy circumstances to indigence; and to bestow on them what I have no occasion to use myself" (Tenney 324). There is ambivalent judgement towards Dorcasina, who has been considered foolish and critiqued by others when she falls to romantic ideals, but she becomes admired, despite the fact that she still reads books of fiction and romance, when she learns from her mistakes and chooses a charitable, independent life.

While many men try to manipulate and degrade Dorcasina, there is one who can look past her love of reading and attempt to marry her. This man, a widowed merchant by the name of Mr. Cumberland, is displayed in an ambivalent light, for he is shown to be an upstanding member of society, yet none of the women within the official order desire him as a husband. Mr. Cumberland attempts to gain Dorcasina's favor, seeing the marriage as advantageous, despite her penchant for books and romance, because of her allowance and her age. Dorcasina will not have any of it however, stating that she cannot marry "a man, who, in a love affair, goes on in the same cold, regular, and systematic manner, in which he transacts all his other business...No sir, the man to whom I unite myself in marriage, must first behold me, and at a glance be transfixed to the heart" (Tenney 204). Even though her father, whom she loves and whose opinion she values dearly, agrees with the match and sees Mr. Cumberland as a respectable man, Dorcasina rebels against it. The ambivalent image of Mr. Cumberland continues as Dorcasina addresses valid points of there being a lack of emotional connection. And yet, though Mr. Cumberland does not care for Dorcasina herself, he does not try to lie or deceive her, promising her a good life. This would follow the social norm for the society Dorcasina grew up in, and for the society

that the readers of Tenney's time would expect. Where Dorcasina stood, there were not many other options for her, and this offer presented itself as her best chance at a reasonably good marriage. While this may be the case, Dorcasina has been shown stories that present an alternative, a way to allow emotions to take a lead and offer her emotional satisfaction instead of just monetary comfort. Dorcasina's romanticized judgment against Mr. Cumberland is not the only negative judgement towards him, as even Harriot refuses Mr. Cumberland, as he proposes to her immediately after being rejected by Dorcasina on multiple occasions, with Harriot going on to eventually marry a man she falls in love with. Harriot creates the ambivalent bridge for this situation, showcasing that Mr. Cumberland is not just looked down on by Dorcasina, a romantic, but by someone who stands within the official culture. Tenney shows that she is not afraid to exhibit the positives and negatives of each lifestyle, allowing a way forward for ambivalent critiques.

As the daughter who grew up forbidden from reading fiction, Harriot reflects the official culture. Her care for and friendship with Dorcasina, however, keeps her from being fully separated from the unofficial culture, allowing for more ambivalent observation and balancing the two cultures in a more reasonable way than Dorcasina. For a time, in order to help try and keep Dorcasina away from John Brown, a young, hired hand that is of a much lower station than Dorcasina, Harriot dresses as a man and pretends to try and woo Dorcasina as well. Though her mother and father are initially against the idea, horrified by the concept of Harriot dressing as a man, they see no other alternative and allow their daughter to go through with the prank. This acceptance reveals the power of the unofficial culture's nature, with Harriot's antics being outside the normal, restrictive nature of the official culture. When confronted with what her future husband would think of the issue, Harriot is confident in her response, without fear of his

reaction. “Perhaps I shall never tell him; and perhaps I may; it will be just as the humour takes me. If he looks grave I shall laugh; and if he laughs, which I think is most probable, I shall tell him he is a man after my own heart” (Tenney 252). Harriot showcases her ambivalence, embracing her individual identity and the chaotic element of the carnivalesque and the unofficial culture. Her lack of fear in what her future husband will think, believing instead that he should also laugh at the absurd, displays Harriot’s nature to step away from the official culture and explore how the seriousness of the official culture may not always be the correct way. The situation is even more amusing in that her future husband, Captain Barry, is one of the men that Dorcasina makes herself a fool over. Harriot is a woman who has a great deal of intelligence, who can walk the line of the official and unofficial culture, and who can maintain more power than Dorcasina. Despite all of this, her life at the end of the story is not the happiest, thus continuing the ambivalent nature of the novel, questioning the benefits of both the official and unofficial culture, and allowing for a deeper layer of critical thinking.

Using Degradation to Create Balance

In the world of *Female Quixotism*, the official culture and the status of each character within the official order plays an important role in their power. In order to create the bridge between the different power structures and allow ambivalent judgement, humorous degradation has to exist. “Degradation here means coming down to earth, the contact with earth as an element that swallows up and gives birth at the same time. To degrade is to bury, to sow, and to kill simultaneously, in order to bring forth something more and better” (Bakhtin 21). This degradation allows characters to be on a level playing field, without one side overpowering the other in their critiques. The importance of this carnivalesque degradation is to not to push

someone below another because of status or gender, but to allow everyone a chance at renewal and for their voices to be heard.

While Dorcasina breaks away from the official culture, she is still subject to the ambivalence of carnivalesque degradation. Dorcasina is the door to the unofficial culture, and it is through her various praises and degradations by others that showcase how not just women fought for their voices to be heard, but how immigrants, those of other social classes, and those without education fought for this right as well. The men who woo Dorcasina do so for a variety of reasons, be it for amusement, their own selfish fulfillment, or for the hope of happiness and rising in the social class ranks in the world. Each of the men opens a door to our understanding of their struggles and desires through their way of degrading Dorcasina. “In both the novel and the society, the ultimate conflicts of class and wealth are translated into self-enhancing searches for independence, adventure, opportunity, and individualism” (Davidson 253). There are some characters that look to harm Dorcasina, but many of them are looking for their own fortunes and happiness, often mocking her in the process for her sheltered way of living. Men like O’Connor realize that Dorcasina has no true experience with the world around her, sheltered from the realities that would quickly and harshly shatter her romanticized image of the world. While they are cruel in using her, they also expose the bleak worlds that they live in, earning themselves some power over the social order and official culture that keep them down.

Though Dorcasina decides to remain unmarried by the end of the novel, the empowerment of women does not end there. Her view of men has been weakened considerably, with her stating “I begin to think...that all men are alike false, perfidious, and deceitful; and that there is no confidence to be put in any of them” (Tenney 315). Here we see a degrading of men, something that Dorcasina has never done before. She has always romanticized the men of her

world, seeing them for something better than what they were. It is only by the end of the novel, after her multiple degradations by various men in her life, and now through her own degradation of men, that she finally comes to her senses and becomes independent. She is someone who does not need to rely on others for support in her identity, pushing down the very gender she used to look on with romanticized eyes.

Dorcasina is not the only woman to create degradation, as Harriot also gets a chance to degrade. A highlight of power for Harriot is when she is in her form as Montague, when she has the power to degrade Dorcasina, all the while saving her from lowering her status due to John Brown. She delights in the chance for the comedic abuse, “having taken a turn or two across the parlour, to consider what step she should next take to amuse herself, to frighten Brown, and to bring down Dorcasina, at this moment entered the kitchen, apparently in a violent rage” (Tenney 269). Harriot is not afraid to use carnivalesque abuses to help call out the over romanticism of Dorcasina’s situation. She never would have been able to do so as a woman, but as a man filled with anger and violent passion, she is able to sway Dorcasina’s mind. This is all done in a carnivalesque experience, for while Harriot is wanting to save Dorcasina from her fate, she is also incredibly amused, adding to the carnivalesque humor of the moment and taking the chance to be such an exaggerated figure for the fun of it.

This switching of gender roles, a carnivalesque feature in of itself, is humorous throughout the story because we as readers know the extravagance and overplayed character of Montague is opposite to Harriot’s personality. Harriot is a much more rational character than Dorcasina, but her character of Montague is plagued by romantic notions to the point of aggression. Despite these moments being humorous, Harriot does admit to having a sense of power in being a male, though she is still able to take off the form of the male persona easily,

noting that “my new character procures me great respect, I find” (Tenney 272). This, being right after she demands John to bring Dorcasina to her so that she may woo Dorcasina instead of John. Despite Montague being a rival to John, John goes to bring Dorcasina to her without question. This moment showcases a level of respect among men and rivals that Harriot is unaccustomed to, a tongue in cheek commentary on the respect women, even respectable and well stationed women, get in opposition to men.

John, who is the final man to try to woo Dorcasina, does not just threaten Dorcasina’s status but offends the other characters of lower stations as well. He is a man who attempts to step into the official culture, wanting to rise above the other servants that he has surrounded himself with. Scipio, one of the servants in Dorcasina’s household, becomes an important figure within the plot against John, angry about him rising above his station. “[Scipio] now felt for the honor of the family, and could not bear the idea of Dorcasina’s degradation” (Tenney 239). Dorcasina’s degradation would not be rejuvenating or with the promise of new life, but it would bring her and everyone around her into ruin. In a carnivalesque sense, it is watching a character that is supposed to be a part of the unofficial culture take steps into the official, hurting the others in his pursuit for comfort. The servants see it as a threat to Brown’s character, with Betty telling Dorcasina that “You will just spoil an honest, industrious fellow by setting him up so. He’ll soon be proud and lazy enough I’ll warrant” (233). John becomes at risk of losing his status within the world of the unofficial, becoming something to be looked down on, not just for status, but for his personality and character as a whole. Scipio’s decision to get rid of Brown does not have to do so much with Brown’s character as much as it had to do with the loss of Dorcasina’s status. Scipio makes it his goal to ensure Brown remembers his place and that this marriage does not happen. He uses carnivalesque tricks, such as having all of the serving staff call John “Mr. Brown” every

time they see him, making John feel overwhelmed and ostracized. This is a similar degrading tactic that the staff used on Betty when she tried to rise too high and needed to be humbled.

Scipio is given the opportunity to degrade throughout the novel, offering him more power than the other men within the story despite the fact his race would place him on a lower tier within the official culture. His laughter and degradation brings forth truths to the audience, showcasing a leveling that is not just those on the top, but those with little power as well. Scipio, in his laughter and mischievous nature, serves as an opposite to Brown, proving how someone should act and behave. In this, Scipio serves as a more nuanced take on the social order within the world. Based on the official culture, Scipio should have no say or power in society, but he displays himself time and again as someone who crosses the boundary of the official culture, jumping back and forth in his power. Despite not always being an active participant in the chaotic, romantic adventures Dorcasina is a part of, he consistently partakes in mischief, never being completely bound by the rules of the official culture. Because of this, Scipio becomes the one to continue to push John down, “[pouring] on him such a torrent of abuse, that John, being no longer able patiently to endure it, doubled his fist and gave him a blow. This was what Scipio desired, knowing himself to be the best man” (Tenney 282-283). This showcases both physical and verbal abuses, however, the form of physical abuse in the wake of verbal abuse indicates that John is a lesser man for acting out physically. This is because John could never stand up for another individual. He could never protect Dorcasina or fight for her honor, but he could act out when his pride was hurt. Even through his weaknesses, John is morally the best of the men Dorcasina is enamored with, with his only true crime being that he threatened to pull Dorcasina down in class and status. Mr. Stanly allows John to keep the nice clothing that was gifted to him, along with giving John money. This allows John to have a happy, peaceful life, without

damaging the status of Dorcasina. While Brown is degraded multiple times, he still is given a form of comfort, keeping him from being degraded too far, keeping his character and voice from being dismissed and belittled by the reader.

John is not the only character who Scipio degrades. He often mocks Betty, Dorcasina's servant and confidant, in events that are often centered around Dorcasina's romantic adventures. Betty, forced to dress as O'Connor for Dorcasina, gets noticed by Scipio and, thinking she was a thief, laughs at her. Betty feared being found by others and is already ashamed of the role Dorcasina has made her take on, but Scipio's laughter allows Betty to finally break from Dorcasina's wishes and refuse to keep up the act. The laughter from Scipio highlights Betty's shame and allows her to come to her senses, now denying Dorcasina's romantic ideas.

Scipio also laughs at Betty when she is running away from what she believes to be a ghost, but is really a large, white cat. While the other servants "were all credulous, superstitious, and terrified," by Betty's story of a supernatural being, Scipio "had more understanding than all the rest, and laughed at the idea of ghosts and apparitions, like a philosopher" (Tenney 102). Not only does his laughter break free the truth, allowing him to logically analyze the situation and notice the white cat Betty saw, but his laughter and mockery of Betty's superstitious nature, allows for Dorcasina to laugh at Betty as well. If Dorcasina laughed at Betty alone, it would have only been a degradation of someone who is already of a lower station, with Dorcasina being the higher, more intelligent person. With Scipio also laughing and mocking Betty, Scipio brings the power back to the lower station, allowing both sides to critique.

While Betty is degraded due to her superstitions, the moment also highlights a form of degradation for Dorcasina. Dorcasina uses her intelligence and reason to dismiss Betty's claims of the supernatural hauntings, showcasing how smart she can be and how unreasonable the

romantic fictions she reads make her. When Dorcasina is presented with romance, she loses all the rational thoughts she had before. As everyone else is becoming aware of how deceptive O'Connor, the first man to deceive and woo Dorcasina, is, Dorcasina continually finds excuses for him, believing that those who she once held a high opinion of would be deceptive instead. Her father attempts to use logic with her, showing a rare moment of frustration towards her for "giving less credit to one of your own countrymen, whose character for probity is well known and acknowledged, than to a foreigner, whom nobody knows, and who has nothing to recommend him but his own base assertions?" (Tenney 76). Even when called out by her father, another individual Dorcasina has shown multiple times to respect and trust, she does not listen. The absurdity of the situation along with the juxtaposition of her sudden rationality when it comes to the supernatural, creates a humor that also criticizes the romanticized viewpoint of Dorcasina. Degradation, as used throughout *Female Quixotism*, becomes a powerful tool to help critique the world by creating a level of equality. Instead of being used to push people to become lower than everyone else, it is used to keep them in check, all the while creating a positive tone of power.

The desire to keep stories and ideas direct and serious often overshadowed the power of fiction and laughter. This desire for storytelling only being connected to real events combined with the fear that the Sedition Act placed on Americans created a black and white world. The carnivalesque does not believe in such a world, however. It requires people to look from multiple perspectives, without glorifying one and raising it to a romanticized platform. Tenney's story showcases what can happen when an idea is romanticized beyond rational, and she is not afraid to show that both sides of the world have their flaws.

While there has been deep analysis done by others to confirm which point of view Tenney specifically had, I believe the story has power outside of one person's perspective, even if that person is the author herself. She has created a form of degradation for all the characters within *Female Quixotism*, willing to showcase people of various classes, races, and genders to be on equal ground at one point or another. Her humor does not just target one person, but is pointed at many. It is through the ambivalence of this commentary that the audience can find multiple perspectives, and through these perspectives, multiple truths. For the reader to focus on one lesson or idea would defeat carnivalesque purpose to create balance.

Dorcasina's story lives beyond the realm of the black and white. Her truths and lessons create their own power, outside of the structures that society demanded of both her and of Tenney's world. Tenney uses that power to break down walls, with laughter as her main tool. And while there are arguments that show that the world Tenney writes of does not possess a high level of empowerment, it is an ambitious and powerful story that broke boundaries and paved the way for American voices that did not often have a chance to be heard, now to be offered a moment of consideration and joyous laughter.

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CHAPTER TWO – THE INTERWOVEN NATURE OF THE GOTHIC AND THE CARNIVALESQUE

The carnivalesque and the gothic have parallels in their elements, acting as two sides of the same coin. One is a utopian depiction of a space for voices to speak out against oppression and the other is a haunted exploration of the voices that are hidden in the dark. While they both offer spaces for people to speak when they are not often heard, the carnivalesque does so in a way that is celebratory and exciting while the gothic lends itself to a darker, dystopian voice. When combined, they explore the depths of darkness and allow voices to not only shout out against the void, but to create light.

In Toni Morrison's *Beloved*, it is hard to imagine happiness and laughter to overshadow the darkness of the haunting of *Beloved*, and yet, these scenes exist within the storytelling. Moments of carnival joy and togetherness shine light in the darkness and even scenes of grotesqueness send forth the promise of rebirth and rejuvenation, elements that are closely tied to the carnivalesque. While there is haunting and murder within the story, there is also freedom. These moments establish important points of analysis to see that Morrison's story is not just one of darkness and haunted pasts but is also a story of hope and the chance of an empowered future.

Morrison's story is well loved and analyzed, for good reason. Her use of the gothic to discuss themes of spirituality, motherhood, and community connect to many readers. Phillip Goldstein, in his article "Black Feminism and the Canon: Faulkner's *Absalom, Absalom!* and Morrison's *Beloved* as Gothic Romances," showcases the romanticism of *Beloved*, with the focus of the gothic elements of the supernatural, multiple perspectives, a haunted house, and tormented lovers. Goldstein acknowledges the positive outcome in *Beloved*, and how it becomes a source of hope and positivity, stating that "it overcomes evil and brings improvement, instead of degenerating into idiocy and justifying a modernist pessimism" (138). Despite this

acknowledgement, Goldstein does not analyze the depth of how the gothic elements create such a positive outlook, noting that the community places a role in it, but not pointing out the elements themselves. This chapter will showcase these gothic elements and show how they are reflected in the carnivalesque to balance out the dark with the rejuvenation and rebirth that come with the carnivalesque.

Despite *Beloved* being a gothic story, many have noticed that it takes on more hopeful undertones. Deborah Horvitz acknowledges the healing at the end of the story and looks at the cycles of relationships and memories that exist within it. Her article “Nameless Ghosts: Possession and Dispossession in *Beloved*” resolves with the acknowledgement that “though the ghost-child-mother-sister returns, unnamed, to the water, her story is passed on” (Horvitz 166). While much of her article focuses on the losses of memory and relationships, she notices the cycles of loss and renewal that take place within the story, as well as elements of swallowing being both destruction and a form of renewal, being absorbed into the next woman. Linda Krumholz, in her article “The Ghosts of Slavery: Historical Recovery in Toni Morrison’s *Beloved*,” also looks at the cycles of “rememory” that take place within the story but also focuses on how rituals are used to heal. Her cycles of renewal exist outside of the story and bring the readers into the cycle as well, noting that “the reader is led through a painful, emotional healing process, leaving him or her with a haunting sense of the depth of pain and shame suffered in slavery” (407). Each article recognizes the pattern of cycles and rejuvenation that creates a source of healing and power, but this chapter will look at these moments in detail, revealing how the lens of the carnivalesque, along with a focus on the joy that appears throughout the story, creates a powerful voice that breaks through the shadow of the gothic.

Hope and rebirth are not topics often considered within the gothic, which typically is used to explore the depths of darkness, giving us the opportunity to see how and why dark things happen, as well as the resulting effects it has on the people around it. The carnivalesque acknowledges darkness through abuse and debasement, but it also values ambivalence in its abuses. The carnivalesque allows for the critique of a system while celebrating the success from oppression. With the combination of the two, there is a chance to explore multiple facets of a dark and complicated system while allowing voices to rise up and create freedom. There is still a hope and call for change in the future without dismissing the struggles and fight that have been made to get to their moment of freedom.

The Celebration and the Destruction within the Carnival

The unofficial order and folk culture could not exist without the gathering of the people to celebrate, where all is equalized, and no one is above another. These moments turn everything on its head and allow those who feel no power to speak while those who have always been the oppressor to be put down. While such scenes within *Beloved* are brief, they hold power over the rest of the storytelling. The carnival that Sethe, Denver, and Paul D attend at the beginning is one such scene, holding a Bakhtinian balance of laughter and ambivalence.

Sethe, despite all her power and her ability to stand up for herself, feels self-conscious as she dresses up as if she was going to church for the carnival. “The others, ahead and behind them, would think she was putting on airs, letting them know that she was different because she lived in a house with two stories; tougher, because she could do and survive things they believed she should neither do nor survive” (Morrison 47). The story has barely begun, but there is already strong evidence of the fight Sethe has had to make for her freedom and for the freedom

of her children. Sethe is a strong, self-assured character, but when brought to the eyes of those around her, becomes momentarily self-conscious. In the eyes of the community, she is stripped of all her walls. Her outfit also hints at her pride in taking care of herself, her need to step outside the community, and shows her rise above the struggles she has gone through. And yet she has not risen above the rest of the community. She is aware of her status and becomes conscious of how the others put her down for it. Her pride in her home and her ability to care for herself is hinted at here, which becomes a major player in the plot by the end, when the community comes together and helps break Sethe down and build her up together.

Sethe's outfit for the carnival is also juxtaposed with the outfit she is wearing when she is in isolation with Beloved and Denver at the end of the novel. As they are holed up within 124, Sethe makes them clothes: "bright clothes—with blue stripes and sassy prints...by the end of March the three of them looked like carnival women with nothing to do" (Morrison 240). There is a mockery of life in how Sethe and her daughters are living, in their isolation, dressed in chaotic celebration while slowly killing themselves as they are lost in their home, absorbed in the past and refusing to step outside of it.

And yet, within the carnival, despite her well-dressed look, she is neither knocked down or raised up by her community. Sethe does not notice anyone paying attention to her, instead, her focus is on the building of a possible life between Paul D, Denver, and herself, noticing instead that "all the time the three shadows that shot out of their feet to the left held hands"(47). This start from the bottom, of the feet and of shadows, showcase what is buried under the surface and starting to climb out. It is not a downward crawl, but something moving up from the bottom, denoting a birth of something new. By the end of the carnival, "although leading them now, the shadows of three people still held hands" (49). Even Denver, who has been trying to hide any

semblance of happiness, is having a great time. The shadows, which in many parts of the gothic indicate something scary, are cast in a positive, hopeful way, surrounded by the promise of life. After all the pain and suffering Sethe, Paul D, and Denver have experienced, this togetherness and laughter at the carnival is unearthing a dream of a better future.

Death is not cast out of the carnival experience, as it is wrapped in every part of it, embracing death as it is a promise of a new future. As there are cycles of motherhood, nurturing, and rebirth during the story, the carnival also embraces the idea of death, never afraid of it, but acknowledging it as a part of life. Throughout the carnival scene, there are old, dying roses scattered. “The closer the roses got to death, the louder their scent, and everybody who attended the carnival associated it with the stench of the rotten roses” (47). The fear of death is cast away during the carnival. The roses had been through their own cycle, growing in abundance, only to begin dying and rotting. And yet, despite the death that the land around everyone is experiencing, new life from the carnival takes root here, through the laughter of the people and the power that comes with it.

The carnival itself also holds ambivalence in its many role reversals and how all the different characters treat one another. The people of the carnival, made up of mostly white individuals, entertain for the black community. And while many of the carnival workers look down on the community, they are mocked and laughed at by Paul D and the others. “One-Ton Lady spit at them, but her bulk shortened her aim and they got a big kick out of the helpless meanness in her little eyes” (Morrison 48). There is community building within this mockery. Those that once held a ruling power over the community are turned upside down. Many of the people who work for the carnival are used to being put on display to be mocked by others, but they see this as a chance to mock others who they believe to be below them. People such as the

One-Ton Lady and Arabian Nights Dancer found ways to try and laugh at or mock the community as they came for entertainment. Despite this, they were mocked and laughed at in return by the community. Even the lowest of the carnival cast was not immune to laughter, for “When Wild African Savage shook his bars and said wa wa, Paul D told everybody he knew him back in Roanoke” (Morrison 48-49). This moment allows the community to not push the cast below themselves, but to pull them to the same level. None of this is cruel mockery that is purely condescending, for the carnival is made for entertainment and amusement. Instead, the laughter is used to unite the people and bring joy into the community. Paul D, who had been an outsider to this community, is brought in through his interactions and laughter, and both Sethe and Denver can begin to picture themselves with a future as opposed to being paused within the past at their home. While the official culture would be focused on continually pushing those below them down, the community as the unofficial, is able to keep everyone on a level playing field.

This scene of carnivalesque joy and celebration is looked back on throughout the story and the promising birth of a family that came from it as well. It is used as an anchor to express the possibility of pure joy and connection. Though that perfect image is never truly achieved at the end, with Denver never truly loving Paul D as well as her growing less dependent on her mother and growing into her own adult identity within the community, the image still serves as a promise, not just of family, but of connectivity and freedom from the haunting of the past.

The Intermixing of the Carnavalesque and the Gothic

The gothic elements, by themselves, create a sense of hopelessness that spreads to every character within the story and yet, even some of the darkest scenes have joy and laughter seeping through them. This laughter creates power in that it disrupts the negative and calls forth a change. It breaks through the dark and reveals, not only truth, but growth. Since the gothic and

the carnivalesque share elements such as the grotesque, abuse, and darkness, *Beloved* can blend these two forms together, sitting in the dark and then using the carnivalesque to pull back into the light.

This combination of elements highlights the importance of understanding the cycles of rebirth and rejuvenation within the gothic. The carnivalesque chooses to look at the combination of abuse and praise, “invit[ing] the reader to look at the object in a different light, to measure it, so to speak, for its new use” (Bakhtin 372). Neither one is overpowering the other as they are intertwined. Praise does not exist in exclusion of the abuse.

Sixo, one of the slaves who resides at Sweet Home, has the unique ability to move between the darkness and the light. Sixo was seen by Paul D as someone who was gentle, who cooked, and stood out as different from the other men. When he compared himself to Sixo, he thought “Now *there* was a man” (Morrison 22). Paul D goes through a journey to discover what manhood really is, looking at Sixo as the ideal man, even if he cannot pinpoint why.

Paul D’s exploration of Sixo and manhood continues as he looks at Sixo’s laughter. Sixo’s laughter can bring rejuvenation and joy, but it is also a revolutionary laugh, challenging those who oppress and degrade him. Sixo’s character steps away from the official order to laugh and bring happiness to himself and to those around him. While he is a slave at Sweet Home, he does not allow it to define him or hold back his personality. He lives outside the sphere of the official culture that oppresses him and the others. It is through this that he is able to laugh when he is caught by Schoolteacher and killed. Paul D comments on how he wishes he had joined Sixo in his laughter when he was going to be killed. “He couldn’t figure out why it took so long. He may as well have jumped in the fire with Sixo and they both could have had a good laugh. Surrender was bound to come anyway, why not meet it with a laugh, shouting Seven-O?” (218-

219). Paul D lost his humanity, his sense of self and personhood, while enslaved at Sweet Home, and it is through Sixo's laughter that he sees power and a voice for not just Sixo, but for the future that is promised to him through his son.

The juxtaposition of the humor behind the men trying to start a fire with so little with the horrific reality of what they are trying to accomplish creates a sort of demeaning quality towards the oppressor. The humor is ambivalent and creates power for Sixo. Historically, laughter was seen as a weapon of truth, a way to break out of oppression that "open[ed] men's eyes on that which is new, on the future" (Bakhtin 94). Sixo knows that he has lived on through the promise of his child, Seven-O. And though Paul D sees this as a surrender, it becomes something more with the promise of rebirth, a reason why Paul D could never join Sixo in his laughter at the time. He had no promise of renewal or light. He saw Sixo's death as a surrender to what was to come, instead of a freedom beyond what was being forced on him. "According to Aristotle, a child does not begin to laugh before the fortieth day after his birth; only from that moment does it become a human being" (69). The growth for Paul D is in learning how to be a man, despite what the official order has tried raise him into. He looked up to Sixo and Halle as "it was always clear to Paul D that those two were men whether Garner said so or not" (Morrison 220). Sixo, being one of the few characters who could stand outside of the limitations of the official order, did so through laughter, dance, and song. While his life might have ended, he knew that life continued on through the Thirty-Mile Woman, his child, and their freedom.

Sethe experiences her own form of life after death as she escapes Sweet Home. Her escape was not an easy one, her body in constant pain as she walks, to the point that she begins to crawl as she continues to move on. For Sethe, it felt as if "[n]othing was alive but her nipples and the little antelope" (Morrison 30). Everything about Sethe felt dead except that which would

provide life for her unborn child. She would have been willing to give up, lay down and accept her death, but the idea of her child dying because of her caused her to have the strength to move on just a little further. It is from there that Sethe meets Amy, who encourages her to become more than the dying animal she felt she was, and helps revive her by rubbing her feet and legs. As Sethe struggles from the pain, Amy tells her, "It's gonna hurt, now...Anything dead coming back to life hurts" (Morrison 35). Through the pain, Sethe began her new life, free of Sweet Home and slavery and free to care for her baby, being able to bring her to life and nurture her.

This interwoven use of abuse and rebirth can be seen with Sethe and her assault. Women in this novel are seen as a system for breeding more slaves by the white slave owners and they are seen as sexual objects by men in general. This is symbolized by how Sethe's breasts are seen and used throughout the story. The nephews of Schoolteacher assault Sethe by taking her milk from her. While Paul D can only focus on the aspect that she was beaten, Sethe focuses on the fact that they stole her milk, that which she considered to be a part of her being and her power. She does not even focus on its concept as sexual assault as much as how it stole a part of that which gave her power in being a nurturing mother. Michele Mock analyzes the symbol of ownership and facets of motherhood in her article "Spitting out the Seed: Ownership of Mother, Child, Breasts, Milk, and Voice in Toni Morrison's *Beloved*." It is not just the symbol of the breast itself, but the idea of nursing that is important. "Nursing, while symbolized by ownership, also denotes a static symbol of unity and communication" (Mock 12). Nursing is not something that was easily provided for Sethe when she was a child, she was denied her mother's nourishment so that her mother could go back and work in the field. Instead, Sethe had to survive off the scraps handed to her from a nursemaid who had to give her milk to the white children first. This shows how Sethe is outside of the established order and community. She has no

connection to her mother, for her mother was not able to provide her with the very essence of survival, which is not just a physical need, but that of connection and love. There is no nourishment or strengthening through her nursing and she is determined to be able to express her love and provide for her own children. She does not want them to go through the suffering she has. It is one of her driving forces behind making it to freedom. For her, nursing her child is her way to communicate safety and freedom. When her milk is stolen from her, she feels stripped of her freedoms and rights as a mother, she is stripped of her ability to create and nurture life. When Sethe leaves Sweet Home, it is so that she can gain her freedom to nurture and provide a connection to her children—a connection that is eventually broken again by Schoolteacher when she feels forced to kill her child in order to protect her from the horrors Sethe experienced.

These cycles of life and death, both in a literal sense and through that of the life and death of a community, are seen throughout *Beloved*, with a strong level of ambivalence. Beloved, with her own death and then rebirth, highlights how both joy and destruction can come from such a cycle. Beloved is birthed, not just through walking out of water, but through Sethe's symbolic water breaking, this symbolism recognized through an unstoppable, urgent need to urinate just as Beloved meets Sethe, Paul D, and Denver. "The water she voided was endless....like flooding the boat when Denver was born...there was no stopping water breaking from a breaking womb and there was no stopping now" (Morrison 51). This moment being one of many grotesque scenes within the gothic story, yet this one is upholding a promise of life. This use of urine and birth is a common element within the carnivalesque, with Bakhtin noting that "such debasing gestures and expressions are ambivalent, since the lower stratum is not only a bodily grave but also the area of the genital organs, the fertilizing and generating stratum. Therefore, in the images of urine and excrement is preserved the essential link with birth, fertility, renewal,

welfare” (148). Morrison has turned a gothic, grotesque concept of her time and created a symbol of rebirth. Beloved both heals and hurts Sethe throughout the story, and her experience with Sethe, in its most ambivalent sense, created the new life Sethe needed to move on past her traumas. This scene is tied closely to the carnival in a continuation of the hope that Sethe has for her new family, despite the grotesque start. Sethe sees this as a chance to heal from the hurt and give Beloved life instead of the dark haunting they claimed Beloved has done since her death.

Hunger and Feasting Mouths

Throughout *Beloved*, Morrison brings up multiple gatherings of food along with comments on swallowing, be it in nature when “the water sucked and swallowed itself” or when talking about another character interacting with each other, saying, “Watch out for her; she can give you dreams/ She chews and swallows....I drank your blood/I brought your milk” (Morrison 85, 216). While there are moments of literal consumption from a character, such as Denver mentioning having drank some of Beloved’s blood after her death while nursing, many times it is conceptual. The dark, gothic idea of being swallowed leads to fear and loss, but within *Beloved*, it often reveals truths. “The body transgresses here its own limits: it swallows, devours, rends the world apart, is enriched and grows at the world’s expense...Man’s encounter with the world in the act of eating is joyful, triumphant; he triumphs over the world, devours it without being devoured himself” (Bakhtin 218). Denver uses the description of her mother swallowing as the image for Sethe killing Beloved. Through this imagery, Denver displays how she is always afraid that Sethe could kill one of her children again. Beloved’s all-consuming nature reveals how consumed by the past Sethe and Paul D are. It is only when Beloved is gone that they are no longer consumed and able to move forward.

A community event that analyzes the concept of consumption and truths is the picnic at 124 that is hosted by Baby Suggs after Sethe and Denver first arrive. Despite the dark pull the community brings to the party, this scene shows celebration, abundance, and feasting, all of which are elements of a promised future and joy for Sethe and Baby Suggs family. It is a moment to bring the community together and to turn away and break free from the oppressive forces that have, in some way or another, brought them here. The concept of feasting and femininity are highlights beyond just carnivalesque culture. Sarah Sceats analyzes various ways in which food and the body is explored within literature and how it speaks to motherhood, femininity, and rebellion in her book *Food, Consumption and the Body in Contemporary Women's Fiction*. A mother is a symbol of life, birth, and care. What she makes, she shares with her family. The provision of food goes beyond just the family, however, and can be spread to the community at large. To nurture the community is to share in love. This is precisely what Baby Suggs does whenever she celebrates Sethe and Denver's arrival to her home. "Social eating is not simply a question of group function, but is linked with the (political) relation of individuals or groups to bigger groups and thus to society at large, and this must almost inevitably be by way of representative figures" (Sceats 165). Despite these gestures of connectedness and nurture, the community showcases their jealousy and bitterness towards Baby Suggs and her family. How the community sees Sethe is made more poignant when they refuse to help Sethe when Schoolteacher and his nephews come into town. Baby Suggs is broken after Schoolteacher's arrival, and it's not because of Sethe's actions toward Beloved, of which, Baby Suggs acts rather ambivalent about, but because of what it means about her community. Her world had been safe, but quickly shattered with the reminder that her freedom was fragile, that the world could come in and ruin her happiness.

The references to Sethe's ability to nurture are not the only reference to food and nourishment as there are many references to gaping mouths and hunger. In Lea Anderson's analysis of the use of the open mouth within the horror genre, "The Ontology of Open Mouths: The Scream and the Swallowing", she notes that within horror "the Swallowing therefore refers to the occasion in horror where the abject (which is to say, the monster) appears as a form of devouring Other" (1). Hunger comes into play many times within *Beloved*, but one that showcases such a monstrous outlook would be when Sethe, Beloved, and Denver are all isolated within 124. They all have instances of swallowing each other as they sink further and further into isolation. Denver has swallowed Beloved's blood when she was a baby and has continually shown a thirst for more attention. Sethe has swallowed Beloved as Beloved is born as a ghost. "I reach for her chewing and swallowing she touches me she knows I want to join she chews and swallows me I am gone now I am her face" (Morrison 213). Beloved herself is always hungry, constantly begging for sweets. The hunger of Denver and Sethe revolves around Beloved and their relationship with her, while Beloved's hunger is all consuming. She continues to take more without giving anything back and becomes the gothic Swallowing horror.

Beloved is a creature that is gluttonous and bottomless in her hunger. Her body is empty, as she is a spirit revived, and will continue to consume more and more. According to Denver, Beloved "invented desire" (240). She took everything she could from Sethe and still wanted more. Her devouring nature would turn her role and Sethe's around, breaking Sethe apart further than isolation ever could. "[Sethe] sat in the chair licking her lips like a chastised child while Beloved ate up her life, took it, swelled up with it, grew taller on it. And the older woman yielded it up without a murmur" (250). This is the downward movement, the upside-down, and role reversal that Bakhtin emphasizes in his writing. Sethe, in her own right, is dying and

becoming the child, powerless to Beloved and her gluttonous desire. Beloved devours Sethe's spirit, and yet it is through this devouring that Sethe is later built back up. The grotesque imagery of Beloved devouring, while drowning in the promise of death, also creates life. Beloved has a pregnant figure when the women come to rescue Sethe, showing that Beloved is not just a spirit of consumption, but can also create through her destruction.

It is through food that Denver is able to break free of the consuming nature of Beloved and embrace the community around her.

Maybe they were sorry for her. Or for Sethe. Maybe they were sorry for the years of their own disdain. Maybe they were simply nice people who could hold meanness toward each other for just so long and when trouble rode bareback among them, quickly, easily they did what they could to trip him up. In any case, the personal pride, the arrogant claim staked out at 124 seemed to them to have run its course. They whispered, naturally, wondered, shook their heads. Some even laughed outright at Denver's clothes of a hussy, but it didn't stop them caring whether she ate and it didn't stop the pleasure they took in her soft "Thank you." (249-250)

What pride once existed within the community changed when Denver was willing to ask for help. No matter how they felt about Denver's family, or the reasoning behind it, they could not let her go hungry. This also inspired a relationship between Denver and the rest of the community. The offering of food sparked conversation for Denver with others, she got to learn their names, their faces, and received more interaction from the community than she ever did beforehand. While there is laughter directed at Denver and her dress, it is not a degrading laughter, for everyone is still offering their help. None of this help would have existed if Denver did not take the first step, which still existed because of the state her family was in with food.

There is reason behind the carnival clothing Denver is wearing as she leaves 124 and ventures out on her own for food. It is symbolic of the reversal of roles, which is so prevalent within the carnivalesque. Denver not only is taking on the role of the nurturer, when she has normally taken on the role of nurtured, but she is stepping outside of the need for attention. She is growing beyond her need for attention and has become something more. And now, the role she had in protecting Beloved, has turned into her protecting her mother from Beloved.

Denver's growth through the novel becomes visible, having always had to sway between that of being a child and that of being an adult. Her growth being stunted by the trauma and haunting of Beloved, with Denver only able to grow past it as she becomes hungry for life outside of Beloved and Beloved's haunting. Morrison makes note of the child, yet adult-like images of Denver. Denver started out as a child-like character with a more adult body, where "the tears she had not shed for nine years wetting her far too womanly breasts" (Morrison 14). And yet, as she moved past Beloved's haunting there begins a shift. By the end of it, even Paul D notices a change in her.

"Well, if you want my opinion-"

"I don't," she said. "I have my own."

"You grown," he said.

"Yes, sir." (267)

She was starved for attention from her mother and from Beloved, became swallowed in her desire for it, consumed in 124. It wasn't until she was able to break free of it all through her own strength, that she truly began to grow up.

None of this would be possible without the hunger that Denver has had throughout the story. Her hunger starts as a hunger for attention. Her isolation kept her from the attention she so

craved, the isolation from her community, the death of Baby Suggs, the loss of her brothers, and her fear of her mother, kept her from truly connecting with anyone, until Beloved came around. “To go back to the original hunger was impossible. Luckily for Denver, looking was food enough to last. But to be looked at in turn was beyond appetite; it was breaking through her own skin to a place where hunger hadn’t been discovered” (Morrison 118). Beloved had always been a person that Denver had a connection to, even when she was a ghost that existed within the house. But now that Beloved had a human form, Denver has someone physical to attach to, someone who can give her attention back. This hunger kept Denver focused, allowing her to remain on the receiving end of care. She would not have to care about isolation so much because this drive for attention from specific individuals, specifically Beloved and Sethe, kept her focus. It was not until the three were connected in their isolation and they were able to pour everything into each other that would create their own destruction and breakdown. “Denver, who thought she knew all about silence, was surprised to learn hunger could do that: quiet you down and wear you out” (Morrison 239). The breakdown of Denver in this way was necessary. She could not move forward and grow unless faced with her death. Her death, in this case, is the death of who she has been. The childish soul hungry for attention but terrified of the outside world. Her hunger becomes a real, tangible hunger that forces her to save her own body, and through doing so, embrace the community around her. There is a carnivalesque promise of rejuvenation and freedom in the death of her old self, with a whole new life in front of her.

Paul D notes Sixo’s comments about the Thirty-Mile Woman and how “she gather me, man. The pieces I am, she gather them and give them back to me in all the right order” (Morrison 272-273). The carnivalesque is all about breaking down to rebuild again and here at the end of

the novel, after a gothic and terrifying breakdown of both Paul D and Sethe, are the two able to begin to build each other back up again in a new and hopeful way. The story of *Beloved* is certainly not one filled with positivity, as it has plenty of struggles and harsh realities tied around it. The freedom that Sethe experiences at the end of the story is bittersweet, having come to terms with the loss of Beloved and having no plans for the future. Her story does not end with her optimistically stepping into the future, but instead, with Paul D stepping in to help her into the next tomorrow. In many ways, however, this too, is a promising tomorrow for Sethe. She is a woman who has fought hard to be a nurturing, security providing individual to those she loves, even if that meant through their own death. She has had to care for herself, become independent and self-reliant, from a young age to her isolation from the community. To be provided with the opportunity to be nurtured instead, is an act of freedom that Sethe had never been afforded.

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CHAPTER THREE – THE POWER OF HUMOR TO FRACTURE MISCONCEPTIONS AND REGENERATE COMMUNITIES

The carnivalesque, while a theory constructed around Eurocentric ideas, is a product of broader truths and revelations built around folk culture. Michael Holquist, a professor of comparative literature at Yale who devoted many years studying the works of Mikhail Bakhtin, notes that Bakhtin’s work “is a contribution to historical poetics with theoretical implications not limited by its origin in a particular time and place” (xv). The culture of the people desires a voice and the ability to move away from seriousness—to embrace laughter—and the combination of the two is not just seen within medieval France, but throughout the world. Bakhtin himself used these ideas to create his own critiques of the Russian adaptation into Stalinist orthodoxy. Folk culture creates the ability to separate from the official image of a culture and to portray a deeper understanding of the people.

One such culture that separates from both the official image of themselves and from the official culture, is that of Indigenous Americans. Indigenous Americans have fought through oppression and constant stereotypes, but they have done so while looking at it with a lens of laughter. Michelle Raheja, in her chapter of *Visualities: Perspectives on Contemporary American Indian Film and Art* states:

But beyond their potential to reframe, reappropriate, and reimagine the tribal world joyously with hope and healing, Native American media makers on the virtual reservation also challenge and complicate representations of indigenous people by voicing dissent, offering counternarratives that reveal the often dismal and depressing aspect of inhabiting homelands that are still colonized in an otherwise seemingly postcolonial world. (Raheja 8)

Sterling Harjo and Taika Waititi's *Reservation Dogs* takes an important approach to understanding modern Indigenous lifestyles and the struggles of living on a reservation by inviting people in with laughter. The show breaks through the official culture, with its oppressive images of Indigenous Americans, and has gained a widespread audience. Not only has *Reservation Dogs* helped people reshape their image of what it means to be an Indigenous American, but it gives a voice and image to people who have not been able to see themselves in modern media.

Indigenous storytelling has become more popular, as authors such as Louise Erdrich have obtained a National Book Award, Robin Wall Kimmerer obtained several best seller awards including the *New York Times* Best Seller, and others like Sherman Alexie have had their books taught in classrooms around the United States. These stories have been the subject of many deep, critical pieces of literary analysis, allowing people to read and understand modern Indigenous culture, but there have been fewer breakthroughs through visual media forms such as in television and movies. Many scholars that analyze Indigenous media, such as Dustin Tahmahkera in his book *Tribal Television: Viewing Native People in Sitcoms* and Joanna Hearne in her book *Native Recognition: Indigenous Cinema and the Western*, create knowledgeable collections of Indigenous representations within sitcoms and films, but none of them explore a story so deeply connected and popularized as *Reservation Dogs*. As Frances Danger, a Native freelance journalist, says in an interview with PBS, "It's nothing like I've ever seen or felt before... We are so often seen as historical relics. To see us in a modern setting, dealing with real problems—but also rez problems—was so refreshing and says, 'We are here. And we are going to be represented'" (Kemp). Harjo and Waititi use visual storytelling to invite audiences from all over to come together and connect to universal ideas of coming-of-age, comedy, and family.

The official image is never one that tells the full story, only giving what the ruling order wants to be seen of their community. As Cynthia Baron notes in her article “Fourth Cinema Genre Mash-Up: Coming-of-Age Drama and Sketch Comedy in *Reservation Dogs*,” through the use of specified roles for genre and characters, American storytelling creates a “limited cultural perspective...[continuing] to traffic in *The Breakfast Club*’s prevailing tropes” (35). Instead of only following the genre of coming-of-age storytelling or comedy, *Reservation Dogs* breaks outside of basic character or genre tropes. This can be seen in *Reservation Dogs* ability to move outside of a coming-of-age story and letting their characters become complex, multifaceted people, allowing for both difficult conversations and humorous storytelling. Each character gets to step beyond a specific trope and become more complex.

In the United States, there is the official image of what the government wants to be seen of Indigenous Americans, and that of what Indigenous Americans have truly gone through. It is through understanding the depth of the marketplace and the folk culture of Indigenous Americans that the deconstruction of what is presented and the reconstruction of what actually is true can be done. Bakhtin showcases this through his analysis of Rabelais and the culture that surrounded Rabelais:

[Rabelais’s] images link the immeasurable depth and breadth of folk universalism with concreteness, individuality, and with a detailed presentation of living actuality...[his] basic goal was to destroy the official picture of events. He strove to take a new look at them, to interpret the tragedy or comedy they represented from the point of view of the laughing chorus of the marketplace. (Bakhtin 438-439)

Harjo and Waititi’s television series *Reservation Dogs* presents a culmination of the voices of the oppressed finding strength through humor and through critical analysis. Here, we continue to see

the combination of the picaresque and the carnivalesque working together to bring entertainment to the masses and breaking the official images created by the official culture while also showcasing the struggles that the Indigenous community go through on a daily basis.

The Historical Images and Continual Growth in Indigenous Media

The power of the media has helped shape the image of what the world sees of Indigenous Americans. In many ways, the American voice worked to create the perceived extinction of Indigenous communities. Many people looked at Indigenous Americans as people of the past, historical figures to study and feel sorry for, but not to see as relevant to current events, and media played an important role in this. Because people do not often get to see a world outside of their own perspective, “popular TV series play an integral role in perceptions of Indianness and shaping personal identities” (Tahmahkera 13). To see oneself as replaceable by other, non-Native actors or as something from the past, can hurt one’s personal perspective. With so many shows using images of Native Americans without real knowledge, viewing or understanding, shows that display content that cares to understand and represent appropriately are important.

The representation of Indigenous Americans in media has both catered to and created a variety of stereotypes. Though some seem like they would be beneficial, such as the wise elder, even these have created negative conceptions towards Indigenous Americans, pushing the “settler colonial insistence on the structural ‘dissolution of native societies’” (Tahmahkera 17). The white, mainstream voice, here seen as the official order, has pushed Native American voices as far back as possible, either turning them into “noble savages” or “violent barbarians.”⁹ They

⁹ Direct examples of Indigenous stereotypes and Indigenous representation in media can be found in *Seeing Red Hollywood’s Pixeled Skins*, which is an anthology of critical reviews.

reduce the many different tribes, with different cultures and ways of life, into simplified statements and images.

One of the persistent images being imposed of Indigenous Americans is that they fit only in the past. This parallels with the early U.S. desire to assimilate Indigenous Americans, forcing them to accept the U.S. way of life instead of embracing their own culture. The United States wanted to erase the Indigenous American image from the present, with “early U.S. cinema [advancing] representations of Native Americans, most often as ‘the vanishing American’” (*Seeing Red* xvii). If Indigenous Americans are only seen as historical figures, then people will stop seeing Native Americans as people who exist in a modern environment, and their current troubles will get passed over because they are only seen through the historical lens that is provided. These representations remove all acknowledgement of the displacement and forced assimilation that has taken place. By creating the image of Indigenous Americans as a vanishing culture, the media of the official culture weakens their voice, slowly allowing it to disappear.

To further silence the voices of Indigenous Americans, whenever there was an Indigenous role, they were never played by Indigenous actors. The shows only intended to display the official image of what Indigenous Americans should look and act like, without any actual research or collaboration, turning them into “dubious indigenous iterations imagined by settler producers” (Tahmahkera xiii).¹⁰ These images, well intentioned or not, help recontextualize the concept of Indigenous Americans to the rest of the world. If they see an Indigenous American on screen, or at least, someone who looks Indigenous, then how they act

¹⁰ Dustin Tahmahkera goes on to showcase the different shows, episodes, and actors that have played a role in this in his book *Tribal Television: Viewing Native People in Sitcoms*. He also explores the various stereotypes seen within the films and the harmful affect it has on Indigenous Americans and how people view them.

must be true, and without Indigenous voices to represent themselves or to be a part of the process for their representation or image, the official culture is free to make the image as they want.

The desire for visibility and representation had been so strong, that, as Sherman Alexie notes in an interview with *The Washington Post*, “any images were acceptable, as long as they were brown...So you watch cowboy movies because you at least see Indians. You still root for them and hope that this will be the movie where they finally win” (Kempley). Many films that had Indigenous representation placed Indigenous Americans in either a negative light or in one that required they be seen as an ‘Other.’ American media kept Indigenous Americans from being connected to the rest of the American culture, shutting them down and trying to destroy their existence over time. Media was a tool designed to shape the American voice as the official culture saw fit turning many white American voices as “correct” and the voices for Indigenous Americans as “other,” thus, also creating a message that is to “fear the other” (Seeing Red xvi). Many people could not experience the world outside their town and relied on media to present the world to them. Because of this, media could damage a culture or recreate it, with some people, such as Joy Harjo to “figuratively [position] television as a colonizer of indigenous imagination, as an invader that Native Peoples succumbed to but then resisted” (Tahmahkera 11). While having representation and getting to see one’s culture on the screen felt exciting, the damaging image it created still had a lasting effect on the Indigenous community.

Reservation Dogs chooses to focus on how the unofficial order can grow and share their own voice despite the oppression of the official culture. The story sets itself deeply within the unofficial culture, with only a few glimpses into what the official culture looks like, switching the power dynamic by giving the official culture a small voice and the unofficial culture the main point of view. Harjo and Waititi made sure every aspect of their storytelling remained firmly

within Indigenous culture, with the show having an all-Indigenous crew, writer's room, and regular cast. The importance of this is shown through UCLA's diversity report, as well as data from the writer's guild that show "a lack of representation and the portrayal of Indigenous stereotypes in media have undermined and damaged Native culture and heritage" (Kemp). Understanding the casting of the show, and its reflection on the unofficial culture, is just as important as the storytelling itself. Instead of relying on conventional storytelling ideas, the story demands to be heard as the voice of Indigenous Americans. It does not shy from the hardships of Indigenous Americans, showcasing their struggles and allowing people to see them outside of the conventional light.

Despite the negativity and degradation towards Indigenous Americans, humor has been an integral part of their culture and storytelling. A young student of an Indigenous improv group called Arts AlterNative states it best when she says "I come from a tradition where even in ceremony, where that is the most crucial, most serious part of our lives, there's joke telling. There's people playing the trickster, um, showing their comic wit, and I—I think that that is distinctly Native because I would not have that in a Catholic church or a Protestant church" (*Redskins, Tricksters and Puppy Stew* 45:40 - 46:10). Indigenous humor is often regenerative, focusing on both a degrading and rebuilding aspect to the Indigenous image and to life. It aligns itself with carnivalesque laughter, where "debasement and interment are reflected in carnival uncrownings, related to blows and abuse. The king's attributes are turned upside down in the clown; he is king of a world 'turned inside out'" (Bakhtin 370). *Reservation Dogs* is no exception to this, as the degrading humor is pointed at everyone. Everyone is made fun of, yet the humor also presents a chance for growth and conversation. Dallas Goldtooth, the actor for William Knifeman, a spirit guide for various characters within *Reservation Dogs*, states that "I

think that's—like, the type of comedy I like to do is really a type of comedy where nothing really is sacred, that humor is a vehicle for us to offer social critique about—not only about the world but also how we interact with the world” (“Joyful Protests and Funny Rituals”). Indigenous humor is not afraid to deconstruct anything and create something better out of it. It blends perfectly into carnivalesque humor, creating a powerful voice in a world that has tried to silence it. It invites the world to laugh with Indigenous Americans as they open the eyes of the world to their issues and pains. Katelyn Copage makes note in her article “The Transformative Spirit of Indigenous Humor: *Redskins, Tricksters and Puppy Stew*” how “once permission to laugh at these topics/issues has been granted, at an appropriate time and place because it is not always appropriate to laugh, there is truly incredible healing space created” (190). Instead of closing off from others, Indigenous humor invites everyone in with ambivalent laughter. It shows that there is a chance for everyone to laugh together while creating a space of growth and life.

Indigenous humor has many ties to trickster narratives, creating a wide variety of characteristics that range from lightly humorous to chaos and abuse. Their nature is reflected in the carnivalesque through their abuses and ambivalence, as both are willing to mock and laugh at all people, “calling on communities to rectify their hypocrisies, or making life miserable for oppressors whose inhumanity makes them deserving of retribution” (Howe, Markowitz, and Cummings xiii). Both the carnivalesque and Indigenous humor move away from an official culture, combating it through humorous critique that still promises growth and changes.

Reservation Dogs plays with this concept by using picaresque main characters, who start their narrative by stealing a truck full of hot chips, and their coming-of-age journey as they learn and heal from their traumas. These teenagers' shenanigans continue to the end of the story, with them trying to pull a heist and kidnap a person from a mental health hospital, though they do so with

better intentions than how the story started. The trickster humor showcases the growth each of these characters have done, while not dismissing humor and mischievous behaviors as childish.

Subverting Expectations and Mocking Stereotypes

While Indigenous communities have been harmed by the stereotyped images of them portrayed by many forms of popular media, Indigenous media has turned these images around and made them into their own weapon. Contemporary Indigenous American film directors have noted the importance of their relationships with the visual archives of popular images of Indigenous Americans, appropriating and renarrating these images in their films in ways that strengthen connections to ancestral homelands and reassert Indigenous ownership of images through processes of visual repatriation (Hearne 3).

Instead of trying to remove the images made of Indigenous Americans completely, Indigenous media has repurposed the images to gain back their voice and power. They take an expectation that has been established and turn it upside down. This ability to turn expectations on its head is in line with the carnivalesque, for the carnivalesque's concept of downward movement and uncrowning becomes regenerative, creating a positive image. Subverting expectations takes previously held ideas, thrusts them down, and conceives a new image through comedy, laughing at and mocking the previously held expectations and stereotypes often seen of Indigenous Americans. *Reservation Dogs* presents these concepts in a way that turns them on their head, allowing their audience to question their once held beliefs.

William Knifeman, a character with powerful, stereotypical images, is a blatant subversion of viewers' expectations when imagining ancestor spirits for Indigenous Americans, allowing them to be seen as real and human. *Reservation Dogs* illustrates the importance in using

Knifeman as a reoccurring, humorous character because of how the world views Indigenous Americans and their spiritual practices. Instead of expressing himself as “serious and stoic,” he is designed to help bring the audience in, to “bake into the show permission to laugh with [Indigenous Americans]” (Gross). He is initially presented exactly as a general viewer would imagine the spiritual, wise ancestor: riding in on a horse through the mist, ready to talk to the unconscious Bear, one of our main teenage protagonists, and impart wisdom. Knifeman creates the image of someone who will bring insight and guidance to Bear during his pivotal coming-of-age. However, this image is quickly transformed as Knifeman continues to speak, rambling through his introduction and revealing that he did not get to fight in any impressive battle, but instead died because his horse stepped into a gopher hole. The story of his death is less exciting and brave than what is expected, and his story continues to become less serious as he ends some of his rambling with how the spirit world “is cold. My nipples are always hard. I’m always hungry” (“F*ckin’ Rez Dogs” 15:04). The contrast between this comment about the spirit world and him saying how he’s coming to guide lost souls instantly breaks down the stereotype often presented. This moment jerks the audience away from their previously held conception of what they were expecting from Knifeman, only to be jerked back into it, because despite these shocking statements, Knifeman swings back into some wise comments. He states how he and the people during his time “gave everything. We died for our people. We died for our land. What are you going to do? What are you going to fight for?” (“F*ckin’ Rez Dogs” 15:26). Just as the audience gets back into the comfortable image they are used to experiencing, Knifeman is immediately put back into a scene of ridicule as, when he tries to leave, his horse sits down and refuses to move.

Knifeman's introduction is not the only time he is seen in ridiculous positions, either, as the very next episode he is calling out to Bear while behind a dumpster, relieving himself. The act of urination or defecation is commonly used as a form of grotesque regeneration within the carnivalesque, an element that is also explored for its connection to rebirth in *Beloved*, are also seen with Knifeman during the series, linking the act of urination and defecation to the same acts of eating, death, copulation, and childbirth, with them all representing "the ever unfinished, ever creating body" (Bakhtin 26). Urination and defecation are connected to death, or of expelling out of the body and into the earth. It becomes carnivalesque when tied to rebirth or to giving life, seen in these scenes as Knifeman is imparting forms of wisdom to Bear, helping him grow and transform into a young adult. Not only does this encourage the audience to laugh at the image before them, but it gives them a chance to see that the image of the wise ancestor is just that, an image. It is a short moment in the full spectrum of their life, and that there is more to a person than just that moment.

Throughout the show, coinciding with the comedic moments, Knifeman offers true wisdom, helping guide Bear on his journey without directly telling him what to do. He allows Bear to make his own choices and learn from them, guiding him with questions to ask himself. When Bear asks him for a direct piece of advice, Knifeman only responds with "I don't—I don't got any answers, only questions" ("Saturday" 2:10). And yet, despite this subversion, Bear takes Knifeman seriously and considers him worthy of respect. Bear does not question that this is an ancestor that he must listen to and when he mentions Knifeman to his friends, saying that they can't leave the reservation to go to California just yet because, according to Knifeman, they have unfinished business, most of his friends agree that they need to honor Knifeman as their ancestor and listen to what he has to say. These moments of true advice and wisdom are important parts to

Knifeman's character. While the stereotyped image of Knifeman is torn down with humor, he is also rebuilt. Despite his flaws and lack of stoicism, he is still someone worthy of respect and can still impart wisdom to others. Knifeman is a breakdown of the serious tones behind the official image of what people expect those who can guide others to look and act like. Knifeman creates an important, carnivalesque message on how important change and actions can be accomplished without just stoicism, but with laughter and joy.

William Knifeman's personality is not the only part of him that is mocked, but the concept of spiritual ceremonies and their sacredness is also mocked. Willie Jack, a friend in the Reservation Dog group, believes she has set a curse on her friends due to her attempt at cursing a rival named Jackie with "bad medicine." It takes multiple episodes for Willie Jack to be able to break the curse, as she runs to different parts of the reservation, working with others and collecting items. There is a buildup to the breaking of the curse, with Brownie (Elora's marijuana-loving uncle) who is convinced he is a medicine man, leading Willie Jack and Cheese in a prayer to begin the ritual to break the curse. The prayer sounds proper up until he begins to use the prayer to try and work through his issues with his friend Bucky, who is also there to help remove the curse. Their back-and-forth prayers break the seriousness of the ritual to focus on personal problems, and there is humor in their weak attempts to be subtle about who they are talking about. This moment of humor and disrupted expectations, the breaking of a sacred moment, is considered grotesque realism within the carnivalesque, where there is "the lowering of all that is high, spiritual, ideal, [and] abstract" in order to connect to the people and bring "indissoluble unity" (Bakhtin 19-20). By bringing down the sacred to a personal, real level, there is healing. The two friends would not get along until this moment, highlighting the healing nature that the Reservation Dogs have on their community. Not only is Willie Jack healing her

friends and beginning a connection between the Reservation Dogs and the NDN Mafia, but she is healing the pains of past generations.

When the curse is being lifted by Brownie and Bucky the song they choose to sing for the sacred ritual is “Free Fallin’” by Tom Petty. This song pulls the sacred ceremony image that people imagine with Indigenous rituals and makes it more light-hearted. This scene also mocks the concept of the song needing to be “old,” images of ancient Native chanting or songs in their native language coming to mind, showcased when William Knifeman joins in the singing with his chanting, with Cheese stating that the song isn’t even that old. The song is even used later, when the Reservation Dogs finally go to the beach in California to let go of their pain and to create a form of closure and connection to their old friend, Daniel. Despite these scenes mocking the seriousness of ceremonies, they also create a message of togetherness and healing.

Knifeman’s character almost creates a serious tone for the curse breaking scene again, standing over the ritual and recreating the image of a sacred spirit watching over “this most sacred of ceremonies” and trying to speak in a more serious, spiritual way, but it is turned on its head again when he inserts words such as “bastards” and “fuckers” and when Brownie translates it to the kids as “stop being shitasses” (“Run” 21:05). Everything about this scene could produce seriousness, and yet everything that could be serious gets laughed at and demystified, turning it from something that is normally considered magical and reverent into something that feels real.

The mocking of the spirit and the stereotypes that are prevalent in American culture continue with the use of the “Medicine Man” machine. It is first seen with Jackie when she and Elora are traveling to California. As they walk into a convenience store, there is a fortune telling “medicine man” machine there to give out parcels of wisdom for a price. His outfit and voice are

the exact same as William Knifeman's, connecting the two characters as they play on the same stereotype. His initial wisdom sounds vague, connecting with animals and nature as is often the stereotyped image, yet he continues with grotesque, out of place "wisdom" about how two dogs stuck together will give you pinkeye. Here, the mystical medicine man that is represented by such machines is mocked and made fun of by the show. And yet, at the end of the message, an actual piece of advice comes through for Jackie, telling her "Your medicine has grown weak. You must turn away from the path you are on" ("The Curse" 3:28). This message not only foreshadows the problems with the journey both Jackie and Elora will experience as they try to go to California, but it also foreshadows the growth they need to experience back on the reservation.

Bear also finds the "medicine man" fortune telling machine and gets mixed advice from it as well. This is during a time when the Reservation Dogs are struggling as a friend group, not connecting and fighting to stay together. After they read a letter from Daniel during his freshman year, they decide to complete his wish of visiting California, this time not in an attempt to run away from the reservation, but to honor their friend before going back home. Advice is mixed from both real advice and ridiculous, continuing to mock the stereotypes around Indigenous sayings and their actual meanings. While the machine starts his message with a mix of real and ridiculous pieces of wisdom, it then gives the message, "The path that you are on is unsure. You must pave new ways. Or you'll probably die" ("I Still Believe" 9:47). The expectation of the fortune telling machine to offer real advice, or at least some kind of vague piece of wisdom, is a jumbled mess of something real with something ridiculous. It throws the expectations of the audience around to showcase how many versions of what is seen or experienced of Native Americans in media only present half-truths.

The story also turns the idea of a coming-of-age story around. Many children, as they grow, gain a level of independence from their families. They want to move out and become a person outside of their initial community. *Reservation Dogs* makes no exception to this as the story begins, with Elora, Willie Jack, Cheese, and Bear all wanting to leave the reservation and travel to California. Elora comments on how the reservation is “why Daniel is gone. ‘Cause this place killed him...I’m not letting it kill me. I’m getting the fuck out with or without y’all” (“F*ckin’ Rez Dogs 21:28). The reservation is a place of loss and lost hope for these four. They see no future taking place there and want to move out into the rest of the world. This representation of the reservation is not far off the image many people have of reservation life. Raheja describes how the reservation “is imagined in popular culture to be a space of dysfunction and defeat. It is a place the nation needs to continually invoke as a metaphor of its own imagined triumph and Native American defeat” (Raheja 7).¹¹ The audience can see early on why the four teenagers might want to leave such a place and, despite the negative images that surround the reservation, *Reservation Dogs* slowly changes the perspective of the place, creating a place of healing that stems partially from the very four teenagers wanting to leave. This concept of “death as renewal” is deeply rooted within the grotesque imagery of the carnivalesque (Bakhtin 51). The carnivalesque connects to the concept that from death, life is built. For *Reservation Dogs*, it is through the death of Daniel that Bear, Elora, Willie Jack, and Cheese go on a journey of healing that prompts them to also find and make connections within the reservation. It is then through those connections that healing and rejuvenation finds its way to their elders, who are also learning to have new life after the death of their friend Cookie, who

¹¹ Raheja also analyzes the concept of virtual reservations and media reservations, which makes another comparison for official and unofficial voices. The virtual reservations as spaces for Indigenous voices to be heard is an important one to help understand Indigenous representation in media.

was also Elora's mother. As the story goes on, each character decides to stay for one reason or another. They decide that their community, family, and friends are the people they want to stay with. This reversal analyzes the idea of independence and what it means to become an adult. For the Reservation Dogs, they are trying to become independent and move away in order to run away from their home and from the tragedies they experienced but, as they grow older, they learn how important their community and their circle of friends really are, and the power that comes from creating healing within their community. Though Elora does move to a college outside of the reservation, the show allows the audience to see how growth and healing are not just one path, but one of many, with no one path being the correct way for people to grow.

The Inversion of Power

The inversion of power, an element used in the carnivalesque to showcase a movement from the top to the bottom, also reflects an image of birth from death—as there are movements downward, there are also movements up, allowing those who are at the bottom to rise. Through the carnivalesque, debasement is used for grotesque realism so “all that is sacred and exalted is rethought on the level of the material bodily stratum or else combined and mixed with its images” (Bakhtin 370). These images are used within *Reservation Dogs* to question the power structures that are placed and to strengthen the voices of those who have been shut down. They are not afraid to mock both sides of the inverted power structure, but they use it to give way to ideas outside of the expected and to ask questions about why power structures and perspectives are set the way they are.

One of the characters that is in a position of power, Officer Big Hill, is constantly degraded by others, both in his community and outside of it. The initial scene that introduces Big

is when the Reservation Dogs are stealing the chips truck. As they drive loudly by, with the ramp in the back of the truck scraping against the road, Big is watching a video from his phone about a conspiracy of the Kennedy assassination. He does not attempt to pay attention to his surroundings and the kids escape easily. The Reservation Dogs are shown to make fun of him moments later when they have a video project for school and film his police car saying, “He thinks he’s a badass but he ain’t shit” (“F*ckin’ Rez Dogs” 5:57). They continue to disrespect him by giving him the middle finger. Big continues to be unaware as he does not easily connect that Bear, Elora, Cheese, and Willie Jack are the ones who have been stealing from the reservation. Big is supposed to have a role of power, and yet, he is not seen as an authority figure by many of the people in the story. This includes at his place of work, where the other police officers make fun of Big and his beliefs. Despite this, he is shown to have a good heart, interacting with his community, and despite people not respecting his official role in the community, they respect him as a person.

Later, Big has a carnivalesque experience with Kenny Boy, a man known for selling and using various drugs, when he accidentally takes LSD and must travel through the high. Kenny Boy drinks one of the sodas that is laced with LSD as well and follows him to try and guide him through the experience. They are brought together to be on equal grounds, with no one above the other. If Kenny Boy was not on LSD, he would be above Big since he would be easily guiding him through the experience but instead, they are both mentally on the same level. This is where healing begins for Big. His walls are forced to be brought down and he has to evaluate what he has been trying to hold back from himself. He consistently tries to remind himself that he’s a good person, but when he sees Deer Lady, he becomes scared and runs away from her. Deer Lady has been a reoccurring presence in Big’s life, as she protected him when he was a child at a

store that was getting robbed. She had told him then that if he was good, he wouldn't have to worry about her like the other men she met did. Later, it is revealed that Big has blamed himself for the death of Elora's mother, tying into his fear of seeing the Deer Lady again. Through the culmination of dealing with the high of the drugs and fighting with a cult called Midstreamers, a group of powerful, white men who believe themselves to rightfully own Indigenous land, both Big and Kenny Boy end up blindfolded and tied to a tree, and Big finally admits to his feelings of guilt, stating "I'm not a good man, Kenny Boy" ("This Is Where the Plot Thickens" 22:35). This moment is when Big is at his lowest—he has been knocked down both mentally and physically and is able to finally address how he is feeling. Big's confession is given to one who nobody in the community would expect healing or growth from, but for Big, Kenny Boy is the one who sees him as an equal, calling him brother throughout their journey, and has had his back, no questions asked. This is where Big's healing can truly begin, and he can rise back up, for it is through these "carnival uncrownings" where Big's downward movements "are understood anew and merged in one single movement directed into the depths of the earth, the depths of the body, in which 'the treasures and most wonderful things lie hidden'" (Bakhtin 370-371). This moment, the most wonderful thing Big can find is true forgiveness, which he discovers in Kenny Boy, Deer Lady, and Cookie. When Deer Lady says that Cookie told her they were in trouble and gives Big a hug instead of harming him, there is forgiveness and a chance to grow. Because Deer Lady leaves Kenny Boy in good graces after he admits that he hasn't been good, though he's trying, Big learns that his fears of being bad due to his inadvertent relation to Cookie's death are not necessary. He can continue to strive for goodness and that it is the continual fight for good that helps him rise in power.

Not only is Big going through a carnivalesque experience, but the show also uses this time to address more political issues by following the carnivalesque form of satire. The owl statue is a direct reference to Bohemian Grove, a real group that exists in California that is filled with rich men in powerful positions. When the show reveals that the group includes the governor of Oklahoma, it can be seen as a dig at Governor Stitt, not just any man in power in Oklahoma. Governor Stitt had vetoed almost every bill that was endorsed by the tribes of Oklahoma, straining relationships with tribal leaders, and making it to where even “fellow Republicans are scratching their heads at Stitt’s continued hostility toward the tribes” (Murphy). The rituals the Midstreamers go through, as well as the costumes that include giant catfish heads, create a mockery of these people who are supposed to be in positions of power. Instead of being powerful, these men are seen as ridiculous and easily surrender to Big as soon as he is freed. Big, who had been mocked and seen as a less than competent officer, suddenly becomes praised and powerful as he interrupts the ceremony and helps arrest all the men involved. Despite his rise, there is still a jab at Big as, even though the Midstreamers were arrested for assault, which is announced in passing by the news station, the news station places more emphasis on the fact that the Midstreamers were also arrested for “fornicating with catfish, which surely is a great crime” (“This is Where the Plot Thickens” 26:20). This commentary creates a continued downplay of the position Big holds, but it is less important than the rise of respect Big got back for himself.

Another character to experience a change in power is Brownie, who had a large reputation as a strong fighter. After Cookie’s death, however, he has become a recluse, not going out to see his friends or be a part of the reservation community. When the Reservation Dogs come to Brownie for guidance and mentorship on how to fight, he initially brushes them off. As they try to call him out on some of his behaviors, he continues to wave them away, saying “I

don't have to listen to you. And you're all just kids. I don't like kids. Leave me alone" ("Uncle Brownie" 8:28). However, after a moment where he connects with Elora over Cookie, he promises to help them as they help him sell his weed, which has him going throughout town and connecting with people he had not seen in a long time. By the end of the episode, he admits to being ashamed to show his face to the town. Despite this, he is welcomed back amongst his friends with open arms and is then seen among the community more often, reconnecting with others and talking with the Reservation Dogs.

Brownie along with the other elders learn to heal from their grief and loss in tandem with Elora, Bear, Cheese, and Willie Jack. The elders have all experienced a death in their circle, just as the Reservation Dogs have. Elora's mother had a place in all of their lives, and their lives after her death were shaped in guilt, sadness, and loss. When Elora's aunt Teenie shows up to the reservation after a long period of time and talks to Big, she asks:

"Like, uh, what if we all would've come together after Cookie died?"

"No one really hung out after that. Really ended everything" ("Mabel" 19:19).

As the story continues, and the Reservation Dogs learn to heal from their trauma, so too do the elders of their community. They don't do it in isolation, instead leaning on each other and learning from the Reservation Dogs and their growth.

The cycle of growth and healing continues as Brownie and the other elder men are brought together to help Cheese, who is fighting through his own isolation and depression. Each man, Bucky, Brownie, and Big, find moments to connect with Cheese and allow him to find different ways to heal, be it through connecting to nature, laughing, talking about his problems, or storytelling. Near the end of their day together, Cheese has them all talking about their feelings, with each man opening up and talking about their pain and healing through their

connections. While Cheese decides to stop avoiding his friends, it feels as if Cheese has done more for the three men than they have for Cheese. In this time, he has given the three men a space to communicate, let their emotions free, and help Cheese see how their pain has affected them. Their shared experience and healing help show Cheese the importance of his friends, as these three men lean on each other for support through their pain. In this moment, Cheese is an equal to his elders, with each learning from the other, instead of the elders being the only ones in power.

Reservation Dogs has gone on to gain many awards, reaching a broad audience that has been able to connect to the story for many different reasons. This story creates a level of authenticity that speaks to its audience, all given through the ability to laugh together.

The story circles around the themes of life and death, both beginning and ending with a death, yet continuing the promise of growth and healing. The promise of new life does not just reside within Harjo and Waititi's storytelling, but in the American culture of storytelling, as Abbey White notes within her article "For Sterlin Harjo, the End of 'Reservation Dogs' was Always Going to Be About Community," with Harjo's farewell to the series offering "a chance to make more space for other Native artists to begin their own great stories." With *Reservation Dogs* story ending on such a well perceived note, the excitement for Indigenous media can continue on, continuing from the hope permeated *Reservation Dogs* and its story.

The humor within *Reservation Dogs* is not meant to just degrade, but to lift back up. The laughter and humor break down the walls that have been built and allow for a clearer image of what truly exists. These comedic moments "deconstruct dominant-culture narratives" while the "coming-of-age stories humanize the Indigenous characters, who grapple with compelling

questions about what is important in life” (32). It promises healing and growth, not just through deconstruction, but by inviting people to come together and learn as a collective, breaking old concepts and structures to create one that has depth. Through the voices brought together by Harjo and Waititi’s creation, a new life with a new, visual understanding of what the struggles of the Indigenous community has experience.

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CODA – REGENERATING AMERICAN COMEDY

The official American culture is rooted in seriousness, constantly and desperately trying to prove itself as valid to the rest of the world. This idea has been phrased multiple times within this thesis because, when we look at our modern society, we see this overwhelming need to be serious about important topics. We strive to take important things seriously and leave humor to the frivolities of life. When creating satire, it is made within a negative perspective, pushing down and shutting out other voices.

Despite this, just as seen within *Beloved*, rejuvenating laughter still attempts to shine through the dark, serious tones of our official culture. The carnivalesque promises positivity and rebirth from such negativity. It promises the chance to heal instead of continuing a cycle of harm. When satire only degrades, it promises the continuation of the harsh cycle of the official culture, ruling through another name.

When I was first introduced to the carnivalesque, it did not seem like it had much application to any other form of media. It felt niche, an unobtainable kind of humor that is not reflected in our modern culture. Most of the humor I viewed or read seemed absurdist or surreal in nature, while mockery was an overexaggerated form of degradation that had no positivity. If someone laughed, it meant that they were not fully grasping the severity of a situation. If I wanted to relax, I would read or watch a comedy.

As time continued on, I could not let go of the idea of the carnivalesque. As someone often surrounded by seriousness, the concept was refreshing. And once I returned to pursue my master's degree, I began to notice moments of carnivalesque humor and rejuvenation within many of the stories read in class, noting how these moments enhanced the themes and narratives within. When these carnivalesque elements were discussed, it was disappointing to see them

dismissed by colleagues as they stressed the importance of seriousness around such themes and topics. Satire was analyzed by others as a form of punching down, and while my colleagues provided excellent examples of such degrading satire, I could not let go of the optimistic, healing qualities of the carnivalesque. The idea that seriousness did not have to be the default or only part to understanding and conversing on important topics stood firm in my mind.

This thesis was born on the hope that a light could be brought to an old idea that laughter and critique did not just have to bring down but can also hold equal and ambivalent—that comedic tones could be seen as just as important as the serious ones. Laughter can be healing, laughter can be important, and this thesis hopes to promote the continued research and production of these tones within comedy, for the ideals of the carnivalesque produce the image that life is beyond just stoicism and highlights the importance of laughter, not in spite of, but in tandem with the important, the critical, and even the serious.