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UNIVERSITY OF OKLAHOMA

GRADUATE COLLEGE

# A DISARMING LAUGHTER: THE ROLE OF HUMOR IN TRIBAL CULTURES AN EXAMINATION OF HUMOR IN CONTEMPORARY NATIVE AMERICAN LITERATURE AND ART

A Dissertation

SUBMITTED TO THE GRADUATE FACULTY

in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the

degree of

Doctor of Philosophy

By

Sally L. A. Emmons
Norman, Oklahoma
2000

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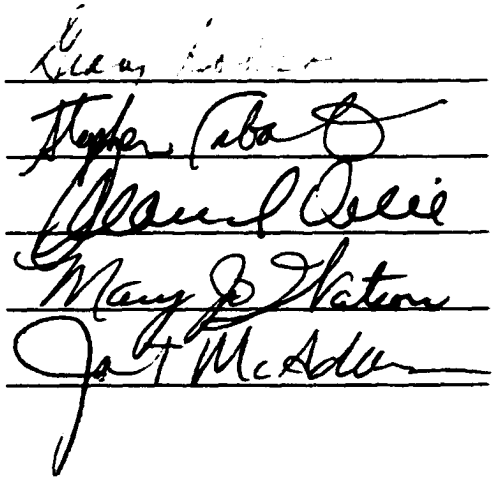
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A DISARMING LAUGHTER: THE ROLE OF HUMOR IN TRIBAL CULTURES
AN EXAMINATION OF HUMOR IN CONTEMPORARY
NATIVE AMERICAN LITERATURE AND ART

A Dissertation APPROVED FOR THE
DEPARTMENT OF ENGLISH

BY



## Dedication

*To Mom and Dad*

*Words alone cannot adequately express my sincere gratitude. Without your support, I never would have reached this point. You were there at the start that hot August day eight years ago, and drove nearly 800 miles in one day for the finish. Thank you for inspiring me.*

## Acknowledgments

I cannot complete this project without acknowledging the efforts of the professors who have encouraged, guided, and, when necessary, prodded me over the past few years:

> To Janet McAdams and Mary Jo Watson, you are powerful role models to female graduate students who often feel out-numbered. Janet, your enthusiastic support and fresh ideas were always appreciated. Mary Jo, I will always thank you for introducing me to the intricacy and beauty of art.
> To Steve Tabachnick, thank you for taking a chance on a subject outside of your field of study. A special thank you for all of your supportive words and ideas sent via e-mail. On many days your ideas alone encouraged me to continue.
> To Alan Velie, you were the first to encourage me to pursue my dreams when I first arrived in Norman, for which I will always be thankful.

Last but not least, a heartfelt thank you to Geary Hobson, whose near-perfect memory continues to astound me. You not only always answer my questions, you also know of several supplemental sources--including their publishers, editors, and specific page numbers--that I can turn to for information. Over the years, you have served as a mentor, a guide, an editor, and a friend. In my lifetime, if I only receive half of the esteem which your students and colleagues have for you, I will be a very lucky woman.

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## ABSTRACT

Non-Indians have long considered Indian people to possess little or no sense of humor because they trustingly accept prevailing stereotypes. This dissertation dispels this assumption by showing that humor has served, and continues to serve, an important role in tribal cultures, oftentimes assuming even a sacred position within ceremonials. It begins by examining some of the varied roles which humor played in traditional tribal cultures---the widespread Trickster tradition, clown societies of the Pueblo tribes, Cherokee Booger Dancing, the Potlatch ceremonies of Northwest Coast peoples---and then shows how this tradition carried on into the early twentieth century, and continues in the present-day. After a close analysis of early humorists, such as Alexander Posey [Creek], Will Rogers [Cherokee] and Dan Madrano [Caddo], this study segues into a discussion of how and why humor functions in contemporary Indian Country, with special attention paid to humor's important place in literature, art, music, cartoons, Reservation jokes, and storytelling. The examples presented are not intended to be conclusive but, rather, to serve as a foundation for understanding the various roles which humor plays in present-day Native America, all with an emphasis upon how this practice is rooted in tribal traditions.

## Introduction

Humor is alive and strong in Indian country, whether it be found in conversations taking place on reservations or in other Indian communities, in urban environments such as Los Angeles or Oklahoma City, or in rural settings stretching across the United States. Interestingly, however, much of the American public conceives of, and represents, Indian people as being humorless, in large part, it would appear, because of prevailing stereotypes which have represented Native Americans as being dry, stoic, and overly reserved for hundreds of years. Despite these conventional notions, American Indians have maintained humor and a sense of play in many of their traditional practices, and certainly in their daily conversations, and in their literature and art as well. In fact, I believe that tribal cultures are rooted in a certain comedic element, whether it be in the Booger Dancing of the Cherokees, the drama of the Pueblo Koshares, the False Face masks of the Iroquois, or the Potlatch ceremonies of the Pacific Northwest Coast peoples (only to name a few). Hence, the humorous elements which are seen in contemporary Indian life, including the often boisterous 49 songs, biting reservation jokes, and satire, irony and sense of play in modern Native American literature and art, is in many ways a reflection, and extension, of cultural practices.

According to the *Oxford English Dictionary*, "humor is that quality of action, speech, or writing which excites amusement." Humor always involves amusement, even though this amusement may be derived from something which causes discomfort in the recipient of the humorous moment, but it does not always result in physical laughter. Roger Scruton explains that humor has intentionality and that laughter, amusement and

humor all designate a single state of mind. "Laughter is [humor's] full expression, amusement its essence, and humor its intentional object" (Morreall 157). Sigmund Freud argues that "humor has in it a *liberating* element...It refuses to be hurt by the arrows of reality or to be compelled to suffer. It insists that it is impervious to wounds dealt by the outside world, in fact, that these are merely occasions for affording it pleasure (Morreall 113). Defining humor and cataloguing examples of different types of humor is a highly debated and difficult process among scholars. Because my intention is to examine how and why humor operates in contemporary Indian Country, I choose to omit an in-depth analysis of the different definitions of humor. As such, I approach humor with the most basic of definitions: that which amuses. Students interested in theories of humor will find that John Morreall's *The Philosophy of Laughter and Humor* and *Taking Laughter Seriously*, Henri Bergson's *Laughter: An Essay on the Meaning of the Comic*, and Sigmund Freud's *Jokes and their Relation to the Unconscious* are good resources and will provide an excellent basis for beginning to understand theories of humor in its many forms. While I make mention of these and other scholars, my overall goal here is to understand how traditional tribal cultures and Indian people viewed, and view, humor, and how this world view functions in contemporary works.

I first became interested in the study of humor as it relates to Native American literature and art after watching Sherman Alexie's film adaptation of some stories from *The Lone Ranger and Tonto Fistfight in Heaven*. Renamed *Smoke Signals*, Alexie's film explores the lives of Victor Joseph and Thomas Builds-the-Fire, two young Coeur d'Alene men, who begin to discover who they are as they leave the Coeur d'Alene Reservation in

search of the ashes of Victor's recently deceased father. Their reflections and experiences are often thought-provoking and sobering, yet they are also laugh-out-loud funny. Since I was at the time on the verge of taking my General Exam, I was not feeling especially humorous or light-hearted, yet this film succeeded in making me laugh repeatedly. Moreover, it sparked my interest as I began to wonder why so many people still continue to regard Indian people as being quiet and serious when so much of their contemporary literature and art is actually so comedic.[1] Such began the first ruminations of this current project.

My intention in this study is to offer an analysis of the many forms of humor which are evident in both contemporary Native American literature and art[2]. Because Native American Studies experienced a Renaissance in the twentieth century which has led to significant contributions to both the literary and art worlds, a trend which promises to continue in the twenty-first century, I am selective in the examples which I choose to include. I do not intend for this study to be exhaustive of the subject of humor as it relates to the works of American Indian people, but rather as offering a critical framework by which other texts and examples can then be studied. In addition, while I envision this study to be inter-disciplinary, including literature, art, music, cartoons and reservation

---

[1]I use the term "comic" loosely here to include not only the playfulness and jokesterism in this literature and art, but also the more serious forms of humor which undermine traditional stereotypes of Indian people and serve as culture critique.

[2]Because of the wealth of sources available, I am necessarily limiting myself only to the literature and art of native people in the United States. This by no means is meant to devalue the contributions of native writers and artists living in Canada and Mexico whose borders are arbitrary with America's, and which were originally unrecognized by native peoples who crossed them freely.

jokes in its analysis, my background is rooted in literature; thus, it may at times seem as if my analysis is weighted more towards the literature than these other forms.

Whenever possible, I use native voices to define humor, finding that this approach more accurately relates the significance of the subject of "play" to the lives of native peoples, especially as it relates to traditional tribal practices. Nevertheless, at times I do of necessity refer to conventional theoretical paradigms of humor by non-Indian scholars in order to provide readers with a better understanding of how, and why, humor may be operating in a specific text, piece of art, song lyric, or reservation joke. Because there are fundamental differences between the uses of humor among Native Americans, especially in traditional tribal cultures, and Western humor, it is problematic to invoke the theories of these non-Indian theorists whose work focuses upon a universal humor. These theories are only helpful in that they show how contemporary Native Americans tap into this universal humor. For a more complete and accurate picture of the specialized roles which humor served and serves in native societies, we must instead rely upon information describing how humor functioned in traditional tribal cultures, as well as listen to the voices of contemporary Indian people.

Since the role of humor and its relation to traditional cultural practices is always foremost in my mind, Chapter I begins with an examination of how humor, comedy and play are integral components of tribal living. Although it would be an impracticality for this project to examine every individual tribe's use of comedic elements in its ceremonies and practices, I will offer some examples in order to show that humor was, and is, an important part of tribal life. This information will provide a crucial basis for the rest of

this text. Foremost in subsequent chapters is an illustration of how many contemporary native writers and artists continue their cultural traditions by incorporating humor into their works, a strong indication of the significant role that humor played in traditional tribal living, and continues to play in the present-day.

Chapter 2 examines some early humorous voices in Native American literature: Creek writer Alexander Posey, well-known Cherokee humorist, Will Rogers, and Dan Madrano [Caddo] whose *Heap Big Laugh* catalogues the humorous stories and jokes which his son loved hearing while growing up. This chapter provides an important segue between Chapter 1, which focuses upon traditional practices, and Chapter 3, which moves the discussion to the contemporary. Significantly, because these writers lived in the early twentieth century in a time when native cultures were undergoing transition due to increasing contact with non-Indians, their writings show what this transitional period was like, reveal concerns which they had regarding this transitional period, and, importantly, show that humor remained an important feature of native cultures throughout this time and into the future.

While Chapter I introduces Tricksters as a widespread comedic archetype in many tribes, Chapter 3, titled "Trickster as Culture Bearer, Comic Relief, and All Around Scoundrel," focuses exclusively upon how Trickster roles are being continued in contemporary native writing and artwork. Although the Trickster figure is widely incorporated into many modern texts, I focus my discussion upon the literary works of Louise Erdrich [Chippewa], Louis Owens [Choctaw] and the artistic offerings of Harry Fonseca [Maidu/Portuguese/Hawaiian]. Information about Trickster is prevalent enough

that he/she/it could be the subject of an in-depth study all its own, but my interest in Trickster will necessarily have to be limited for the sake of the overall discussion of humor. Nevertheless, a Trickster's importance should not be under-estimated for it is his/her/its appearance that joins contemporary literary and artistic works with traditional tribal life most clearly.

Chapter 4, titled "A Disarming Laughter" examines the extensive use of inter-cultural humor in Native literature, art and reservation joking, particularly as it relates to the dismantling of traditional stereotypes, such as the widespread Noble Savage, Red Devil, and Indian Princess conceptions, and the making fun of Whites. The examples in this chapter help to debunk widespread stereotypes, revision America's history with Indian people, and discuss the social, economic and political concerns which are important to contemporary Indian life, especially as they relate to non-Indian America's relationship with Native America. Much of the humor here is oriented around issues of serious concern to native people, and very often assumes forms of irony and sarcasm. As such, its messages are often biting in tone and approach.

Chapter 5 presents Part II of "A Disarming Laughter" as it segues into a discussion of Resistance Humor, and how humor functions as a corrective and form of culture critique. Most of the selections are directed to a White readership and critique this audience for a variety of reasons: its treatment of indigenous peoples, its disrespect for the natural world, its lax care for elders and the handicapped, its spiritual void. Although many of the examples in this section serve as forms of inter-cultural humor as well, I have decided to separate them into their own category due to the militancy evident in many of

the selections' themes and expressions. Moreover, because the examples explored are particularly message-oriented, there is both a criticism of White culture in these pieces, as well as a certain didacticism as the writers and artists urge readers and viewers to overcome their apparent apathy. My interest in this section is not in how Indian writers and artists make fun of non-Indian people, though there is certainly a sense of ridicule to many of the more militant examples, but in the overall messages which these pieces engender.

"Inter-tribal Humor: Jokes for Indians" is the focus of Chapter 6. The jokes range from good-natured ribbing between tribes, to "in" jokes, jokes that people in Indian country will likely only know and appreciate: jokes about themselves and particular geographic landmarks, living on reservations, the coming of the first European immigrants to America, and the like. Some of the jokes reveal a deeper lesson to the listeners, but many are told simply for pure play and jokesterism.

Finally, Chapter 7 examines how humor functions as a survival technique, and as a way for Indian tribes to feel a common bond through their shared experiences, even though they may be separated by great geographic distances. As such, humor becomes an important and powerful tool of survival which allows people to connect with their tribal pasts and with other native people. In addition, it provides writers and artists with a medium to address painful subjects in a less painful manner, allowing Indian people an effective way of coping with many of the social, economic, and political problems which are still of special concern to them in the twenty-first century.

My research for this project convinces me that humor not only plays a significant

role in much of contemporary native writing and art, but also in traditional tribal cultures. Why this element is often overlooked, or under-emphasized, by non-Indian readers, viewers, and scholars in part indicates American society's commitment to continuing to see Native Americans through a sepia-colored lens, even though we are now in the twenty-first century. Many historical and anthropological texts have perpetuated, and confirmed, the preconceived and romanticized stereotypes that have long been associated with Indian people. The public's continued attraction to these images is evident in just one glance at today's popular culture: films like Kevin Costner's *Dances With Wolves* and Michael Mann's *The Last of the Mohicans*; romance novel book jackets featuring a bare-chested Fabio, supposedly an Indian warrior, in requisite breech-cloth, with hair blowing in the wind and eyes smoldering with passion; country musician Tim McGraw's "Indian Outlaw" topping the music charts for weeks; an often silent and ever wise Commander Chakotay playing sidekick, Tonto-style, to Captain Katherine Janeway in *Voyager*, the latest inception of the *Star Trek* Series; the image of an Indian maiden used to sell Land of Lakes butter in grocery stores. The public is attracted to these images because they harken back to a romanticized and nostalgic past; as well, the images also dangerously imply that Indian people are static, belonging only to the past, not the present (reminiscent of the Vanishing American mythos). Moreover, they aid in revisioning history: if Native Americans really are just remnants of the past, then talk of their dislocation and genocide must also be wrong.

Much of the humor explored in this study is discomforting; its intention is to make its non-Indian and Indian readers/viewers think, squirm, feel uncomfortable, often with the

overall purpose of conveying important social messages. Some of the joking, whether in literary, artistic, or spoken form (as in the case of reservation jokes) is so subtle that it is easily passed over and missed because it must be understood from within Indian cultures, rather than outside of them. Even so, there is also a large amount of humor which functions as raucous comic relief which places its characters and subjects in unenviable positions and represents pure play with the audience.

Come explore with me as we begin this study of humor. Laugh. Chortle. Feel uncomfortable. Get angry. Most importantly, realize that Indian people are very much rooted in the present, in bright, non-sepia colors, wearing blue jeans and business suits, eating fry bread and caviar, trading on the stock market, exchanging gossip in bingo halls, teaching in universities, learning on the streets, *living*.

## Chapter One

### The Role of Humor in Traditional Tribal Cultures

Humor's importance to traditional tribal living is evident by its frequent appearance in the tribal practices and ceremonies of many different tribes. Significantly, this suggests that Indian people, whose multi-dimensionality is misunderstood by those who perpetuate conventional stereotypes which assume that Indian people are far too wise, serene and stoic to enjoy a good laugh, have always enjoyed an element of play which is typical of all peoples; but that humor, more importantly, also enjoys a spiritual function among tribes, elevating its importance as a ceremonial feature which possesses the power to implement change, and heal. Consequently, contemporary Native American writers and artists who incorporate humorous qualities into their works, often do so with the understanding that humor served, and serves, an important role in their cultural identities.

Before contact, more than 2000 tribes inhabited this continent, all of which had highly developed, and complex, belief systems and tribal practices. Today, over 500 tribes remain, including those which are federally recognized and those which are not recognized by the government, and many of these tribes are committed to preserving their cultural histories, languages, and beliefs. The subject of humor and its relation to traditional tribal living is mammoth, a task worthy of its own study. While it is impossible for me to present the importance, and varying roles, of humor to every tribe in this current analysis, I believe that it is important to acknowledge that humor served a viable function in the traditional lifestyles of many tribal peoples, a topic which is especially important when

considering the roles of humor in contemporary native works. As such, I have selected to present only a few of the practices and ceremonies of differing tribal peoples in which humor serves a prominent role. This does not suggest that only these tribes exhibit comedic qualities in their traditional life ways, or that these practices/ceremonies are akin to what is found in the practices and ceremonies of all tribes. This simply provides a more effective framework by which to discuss humor in general.

## The Trickster Tradition: The First Comedians in America

The widespread appearance of the Trickster figure in traditional storytelling marks this figure to be not only the most prevalent of the comedic features in tribal cultures, but also one of the most important. Trickster stories abound in the tales of virtually every tribe; of those tribes whose storytelling traditions have eroded or remain undocumented, and in the tribes which have disappeared, or merged with other tribes after contact, it is still highly probable that Trickster served, and serves, a significant role. And the Trickster tradition still continues today: tribal members continue to tell traditional Trickster stories, contemporary Native American writers incorporate modern forms of Trickster into their writings, and Indian artists depict Trickster in their artwork.[3] According to critic Alan

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[3]One of the most beloved Trickster stories is often attributed to African culture: the story of Uncle Remus and the Tar Baby. This story actually originated with the Southeastern Indian tribes. Because of the close contact between Native Americans and African Americans in the southeastern states, however, it became an important story for both groups of people. Even though the story is most often associated with African storytelling, its origin is actually rooted to the Cherokee, Choctaw, Chickasaw, Seminole, and Muskogee peoples who first told it, and then shared it with other peoples around them. James Mooney records one possible rendering of the original tale, this one told by a Cherokee storyteller in the late nineteenth century: "Once there was such a long spell of dry weather that there was no more water in the creeks and springs, and the animals held a council to see what to do about it. They decided to dig a well, and all agreed to help except the Rabbit, who was a lazy fellow, and said, "I don't need to dig for water. The

Velie, Tricksters are "the most important mythic figure in most tribes" (Vizenor 121). Velie includes the entire Winnebago Trickster cycle in *American Indian Literature*, Trickster stories which belong to the Winnebago people, and provide us with one of the most complete records of Tricksters' experiences. Paul Radin presents the same cycle of stories, and additional, less-structured Trickster stories in *The Trickster: A Study in American Indian Mythology*. One of the more salacious, yet also humorous stories of the cycle is the story in which Trickster, after discovering his penis and putting it in a box for safe-keeping in a previous story, decides that he will have intercourse with the chief's daughter:

> *...he walked down a slope and finally came to a lake. On the opposite side he saw a number of women swimming, the chief's daughter and her friends. "Now," exclaimed Trickster, "is the opportune time: now I am going to have intercourse." Thereupon he took his penis out of the box and addressed it, "My younger brother, you are going after the chief's*

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dew on the grass is enough for me." The others did not like this, but they went to work together and dug their well. They noticed that the Rabbit kept sleek and lively, although it was still dry weather and the water was getting low in the well. They said, "That tricky Rabbit steals our water at night," so they made a wolf of pine gum and tar and set it up by the well to scare the thief. That night the Rabbit came, as he had been coming every night, to drink enough to last him all next day. He saw the queer black thing by the well and said, "Who's there?" but the tar wolf said nothing. He came nearer, but the wolf never moved, so he grew braver and said, "Get out of my way or I'll strike you." Still the wolf never moved and the Rabbit came up and struck it with his paw, but the gum held his foot and it stuck fast. Now he was angry and said, "Let me go or I'll kick you." Still the wolf said nothing. Then the Rabbit struck again with his hind foot, so hard that it was caught in the gum and he could not move, and there he stuck until the animals came for water in the morning. When they found out who the thief was they had great sport over him for a while and then got ready to kill him, but as he was unfastened from the tar wolf he managed to get away" (Mooney 271-272).

*daughter. Pass her friends, but see that you lodge squarely in her, the chief's daughter." Thus speaking he dispatched it. It went sliding on the surface of the water. "Younger brother, come back, come back! You will scare them away if you approach in that manner!" So he pulled the penis back, tied a stone around its neck, and sent it out again. This time it dropped to the bottom of the lake. Again he pulled it back, took another stone, smaller in size, and attached it to its neck. Soon he sent it forth again. It slid along the water, creating waves as it passed along. "Brother, come back, come back! You will drive the women away if you create waves like that!" So he tried a fourth time. This time he got a stone, just the right size and just the right weight, and attached it to its neck. When he dispatched it, this time it went directly towards the designated place. It passed and just barely touched the friends of the chief's daughter. They saw it and cried out, "Come out of the water, quick!" The chief's daughter was the last one on the bank and could not get away, so the penis lodged squarely in her. Her friends came back and tried to pull it out, but all to no avail. They could do absolutely nothing. Then the men who had the reputation for being strong were called and tried it but they, too, could not move it. Finally they all gave up. Then one of them said, "There is an old woman around here who knows many things. Let us go and get her." So they went and got her and brought her to the place where this was happening. When she came there she*

*recognized immediately what was taking place. "Why, this is First-born, Trickster. The chief's daughter is having intercourse and you are all just annoying her." Thereupon she went out, got an awl and straddling the penis, worked the awl into it a number of times, singing as she did so: "First-born, if it is you, pull it out! Pull it out!" Thus she sang. Suddenly in the midst of her singing, the penis was jerked out and the old woman was thrown a great distance. As she stood there bewildered, Trickster, from across the lake, laughed loudly at her. "That old naughty woman! Why is she doing this when I am trying to have intercourse? Now, she has spoiled all the pleasure..."* (Velie 58)

The story features a ritualistic use of the number four, a sacred number for many tribal peoples. Trickster's behavior is typical; he plans to play a trick on the chief's daughter, but he becomes the victim of his own trick when his plan to have sexual intercourse with her is thwarted by the tribal members. The story warns young women to be careful when they are alone, and even with a group of women, and it is also quite comedic. Imagine the audience's response to the storyteller as he recounts the efforts of the strongest warriors who try to remove the penis from the young woman, and yet fail, only to be outdone by an old woman who succeeds in disengaging the penis with an awl, criticizing the men for interrupting the girl's pleasure. What bright, laughing eyes and merriment there must have been at the storyteller's words, and at the images which his words invoked in their minds as he acted the scene out before them.

Originally, these Trickster stories, and the Trickster stories of other tribes, were

told for both didactic and entertainment purposes.[4] The audiences could vary, consisting of only children, only adults, or a mix of adults and children. Because tribes typically did not restrict subject matter according to audience, a tale like the preceding could be told to an audience consisting of both adults and children. While the youngest in the group would not understand the sexual nature of the story, instead finding interest in the way the storyteller told the story, the adults would delight in the sexual exploits described in the tale. This "layering" of meaning is a common feature of traditional storytelling. In addition, because storytellers in oral cultures did not tell the same story in exactly the same way, one storyteller might choose to emphasize the entertainment quality of a story---as in this ribald Winnebago tale---while another, when telling the same story, might emphasize the spiritual nature of the tale. In this latter example, the stories often served as important lessons in what behavior was and was not acceptable within the tribe. For the children, the stories instructed in proper moral behavior; for the adults, the stories reinforced the moral beliefs which they learned as children. This spiritual quality of Trickster stories is often under-emphasized, and even ignored, by critics who tend to focus more upon the entertainment quality of the stories. However, it must be remembered that in societies where an individual was taught that one misdeed alone could undermine the spiritual health of the entire community, stories were an important way of releasing pent-up tensions, and also of providing members with moral guidelines to direct their behavior.

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[4]Some tribes had/have rigorous guidelines regarding who could/can tell the stories, what time of year they could/can be told in, what time of day they were/are to be told at, and the circumstances in which they were/are to be told. I deliberately use the active tense of verbs to underscore that storytelling, and the telling of trickster stories, is a continuing, and vibrant tradition with tribes.

Although Trickster's experiences are varied among different tribal storytelling traditions, his/her/its[5] personality features tend to reflect similar constructs. Trickster's defining personality trait is his desire to play tricks on the people around him, as evident in the earlier example. Due to Trickster's tendency to botch the tricks which he devises, however, he often finds himself the victim of the tricks which he intends for others. This quality of practical joking in Trickster tales accounts for much of the humor, and entertainment, of the stories. In addition, Trickster's appetites tend to be voracious, whether they be for sex, food, or warfare; in contemporary Trickster stories, Trickster's appetites also include alcohol, gambling, laughing too much, and other vices. Because Trickster possesses supernatural powers, he can make things happen just by thinking about them. He also possesses shape-shifting abilities which enable him to alter gender, and to change from animal to human form, and back again, at will. Trickster behavior is the subject of both disdain and affection because he is both immoral and moral. Alan Velie summarizes it in this way,

> The same [trickster] figure, in the same set of tales, appears to be alternately an evil spirit and a benevolent deity, a mortal and a god, a creator and a destroyer, a culture hero and a villain. At times he is an ideal citizen, a model to tribal members; at others he is a totally amoral being who flouts the most sacred taboos with impunity. (44)

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[5]I repeatedly refer to Trickster as both a he, a she, and an it, because Trickster has the power to alter forms. Throughout the rest of this section, I will refer to Trickster as a "he" for the sake of simplicity. Readers should remember, however, that Trickster possesses the power to change both gender and form.

Trickster's changing roles (male/female, animal/human, moral/immoral, hero/villain, clown/god, good/bad) and unpredictability typify his characterization in both traditional and modern storytelling. It is this complex nature which classifies him as one of the most important, and interesting, features of traditional storytelling. Yet it must be remembered that Trickster's antics are not just for fun, no matter how outlandish and uproarious they may be. Instead, Trickster's experiences augment the spiritual well-being of the community, cementing his religious significance and role within tribal cultures. Trickster often teaches by negative example what not to be, and how not to act. Chapter 3 will expand this discussion, and will provide several contemporary renderings of this very important figure, which emphasizes that tribal culture is not static.

## Comedic Play in Ceremonial Life

### *The Pueblo Clowns*

A sense of play also emerged in the ceremonial traditions of many tribes. Like the Trickster stories, this play was often intended to amuse its viewers, yet it frequently served more serious purposes as well. In *Custer Died For Your Sins*, Vine Deloria, Jr. [Sioux] identifies teasing, as seen during many ceremonies and also in one-on-one, personal exchanges between individual tribal members, as one of the ways that Indian people expressed themselves. Deloria argues that teasing served a crucial function as a way for Indian people to

> [take control] of social situations...Rather than embarrass members of the tribe publicly, people used to tease individuals they considered out of step with the consensus of tribal opinion. In this way egos were preserved and

disputes within the tribe of a personal nature were held to a minimum. (147)

One of the most documented forms of teasing of this nature involves the ceremonies of the Katcina, and of the clown associations, of Southwestern peoples, ceremonial traditions which continue today.

The Katcina cult is a sacred association among the Pueblos in which the members (usually male, but in some villages, female) impersonate supernatural beings who are affiliated with their ancestral spirits. The members imitate the Katcina by wearing elaborate costumes and donning masks, believing that in doing so they vicariously become the supernatural beings, and that they are temporarily granted the supernatural powers of the spirits, including their abilities to produce rain and to heal disease (Parsons 170).[6] The ceremonial dances of the Katcinas are fiercely guarded, or even denied, among some pueblo peoples, including the Rio Grande Pueblo Indians who believe that only pueblo Indians who know and revere the Katcinas may see them. The Western Pueblos are not as secretive. Laguna, Acoma and Zuni prohibit Hispanics from viewing the performances of the masked dancers, but the Hano and Hopi villages allow all visitors to attend the ceremonies (Dozier 156). Some of the secrecy is probably accounted for by the efforts of the U. S. Government in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries to suppress Pueblo Indian religion due to its supposed pagan nature.

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[6]It is not surprising that so much of the ceremonial focus of the Katcina dances is their rain-making ability given the arid desert locations of the pueblo peoples who need rain in order to maintain their livelihoods, with both the successful production of crops, and the raising of farm animals.

An important part of the Katcina ceremonies is the public dancing which is performed by the clown associations, which are also affiliated with supernatural deities (Tyler 194). Some of the clowning behavior is done for pure amusement and entertainment, while some of it is performed for religious purposes. The defining characteristic of the clowns is the extreme latitude allowed to their behavior.[7] According to early twentieth-century scholar Elsie Clews Parsons, clowning behavior consists of

> ...gluttony or eating or drinking filth; of drenching or being drenched with urine or water; simulating lust, fear, or anger; playing games together or with lookers-on; begging from house to house; distributing prizes or in general distributing corn or melons; burlesquing ceremonial, satirizing individuals and other peoples, scouting and valeting for the kachina, getting out dancers, and acting or speaking by opposites. Inverse or backward behavior or speech is, of all, the most characteristic trait, as it subsumes a good many particulars of behavior and appearance and almost all clown humor. Among Pueblos...clowning is a release from ordinary, conventional conduct. It entertains, but it is also dangerous or rather the clowning society is dangerous and fear-inspiring. The clowns are licensed to do

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[7]See Figures 1 and 2 for pictorials of Hopi clowns. Figure 1 depicts Koyala, also known as Koshari, who is thought to be one of the fathers of the kachinas. Koyala behaves in the usual manner of clowns, "engaging in loud and boisterous conversation, immoderate actions, and gluttony" (Wright 239). The distinction between a clown and a koshare is blurred in the figure of Koyala, who seems to inhabit both spheres. Figure 2 is a depiction of Piptuka, who appears to be a sub-group of the clowns like Koyala, who are both clown and koshare. Piptuka serves as comic relief in the ceremonies, presenting any form of humor from both caricature to burlesque. In this picture, Piptuka makes fun of Hopi farmers.

what they choose...(130-131)

Clowns are reified Tricksters whose clowning activity is believed to uphold the spiritual balance of the community, not only of pueblo peoples, but of non-Indian people as well. As such, clown dances serve significant religious functions along with their more comedic and entertainment qualities. Leslie Marmon Silko [Laguna Pueblo] explains that clowns strive for laughs because laughter is their sacred duty (Lincoln 15). Although their behavior is often outrageous, clowns serve social control functions which uphold the traditional values of the community. "Deviant behavior of the pueblo in general or of specific individuals," offers Edward P. Dozier, "is brought to the attention of townspeople by public ridicule at the time of communal activities" (157).

The clowns enjoy the license to publicly point out unacceptable conduct by the tribe as a whole, or by individual tribal members, in order to encourage a correction in the behavior. Such public shaming emphasizes the communal nature of pueblo beliefs. A lone individual possesses the power to "disrupt universal equilibrium by thought, word, or deed. The consequences of [this] imbalance are illness, disasters, drought--any misfortune. Rites and ceremonies properly performed keep the seasons moving, allow the sun to rise and set properly, bring rain and snow, quell the winds, and insure a well-ordered physical environment and society" (Dozier 151). Trickster stories instruct listeners in the importance of maintaining spiritual balance by adhering to specific moral guidelines. Clowning serves the same role, though clowns also possess the authority to publicly point out, and punish, those who are guilty of inappropriate moral conduct.

Additionally, clowning antics provide a socially acceptable outlet for behavior

which is typically repressed in Pueblo communities. Behavior which is considered acceptable, and unacceptable, is mandated in the belief systems of all tribal peoples. For many tribes, the pent-up emotions and frustrations of tribal members are vicariously alleviated by listening to, and enjoying, Trickster's shenanigans. Among Pueblo peoples, clowning serves a similar function. Those watching the dancing and behavior of the clowns understand that the clowns are afforded a freedom in their behavior that they, themselves, do not enjoy. Thus, "the clown associations in all pueblos--east or west--serve the role of maintaining proper behavior, by indulging in behavior no human should engage in..." (Dozier 203).

Scholar Jill D. Sweet believes that the extreme nature of clowning behavior is now somewhat tempered due to the influences of Hispanics, Anglos, and missionaries, many of whom have condemned the behavior as being inappropriate and perverse. Nevertheless, Sweet maintains that clowns still serve important functions in pueblo communities, by helping to maintain spiritual balance, by making fun of tourists, and by "integrat[ing] foreign institutions, objects, and people into the [pueblo] world through pantomime and humor" (33). She recounts Tewa clowns who "poke fun at the Catholic Church by staging a mock Holy Communion...After lining up a group of Tewa and non-Tewa observers, they tell each 'recipient' to 'open your mouth and stick out your tongue.' The clowns then give a candy wafer to each puzzled participant" (33). In another example, Sweet hypothesizes that San Juan clowns might make fun of White tourists by "borrowing a camera from an Anglo tourist and taking pictures of each other in ludicrous poses. They may also take pictures of the tourist who lent them the camera, thus reversing roles with

the outsider and subtly posing the question, 'see how it feels to be photographed by a stranger?'" (33).

Burlesque is common to all clown behavior, whether it is done to highlight inappropriate moral conduct, or simply for entertainment and fun. We will later see that this same spirit infuses the works of both contemporary Indian writers and artists.

*Cherokee Booger Dancing*

This sense of play is also evident in the Booger Dancing of the Cherokee people. Similar to the Trickster tradition, which is widespread among many tribes, and the clowning tradition, which is common among pueblo peoples, Cherokee Booger Dancing serves both spiritual and entertainment functions. In this dance, a gathering will be called at an individual's house. The guests will arrive and entertain themselves by visiting with each other, eating, and engaging in social dance. At some point, an individual will announce that some strangers are expected. The guests will grow excited, "a most unusual relaxation of Cherokee rules of demeanor" (Hudson 406). At this point, the Booger gang appears at the door, all of whom pretend to speak languages other than Cherokee. The Boogers wear blankets, sheets, or quilts which they have wrapped around their bodies, and masks which are typically made from wood or gourds.[8] They dance for periods of fifteen minutes to nearly two hours (depending upon the number of Boogers

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[8]The mask itself was typically constructed from wood and gourds, but the decorations used to personalize the masks included wasp nests, fur, cardboard, deer antler, and other items which the Cherokee readily found in their natural environments. While the masked dancers were usually male members of the tribe, women did occasionally participate in the ceremony, especially when they were needed to serve as a dance partner, and/or to symbolically help reveal an attribute of the foreigner whose behavior was being depicted.

involved), engaging in a number of humorous antics with each other, and also the guests, and then finally leave. The Boogers then go outside, remove their costumes and masks, and return to the gathering as ordinary, and well-behaved men.

The masks which the Boogers wear represent foreigners (including French, Spanish and European peoples that the Cherokees were in contact with)[9], other Indian people belonging to different tribes, and various animals. Most of the masks have exaggerated features--large moustaches, bushy eyebrows, excessively pale skin--and are often grotesque in appearance.[10] It is unclear when the dance tradition first appeared among the Cherokees, but it seems to have reached its apex in the late nineteenth, and early twentieth, centuries, transitional periods in which the Cherokees were significantly affected by the attitudes, decisions, and activities of the White community.[11]

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[9]Frank G. Speck points out that the maskers represent "people from far away or across the water--Germans, French, Chinese, Negroes, or even alien Indians" (28). Importantly, the masks signify peoples that the Cherokees were in contact with, yet were considered to represent threats to Cherokee life ways. Figures 3, 4, and 5 show masks which depict (in order of appearance) a Black man, a White man, and a Chinese man. Notice the similarities in the depictions: the Black man and White man share the same basic features--large eyes and noses, and a horizontal opening for a mouth. The mask of the Black man, however, is dyed a very dark color, and features what appears to be soft, white rabbit fur for the hair, bushy eyebrows and moustache, and small beard. In contrast, the mask of the White man is lighter in color, is adorned with the teeth of animals, and has coarser, more prickly hair for the bushy eyebrows and moustache, hair, and beard. The mask of the Chinese man more accurately captures its subject, and features more personality: slanted eyes, feathers for the hair, eyebrows, moustache and beard, and a smaller, more pointed nose.

[10]Charles Hudson describes two such masks: one depicts a White man and is constructed from a hollowed out hornet's nest, symbolic of his mean nature; the other, also a White man, represents a sex maniac. Made from a gourd, there is a large phallus where the nose should be, with opossum hair around its base, representing pubic hair. See Figures 6 and 7.

[11]Cherokee artists still make Booger masks today, typically for cultural events and museum exhibits. In fact, it "represents the only surviving Southeastern masking tradition" (Wade, 164). It is unclear to what extent the dance tradition itself is still observed in any

According to scholar Frank G. Speck, the term "Booger" is the equivalent of the word "bogey" (meaning ghost); in the 1930s, Speck observed that the word was "used by English-speaking Cherokee and their white neighbors for any ghost or frightful animal" (36). Speck believes that the Booger Dances represent "a record of the anxieties of a people, their reactions against the symbol of the invader, and their insecurity in their dealings with the white man" (3). By aping the foreigners whose ways were considered strange, or who represented direct threats to Cherokee people, the dancers symbolically diffused the power that the foreigners were regarded as possessing.

A burlesque mood was typical of the dances, emphasizing both the entertainment quality of the gatherings, and also their more important, spiritual message. Each dancer was given a name at the dance, often obscene, which represented the mask that the dancer was wearing.[12] License was given to the dancers to do what they wanted, understanding that their behavior represented the behavior of foreigners, and not the behavior of Cherokees. Consequently, typical Booger Dancing conduct was exhibitionist in nature:

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Cherokee communities, though it is known to be practiced in some parts of Oklahoma. However, the corrective nature of the Booger dances is still continued among many Cherokee people. For instance, in academia Cherokee professors often use Booger dancing techniques---though they may not use the masks themselves---to correct the behavior of fellow faculty and administrators as well as students when their behavior runs counter to Cherokee beliefs.

[12]Frank G. Speck describes a booger dance which he attended in January of 1935. The dancers at this dance were named German, Black, Black Buttocks, Frenchman, Big Testicles, Sooty Anus, Rusty Anus, Burster (penis), and Making Pudenda Swell (29). The names reflect the ethnicities of the foreigners that the maskers represented, and also their sexual natures. By naming the foreigners being depicted in this way, the Cherokees found that humor made what was threatening and frightening to them more manageable. While they couldn't make the foreigners disappear (as was the focus of the Plains ceremony, the Ghost Dance), they could strip them of some of their power, and have fun doing it, by burlesquing them. Thus, the threat which the foreigners represented is undermined.

breaking wind in front of the observers, behaving as if they were insane, staging mock fights with each other, carrying imitation phalli with them (some of which were designed to squirt water at the onlookers), making sexual advances to the women in the audience, and even chasing some of the women around the area, exposing their gourd phalli to them, or pretending to have intercourse with them (Speck 31-34). Through their ribald and playful antics, the dancers entertained the onlookers; more importantly, however, they helped to make strange peoples more accessible, diffusing the threats which they represented.[13]

Like the Pueblo clowns and Trickster stories, Booger Dancing also serves to uphold traditional Cherokee values. In *The Southeastern Indians*, Charles Hudson explains that Southeastern Indians traditionally believe that they, others (including non-Indians), the natural world, and the universe, live in a balance which is maintained, in part, through personal accountability. When an individual does something wrong, this fragile balance can be disrupted, leading to widespread problems, or to individual sickness, disease, or hardship. Ceremonies, medicine people, and stories which teach distinctions between moral and immoral behavior, all help to maintain this fragile balance. Likewise, Booger Dancers also help to maintain this balance in a variety of ways: by underscoring how important it is for Cherokees not to behave like the Boogers whose conduct, though humorous, is wholly inappropriate; by releasing pent-up tensions in both the participants and onlookers; by reducing the threat and fear by which the foreigners are represented

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[13]Contemporary Native American writers and artists, such as Sherman Alexie [Coeur d'Alene] and Fritz Scholder [Luiseno], often employ similar strategies, understanding that humor serves as an important tool to address painful subjects, and to lessen feelings of pain.

through the Boogers' burlesque; and by serving as tools of healing for medicine people who may order a Booger Dance as part of a curing ceremony.[14]

Whereas the nineteenth century Ghost Dance Movement used ceremonial means to try to physically return all European immigrants to their home countries as well as bring back the ghosts of Indian people and the quickly disappearing buffalo, the Booger Dances served as a psychological buffer which helped Cherokee people to better adapt to the presence of these foreigners in their lives. The maskers portrayed the Europeans (in particular) as "awkward, ridiculous, lewd, and menacing" (Speck 36); consequently, the maskers symbolically reduced the threat which these non-Cherokee people, and their strange ways, represented, while also upholding traditional Cherokee values.

The power of the dance is rooted in its buffoonery. By making fun of, and ridiculing, the foreigners for their bawdy, nonsensical, lewd and warlike behavior, the maskers effectively critiqued European cultures, while also limiting the power and authority which the Europeans appeared to possess. This humor, though certainly entertaining and hilarious, is laced with a subversive edginess which allowed the dancers to broach a disturbing subject in a less painful way. Moreover, it indicates that humor and comedy possess power as agents which are capable of implementing change and healing. Hence, humor not only serves as entertainment, but also as a cathartic tool, as well as a spiritual aid. These qualities will be important to remember as we begin our study of

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[14]Foreigners were thought to be partly responsible for illness. Thus, Booger Dancing "has the functional value of weakening the harmful powers of alien tribes and races, who, as living beings or ghosts, may be responsible for sickness or misfortune" (Speck 37). In these cases, the dancers are dancing to "scare away" the sickness which invades the community, or a specific individual.

contemporary Native American literature and art in subsequent chapters.

*Potlatch Ceremonies of the Pacific Northwest Coast Peoples*

The masking tradition is shared by many tribes. The most dramatic, and highly artistic, of this mask-making tradition is found in both the traditional and contemporary masks of the Northwest Coast Indians.[15] These "transformation" masks, as they are often called, have been constructed for hundreds of years by the Northwest Coast tribes, and serve significant ceremonial purposes. Like the ceremonies, stories, and traditional practices of all Native peoples[16], masking serves an "integral role in defining and preserving the stories, values, privileges, status and responsibilities of their owners and makers" (Macnair, Joseph, Grenville 14). For Northwest Coast Indians, masks enjoy a critical role in Potlatch ceremonies as spiritual aids which help to make manifest the spirits of powerful ancestors, thereby making the supernatural world visible to both the participants in the ceremonies, and onlookers. In addition to this religious nature of the ceremonies, Potlatches also function as important social gatherings. Often, giveaways are part of the Potlatch ceremonies, during which the personal possessions and money of a tribal member who has died (typically in the past year) are dispensed to other members of the tribe and to anyone else who has been invited to the ceremonies. These giveaways are done to assuage the grief of the family and friends of the deceased as well as to honor the individual who has died. It is also during the Potlatches that tribal names are given to young people in the tribe or to those who have not yet received their names, another

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[15]Including Native peoples in the United States, Canada, and Alaska.

[16]This includes the Trickster tradition, Pueblo clowning, and Cherokee Booger Dancing.

indication of the significance which these ceremonies serve.

The masks which are part of the Potlatches often evince a sense of play, or comedy, in their features and depictions. Originally, the masks were produced strictly for ceremonial purposes, and were closely guarded due to their significant spiritual importance; "for the eyes of tribal members only" was the common conviction, leading to masks being secretly transported to ceremonies in the cover of darkness, or hidden in homes. Later, many masks were sold or traded to non-Indian people without the masks ever having been used in traditional practices. Today, Northwest Coast artists continue their mask-making traditions, producing sacred masks for use in ceremonies, and also non-ceremonial masks for the growing commercial market.

The masks typically depict human faces which represent spirits that descended from the heavens and assumed human form, and the animals and supernatural creatures which belong to the four dimensions of the cosmos: the Sky World, the Mortal World, the Undersea World, and the Spirit World (Macnair, Joseph, Grenville 14). According to Robert Joseph, a Kwakwaka'wakw chief, "A general and common world-view held by Native people is that all things are linked together. This interrelationship demands that a certain level of balance and harmony be sustained to ensure survival in the broadest sense. Many legends and masks speak to this principle. A mask in dance can acknowledge this obligation to the wholeness of the world view" (Macnair, Joseph, Grenville 32-33). Like the traditional practices of many Indian people, including those presented in this chapter, masking ceremonials affirm the world-views of the Northwest Coast peoples, by emphasizing their spiritual beliefs and educating (especially children) in the distinctions

between proper and improper behavior.

The Potlatch ceremonies are where the ceremonial masks come alive. These ceremonies, which feature songs, dances, and rituals, are important in reinforcing the tribal identities of the Northwest Coast peoples, and affirming their place in the world. Not surprisingly, anti-Potlatch laws were prevalent in the late nineteenth century and well into the twentieth century too, as products of the fear which non-Indians had for Indian people and their beliefs (Macnair, Joseph, Grenville 26).[17] These laws forbade Northwest Coast peoples from organizing Potlatch ceremonies, with threats of jailing, and actual jailings too, if the laws were broken. During this period, many ceremonial houses were torn down, sacred masks were confiscated and destroyed, and tribal beliefs were presented as inferior and pagan. Even so, Potlatch ceremonies continued to be organized in secret, so important were they to the well-being and spiritual health of the Northwest Coast tribes.

I recently attended an art exhibit at the Gilcrease Museum in Tulsa which featured a collection of Northwest Coast masks. Having appreciated their beauty for years, I was unprepared for the overwhelming presence which these masks possess. Their sheer sizes, vibrant colors, and elaborate designs held me, and the other patrons, entranced. Most notably, however, is the spirit which these marks conveyed. It is easy to imagine these

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[17]Not surprisingly, anti-Potlatch sentiment also stems from cultural misunderstandings about the giveaways. From a native perspective, giveaways represent an important tool to heal grief and are a way of showing honor to someone who died. In contrast, the non-Indian perspective often misunderstands the giveaways, assuming instead that the giving away of private property---which runs counter to mainstream ideals---is further evidence that native cultures are not as advanced as Western culture. This difference in world views helped inspire much of the anti-Potlatch sentiment which prevailed in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. While anti-Potlatch laws are no longer in effect, misunderstandings regarding Potlatch ceremonies still exist.

masks coming alive in the Potlatches, accompanied by dance and song, for even in the protected display cases, the masks are dynamic and rich with the intensity of life.

Not every mask conveys a sense of play, but humor often emerges as a key element in many of the masks, especially in those masks with transformative properties, as well as in the masks which caricature specific individuals and/or personify personality traits. Transformation masks, such as those in Figures 8-10, are noted for their technical ability to literally transform from one form to another. In Figure 8, the transformation is from a salmon to that of a human face. Notice that the elaborate jaws literally open to reveal the human face which is inside. In Figure 9, the transformation is from that of a raven to a human. And in Figure 10, which represents Eagle Woman, there is the mask of a woman whose braid ties open to reveal small figures of eagles inside, emphasizing her dual nature. The dancers who wear these masks hold the masks in place over their faces by gripping a jaw piece inside the masks; elaborate mechanisms allow the dancers to effect the transformations. The faces in all three of these masks do not appear to be entirely human because the faces represent the beings of supernaturals who have the power to magically alter their forms from animal to human, and back again. In 1803, Captain James Cook criticized masks like these for not "resemb[ling] the human face divine. They are marked by the most shocking disproportion of features, and the heads have tufts of coarse hair fastened on them, with the teeth of animals set between the lips" (Macnair, Joseph, Grenville 54). Cook's words reveal his misunderstanding of the masks. He judges them according to whether they present humans realistically, not realizing that the masks depict magical beings whose faces resemble, but are different from, those of man and woman. In

addition, Cook was likely upset because he interpreted the masks as equating humans as animals and vice versa, something equivalent to anti-Christian sentiment.

The masks delight as they open to reveal hidden faces or forms underneath, sometimes enacting as many as three or four changes before finally revealing the final figure beneath each layer of the mask. Such transformations are important for two reasons. First, they affirm Northwest Coast beliefs, especially their representations of the cosmic world, the divines who inhabit this world, and their relation to this world and these beings. Secondly, they reveal the creativity and play of Northwest Coast peoples whose elaborate masks both please and astound those who are watching the dancers, entranced at the various magical metamorphoses which take place before them.

This playfulness is also evident in the masks which caricature specific individuals and/or their personality traits. Figure 11, a mask which represents a conceited White woman, and Figure 12, representing a White man, typify this humor. Notice the highly stylized representation of the White woman. The careful attention given to the grooming of her hair (notice that the wood grain is positioned so that it resembles individual strands of her hair), and to her facial appearance, represents her conceit. The artist has sanded the wood until it is completely smooth, and her features---eyes, eyebrows, and nose---are perfectly proportioned. She appears to be emotionless. Unsmiling, yet also not frowning, she stares into the distance with a neutral expression. The exacting care given to creating her features suggests that the mask represents a woman whom the artist actually knew. The same is true of the mask depicting the White man. The man's elongated face, long and pointed nose, baldness, moustache and beard, and dark, painted eyebrows, suggests

that the artist reproduced the portraiture of a man whom he actually knew. According to Peter Macnair, specialist in the art of the First Nations of the Pacific Northwest Coast, some Nisga'a people recognize this man as a churchman whose love for rum is renowned. Macnair explains that the dancer who wears this mask typically dresses in a suit, and reads from a Bible in his hands. As his sermonizing progresses, he removes a bottle of rum from his suit pocket, and quickly becomes intoxicated, eventually falling to the floor in a drunken stupor (Macnair, Joseph, Grenville 63).

Human frailties like conceit, pride, stupidity, avarice, sloth and arrogance are common subject matter for Northwest Coast masks. Depicting these weaknesses reminds the dancers and onlookers that these character traits run counter to Northwest Coast tribal beliefs, and that they must strive to avoid these weaknesses in order to maintain spiritual health, both for themselves and the community. These traits are not always featured concurrently with non-Indian people, as these two masks might suggest. Sometimes they are depicted in masks of supernaturals like those featuring Dzunuk'wa, the wild woman of the woods, or Bak'was, the wild man of the woods and the chief of the ghosts, two figures who scare Northwest Coast children into behaving themselves. Or they may simply be represented by a mask which personifies stupidity, or insanity, or one of the other human frailties.

According to Robert Joseph, "Masks have an important and significant place in our evolution. Every mask is quintessential to our desire to embrace wholeness, balance and harmony. In a simple and fundamental act of faith, we acknowledge and reaffirm our union through song and dance, ceremony and ritual" (Macnair, Joseph, Grenville 19).

Masks aid in telling a people who they are, and affirm their spirituality.

Some of the masks incorporate humorous elements in their actual designs, especially in their exaggerated features, and their use of caricature. For other masks, this playfulness comes alive when the dancer dons the mask, and vicariously becomes the subject. Normal inhibitions are abandoned as license is given to the dancer to conduct himself/herself in ways which are appropriate to the specific mask, and yet which may not be appropriate to the daily behavior of the members of that particular tribe. Significantly, these humorous qualities always accompany ceremony, emphasizing that comedy, and play, serve spiritual roles. Whether in the design of a specific mask, or the performance of a masked dancer, humor often plays an important part, since humor is a dynamic tool which entertains, affirms tribal beliefs, educates, and heals.

*Conclusion*

In the present day, humor tends to be associated more with stand-up comedy, burlesque, and slapstick because these are the comedic forms which dominate popular culture. Humor, however, can assume more subtle forms, and does not always have to provoke actual laughter. In the examples presented in this chapter, humor emerges as an important characteristic of many tribal cultures. Significantly, the play, though entertaining, always serves a more meaningful and sacred role. Thus, while Trickster stories are told for entertainment to both children and adults, they also serve to educate each audience about proper moral conduct, and to affirm important spiritual beliefs such as balance, unity, and wholeness. Much of the humor in the Trickster stories is slapstick in nature. After all, though good-hearted, Trickster repeatedly falls victim to his own

practical joking, creating a laughable buffoonery in many of the stories. Nevertheless, this wit typically does not exist alone, but is concurrent with a more important spiritual focus.

The same is true of the Booger Dancing of the Cherokees, and the ceremonial dancing of the Pueblo clowns. Much of the comedy in the Booger Dances is derived from the specific designs of the masks themselves, especially when they feature prominent and exaggerated features, such as an elongated phallus in lieu of a nose. The wild antics of the Boogers also contribute to the festive and humorous mood which characterizes the dancing. Importantly, however, the exhibitionist conduct of the Booger Dancers, and the caricature evident in the masks which they wear, underscores the overall focus of the ceremony: to affirm Cherokee values and beliefs, in stark contrast to the lax values of the foreigners which the Boogers represent, and to symbolically strip these foreigners of their power and threat over Cherokee people. Hence, humor acts as an agent to strengthen spiritual beliefs, and to heal.[18]

Pueblo clowns serve similar roles. Like the Booger Dancers, the clowns are given license to act however they wish in their ceremonials, understanding that their conduct runs counter to Pueblo beliefs. Consequently, while the clowns' behavior can be outlandish and rowdy, this entertaining quality is not the sole aim of their actions. Rather their behavior helps to maintain the spiritual integrity of the Pueblos by publicly warning those tribal members who are known to have conducted themselves inappropriately that their actions have serious spiritual consequences, for themselves, the tribe, and the entire

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[18]This humor symbolically helps Cherokees to enjoy a healing from the pain which the foreigners represent, and to literally heal the sicknesses and diseases which the foreigners are believed to have caused.

universe. In addition, the clowns point out inappropriate behavior which any individual or the entire tribe may be guilty of committing. Hence, the clowning and mischievousness ultimately helps to restore the all-important balance which is crucial to maintaining a healthy tribe, environment, and universe.

Humor is also seen in the transformation masks of the Pacific Northwest Coast peoples, and in the dances which accompany these masks. Some of the humor derives from the sheer delight of seeing an elaborately designed mask undergo magical transformations as its form transfigures from one shape to another, emphasizing the supernatural powers which these figures possess. Play is also evident in the masks which caricature specific individuals which the artists knew, and in the masks which represent human character weaknesses. Once again, humor both entertains and serves as a sacred agent which upholds spiritual beliefs.

This distinction between a humor which entertains *and* which serves a sacred role underscores a marked contrast between the cultural importance that humor serves in Native cultures when compared to mainstream, non-Indian America. In mainstream America, humor tends to serve primarily as entertainment, or as a vehicle to convey political and social messages. In many Native communities, humor serves as both entertainment *and* as a spiritual aid, emphasizing its heightened importance. This distinction will be important to remember as we begin our study of how Native writers and artists employ humor today because many of them recognize the significant role which humor has played in contributing to their cultural identities.

The ceremonies and practices which I have chosen to include in this chapter

represent only a few of the ways that humor is incorporated into traditional tribal cultures. My interest is not in cataloguing the role which humor plays in the ceremonies and practices of every tribe, but in suggesting through the use of select examples that humor can, and does serve, more significant roles in tribal cultures than what many previously assumed. The stories, ceremonies, songs, dances, languages and beliefs of tribal peoples all serve as carriers which maintain tribal identities and cultures. Humor is a significant feature of many of these carriers, emphasizing the important function which it serves. The following chapters will show that humor remains a dynamic and important part of the lives of contemporary Native Americans.

## Chapter Two

## Early Humorists

These days it appears that many people are surprised to learn that humor served, and continues to serve, an important role in tribal societies and that much contemporary Native American literature, art, music, and the like, both consciously and unconsciously manifest this traditional use of humor. Significantly, there were early Indian humorists in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries---many of whom are unfortunately overlooked even today---who were keenly aware of the role which humor played in their traditional cultures, and used it in their daily lives, especially in their writings. These writers not only offer glimpses into important periods in United States history as Indian people and their lifeways underwent radical transformations, but they also serve as a bridge to contemporary Native Americans whom employ humor similarly, an indication of the importance and vitality of culture. This chapter focuses on three early voices in Indian humor: Alexander Posey [Creek], Will Rogers [Cherokee] and Dan Madrano [Caddo]. Both Posey and Rogers served important roles in their era as public figures and political commentators, while Madrano is best known for *Heap Big Laugh*, a book of a generation or so later than Posey and Rogers which catalogues some of the humorous stories and jokes which his son enjoyed hearing/telling prior to his death. All three writers show that humor was an important part of their daily lives which, itself, is a reflection of the heightened role which humor served in traditional tribal cultures.

### *Alexander Posey*

George Riley Hall, a close friend to Posey, once commented that "Some folks

think the Indian has no sense of humor, but that is far from true. The trouble is that the Indian has his own way of making fun, and other people simply do not understand. I am a witness that Indian humor is keen---at times simply devastating. But you miss it unless you understand the language" (Littlefield 72). Hall's observation is a direct reference to Posey, who from his early boyhood was known for his sharp sense of humor.

Born on August 3, 1873 in a remote part of the Creek Nation of Indian Territory called Tulladega Hills (near present-day Eufaula, Oklahoma), Posey enjoyed a halcyon childhood which was full of laughter and romping across the countryside. His mother was Chickasaw-Creek and a member of Tuskogee tribal town, while his father, a White man, spoke Creek fluently, and was a member of Broken Arrow tribal town, probably by adoption (Hunter 7). According to Daniel Littlefield, the combination of Posey's Creek heritage and his parents' influence engendered a strong sense of humor in him:

> Lewis Henderson Posey [Posey's father] was known as a jolly fellow, and he was a good storyteller, greatly admired by his son, to whom he told dialect stories even after the younger Posey was an adult. Lewis Posey no doubt fostered wit and humor in his son, but so did Alex Posey's Creek heritage. The Creeks in general exhibited a strong sense of humor and were fond of teasing one another. Like his father, Posey's mother, Nancy, was an accomplished storyteller who told stories to the Posey children. (Hunter 10)

As a boy, Posey enjoyed writing stories and poems as well as recounting humorous anecdotes about family members to other people. When he was fourteen years old, his

father sent him to the Creek Nation boarding school at Eufaula, and then later to the Indian university at Bacone, near Muskogee. Posey's father wanted to make sure that his son was fluent in English and that he received a well-rounded education.[19] One year short of finishing his degree, Posey accepted a position as the superintendent of the Creek Orphan Asylum in Okmulgee. While at the asylum, Posey continued to write stories and poems and also maintained a journal in which he recorded his daily experiences and thoughts, many of which show his humor. In one entry Posey records his love of joking around with his friends. "Knowing him to be fond of jokes and much given to laughter," Posey writes about his cousin John Phillips, the handyman at the school, "I tried to split his sides open." In another entry Posey describes a practical joke which he engineered against the school's cook. Posey writes that getting up early one morning, "I got a white sheet and made uncouth noise outside the kitchen, letting the wind flap the sheet against the window where Joe was preparing his dough. He hollered 'Whose dat?' and made distance, dropping his lard in all directions" (Littlefield 85). Imagine the sight of Posey pretending to be a haunt at his friend's window!

Posey remained at the asylum for seven years, but eventually he realized (with the encouragement of his wife) that his real passion was writing. This prompted him to purchase the *Indian Journal*, a weekly newspaper at Eufaula. It was at the *Indian Journal* that Posey's writing assumed what would come to be known as his characteristic style: a

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[19]One of Posey's early poems presented the allotment question as a parody of Hamlet's "To be or not to be" soliloquy. Posey's poems reads: "To allot, or not to allot; that is the/Question; whether 'tis nobler in the mind to/Suffer the country to lie in common at it is,/Or to divide it up and give each man/His share pro rata, and by dividing/End this sea of troubles? To allot, divide/Perchance to end in statehood;/Ah, there's the rub" (Littlefield 75).

strong sense of humor blended with news-reporting. Littlefield suggests that much of Posey's humor rests on his closing a serious story with an unexpectedly humorous turn, oftentimes resembling a punch-line in a joke:

> When only one candidate announced for the position of mayor and local politicians were looking for another, [Posey] ended the report as follows: "We would suggest fly paper or a lasso, and if that fails to bring one, try a shot gun, for a major we must have." He reported once that Dick Greenwood, a full-blood Creek, was sunning himself against the end of a caboose in the railyard, when a sudden coupling of cars jolted the caboose and sent Greenwood jumping for his life: "When he struck the ground he said, 'Holwox!' which is Creek for almost anything you might want to say in English...." Finally, [Posey] wrote of one of his fellow editors, "The editor of the Checotah Times compliments us on the size of our head. We regret that we can't return the compliment." (162)

Several months after purchasing the *Indian Journal*, Posey introduced readers to Fus Fixico, a fictional full-blood Creek man who would eventually pen 72 letters to the editor (Posey), in which he commented upon his (Fixico's) health, his friends, community events, the weather, the condition of crops, and life in Indian Territory, especially as it related to allotment. Gradually, Fixico's letters shifted away from personal matters, and began to focus more upon Creek national affairs and the eventuality of statehood. Fixico's editorials became increasingly popular over a short period of time, as did Posey himself. Curious about the Creek man in Indian Territory who was heading his own newspaper,

articles about Posey appeared in the *Kansas City Journal*, the *St. Louis Post-Dispatch*, the *New York Herald*, and the *New York Tribune*, as well as the *New York Times*, the *Boston Transcript* and the *Philadelphia Ledger* (Hunter 19).

Stylistically, Posey's Fus Fixico letters are noted for their strong use of dialect, slang, coined words, puns, plays-on-words, and unusual expressions. Even so, they often make reference to literary allusions, a testament to Posey's higher education, and almost always reflect Posey's biting wit. Issues such as allotment, the number of non-Indian people moving into Indian Territory, the changing traditions of Creek people, impending statehood, governmental fraud, and prohibition were subjects which Posey frequently addressed. Over time, Posey discovered that Fixico's editorials were an effective forum to discuss matters of importance to him and to others in Indian Territory. Soon, no public official or issue was safe from Posey's barbed pen, leading Carol Hunter to write "What American rural humorists did for America, Posey did for Indian Territory" (Hunter 40).

One of Posey's most effective strategies included a play-on-names---renaming individuals---especially politicians---who were well-known in Indian Territory and national politics, but whom Posey disliked because of their political stances. Thus, President Roosevelt becomes President Rooster Feather, a dig at Roosevelt. Likewise, Tams Bixby, chairman of the Dawes Commission, and Thomas B. Needles and Clifton R. Breckenridge, also of the Dawes Commission, become Tams or Dam Big Pie, Tom Needs It, and Break in Rich. Pliny Soper is called Plenty So Far, and J. George Wright, the Indian inspector, is dubbed J. Gouge Right. Indian agent, J. Blair Shoenfelt, is identified as J. Bear Sho' Am Fat, and Secretary of the Interior, Ethan A. Hitchcock, who was notorious for the number

of regulations which he issued in Indian Territory, becomes Secretary It's Cocked. Posey's names sarcastically point out what little regard he had for the politicians, believing many to be greedily taking advantage of Indian people for a profit.

The letters feature four main characters: Fixico; Choela, a medicine man; Hotgun (based on a real person); and Tookpafka Micco (also based on a real person). Eventually, the conversations between Hotgun and Tookpafka Micco take center stage and provide much of the letters' pointed criticism. One of Posey's abiding frustrations with governmental officials was their penchant for determining what was best for the people in Indian Territory, even though very few of the politicians actually spent any lasting time in Indian Territory. In 1903, Secretary Hitchcock decided to visit Indian Territory in the hopes that his presence might speed up tribal affairs regarding allotment. Fixico narrates:

> Well, so Secretary It's Cocked was made up his mind to see what's the matter down here in Injin Territory. So he was had Tom Ryan run to the depot and send a message to Tams Big Pie that was read this way: "Well, so you must had a cab wait for me at the Katy when I was get off of the Pullman in Muskogee. Maybe so I was come there in the night, or after sunup in the morning, or twelve o'clock in the day time. You must had a brass band there, too, and some feller to make big talk, just the same like I was a editor of a newspaper that was printed in the country. Maybe so I was stayed down there twenty-four hours and fixed up everything all right so you think you was had a soft snap." (Letter 19)

Fixico makes fun of Hitchcock for requesting such fanfare and mocks him for thinking that

he can "fixed up everything all right" in a mere twenty-four hour period. However, by the time of his visit to Indian Territory, Hitchcock had decided against the welcoming ceremony, hoping instead that he could visit the area without even being seen. Of this indecisiveness---typical of politicians, alleges Posey---Fixico jokes:[20]

> Well, so I like to know what kind a man Secretary It's Cocked is anyhow. Look like he didn't had no safety notch and couldn't stood cocked. He was change his mind every time before he get it made up good. When he do anything he acts like he was sorry and take it back after it's too late in the day. So he was had Tom Ryan change the message he was sent to Tams Big Pie and say, "Well, so I don't want no monkey business when I get off of the train in Muskogee. I don't want to hear no brass band playing Dixie or big talk about statehood and things like that. So you must stay in your office and work same as a beaver instead hanging up flags and running down to depot to see if it's train time yet; so when I come there sure enough the people wont think Ringling Brothers was in town to give a show." (Letter 20)

Fixico similarly makes fun of President Roosevelt for doing the same thing during his scheduled visit to Indian Territory on April 5, 1905. Roosevelt's visit consisted of a two-

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[20]An excellent example of this is Senator William M. Stewart's visit to Indian Territory on September 18, 1904. Chairman of the Senate Committee for Indian Affairs, Stewart purportedly traveled to Indian Territory in order to better understand the concerns of tribal politicians. Stewart's visit consisted of less than one day, during which he visited only the Dawes Commission in Muskogee, the Indian agency, and the federal courts. At the time, the press was critical, charging that no progress could be made with politicians who spent such little time trying to understand a complex political situation (Hunter 191).

minute stop at Vinita, a two-minute stop at Wagoner, and an eight-minute visit in Muskogee, during which he addressed a crowd of 1500 people and spoke about statehood, the duties of being a good citizen, and the need to elect honest men to political office. After Roosevelt's visit, Fixico makes fun of the speech which Roosevelt delivered:

> "Well, so I was mighty glad to see you all and hope you was all well. I couldn't complain and I was left Secretary Itscocked enjoying good health [Big cheers and somebody out in the crowd say, Bully for Itscocked!] Look like you all was had a fine country down here. You all ought to had statehood and let Oklahoma show you how to run it. [Colonel Clarence B. Duglast, he pay close attention and listen for some word 'bout 'imself]. I want everybody to had a square deal down here. [Lots more big cheers and everybody smiling but the Snake Injin]. You all was had a fine town here too. You could run flat boats up to it from Ft. Smith, and deliver the goods over lots of railroads, and pump out oil, and develop salt-licks and float bee-courses. But I didn't had time to talk any more, 'cause I couldn't stop here but two minutes and I have been here put near five. So long." (Letter 54)

Spending only ten minutes with the people who would be most affected by the statehood issue, Roosevelt re-boarded his train to head west on a hunting expedition. These short, pointless visits to Indian Territory by government officials, claiming to know what was best for the people who lived there and for the land, incited Posey.

Posey's Fixico even takes time to criticize officials on the Dawes Commission for

their penmanship, citing his own allotment deed as an example: "[the officials] was scribble up signing they names to it, like they was just learning how to make letters so you could read it. They was one name signed to it that was look like a thousand-leg that was freeze to death in winter time. I was show it to some lawyers in Eufaula and they say, maybe so, Tams Bixby was sign his name that way" (Letter 12). Additionally, Fixico complains about the endless rules which politicians make regarding Indian people, this time regarding their names:

> Big Man he was say this time the Injin was had to change his name just like if the marshal was had a writ for him. So, if the Injin's name is Wolf Warrior, he was had to call himself John Smith, or maybe so Bill Jones, so nobody else could get his mail out of the postoffice. Big Man say Injin name like Sitting Bull or Tecumseh was too hard to remember and don't sound civilized like General Cussed Her or old Grand Pa Harry's Son. (Letter 18)

Ironically, Fixico compares the supposedly uncivilized names of the Indians to "civilized" White men like George Armstrong Custer, a well-known Indian fighter whose life ended at the Little Big Horn on June 25, 1876, and William Henry Harrison, the ninth president of the United States, known for being part of the forces which defeated Tecumseh in 1811. Moreover, Fixico makes fun of the reasoning which justifies this forced change-of-name by suggesting that it is all to make sure that "nobody else could get [one's] mail out of the postoffice."

Some of Fixico's writing contains barbed criticism which is directed at Indian

people, especially those who were traditional. In fact, many of Fixico's most humorous moments occur in his record of the dialogues between Hotgun and Tookpafka Micco as they discuss matters affecting the Creek Nation. In the following conversation, Hotgun and Tookpafka Micco begin by discussing the changeable quality of the weather in Oklahoma when compared to Indian Territory, and eventually wend their way to the issue of statehood:

> Well, so Hotgun he say he was for double statehood, 'cause they was too much long-tailed cyclones out in Oklahoma and people was had to live right close to a hole in the ground like prairie dogs to keep out a they way. Hotgun he say he was not used to that kind a living and was get too old to learn to act like a prairie dog. Then he say sometime the people what had a hole in the ground was not out a danger, 'cause the rivers out in Oklahoma had no banks to um and was spread out all over the country when they get up, like maple syrup on a hot flapjack. He says he was druther be where he was had a show for his life. Then Tookpafka Micco he say Hotgun ain't told half of it, 'cause out in Oklahoma they was had a drought in the summer time and hard times in the fall, 'sides blizzards in the winter time and cyclones with long tails in the spring. Tookpafka Micco was mighty bitter and he say he was a druther had a sofky patch in Injin Territory than a big county full a debt and chinch bug in Oklahoma. He say he's glad he

wasn't a delegate to the powwow what Chief Make Certain[21] was pulled off in Eufaula 'cause he might got arrested for slander against Oklahoma. (Letter 23)

Such a passage demonstrates Posey's good sense of humor as he teases about the erratic nature of the weather, turning tornadoes and storm shelters into a joke, yet also makes fun of traditionalists Hotgun and Tookpafka Micco who use this as a reason to justify keeping Oklahoma and Indian Territory two separate states, thus making separate state proponents a joke themselves. At this time, Posey supported single statehood, believing that statehood would help Indian people to unite into a more powerful nation.[22] By reducing his opponents' argument to a premise which assumes that Indian Territory will be spared from Oklahoma's violent weather extremes if the two simply remain separate entities, Posey undermines his opponents' reasoning. Several years later, after Posey learned about the amount of fraud in White-Creek relations, he abruptly changed his position and became an advocate of separate statehood. At the time of this letter,

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[21]A reference to then Choctaw chief Green McCurtain, who in 1903 organized a constitutional convention during which the executives of the other Civilized Tribes discussed the future of Indian Territory. Posey called McCurtain a "wise and far seeing statesman" because McCurtain recognized that the White settlers in the area must also be included in the discussions surrounding eventual statehood.

[22]Posey delivered a compelling speech on this very subject when he was a third-year student at Bacone. An excerpt of the speech reads: "If the Hebrews became a mighty nation in Egypt, there is no reason why the Indians of this territory cannot become a great nation in America. It is not impossible, and the truth demands persevering, top-destined, upright men, with minds as broad as the sky above them, who can by dent [sic] of reason and justice thwart even the measures of the United States, and make the existence of an Indian commonwealth known to the world" (Littlefield 56). Posey's speech was delivered at the graduation ceremonies, impressing his listeners. A short time later, it was published in the *Indian Journal*.

however, Posey's Fixico makes fun of separate state-ists to discredit their position.

While Fixico's letters feature the humorous elements which are the hallmark of Posey's writing, especially in his discussions of political matters, they are also an important record of the changes being wrought to native traditions and lifeways as Indian people shift their ways to accommodate mainstream society. In Letter 62, Fixico narrates what Tookpafka Micco believes will be the changes which he and other Creeks will go through because of statehood:

> "...I go to lots 'o trouble an' expense for nothin', gettin' ready to take up the white man's burden an' walk off with it. I tell my wife she mus' quit huntin' wild onions in the creek bottom an' gather gossip in the womens' literary club, an' stop poundin' sofky corn an' subscribe for the Ladies' Home Journal, an' hire a creek freedman for a coachman an' go shoppin' in a buggy with red runnin' gears an' a high seat 'stead of on a three hundred pound filly with the colt followin' 'long behin'. Then I was go before the Injin agent an' ask 'im to take off my hobbles so I could sell my land an' buy a pair o' tailor-made breeches with legs like a talk' machine horn an' a waistcoat that look like the comic supplement o' the Sunday daily. Then I go 'mong the politicians an' help build a machine to swing the full blood vote when the time come."

Notice that Tookpafka Micco's monologue shows his fear of being negatively affected by mainstream society: his anxiety of giving up traditional ways to "fit in" with White men and women---specifically mentioning that he fears his family will have to give up riding

horses in order to maintain appearances in the community by traveling in a fancy buggy with "red runnin' gears an' a high seat," and that his wife will have to learn to gossip and be part of society clubs rather than taking care of her family---making a profit by selling land, something which runs counter to Tookpafka Micco's traditional Creek upbringing, and increasingly becoming involved in politics. Interestingly, Posey is remembered for his progressive politics. He supported acculturation, believing that the conservative Snake Party was unrealistically holding onto old-time ways and ideals which, from Posey's perspective, would be a detrimental blow to progress.[23] In this passage, Posey's Fixico makes fun of Tookpafka Micco, a conservative, for his fears of change, just as he makes fun of him in an earlier letter for arguing that separate statehood is better for Indian Territory in order to maintain its weather conditions.

In Letter 56, Fixico records Hotgun's---also a conservative---support for separate statehood:

> "We was ready for the Government to keep its promise and fence us off to ourselves. We was give up all our bad habits, like wearing breech clouts and feathers on the head. We wear hand-me-downs now all the time and live in box shacks with a side room to it instead of log huts daubed with

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[23]While at the Indian University, Posey once argued, "Civilization has become so very popular among the Indians that it is a hard matter to even glean a legend from the lowest ranks---let alone the more cultured. Old fashions and ways of living are fast becoming extinct" (Littlefield, 44). By this point in his education Posey was well-indoctrinated in the matters of "civilization" and "culture" and believed that the views of conservative Indians detrimentally affected progress in Indian Territory. Though Posey's mother had told him Creek stories as a child and Posey spoke fluent Creek and Choctaw, some critics believe that Posey's knowledge of traditional culture was limited. It is likely that Posey was aware of, and participated in, Creek culture more than some accept.

men. We have give up the simple life, and buy fine buggies and lightning rods and calendar clocks and had our forefathers' pictures enlarged and be civilized citizens instead common fullblood Injins."

Notice that Hotgun's wording reflects the prevalent propaganda at the time: that Indians represented everything uncivilized, while mainstream society represented civilization. For present-day readers this shows how pervasive this propaganda was in the early twentieth century---so widespread that some Indian people, even a conservative like Hotgun, were disseminating it. Here, Hotgun argues that Indian Territory is ready to be a separate state--Posey's own view by this time---because Indian people have acquired the ways of civilization from mainstream society. Hotgun's approach is similar in Letter 57 when he points out his pride in knowing that Creek people have given up the "warpath" in favor of holding political conventions:

> "Long time ago [the Indian] give a war whoop and go on the warpath; this time he call a convention and go on record. Instead a making medicine he make history; instead a chasing the pioneers with a tomahawk, he preside in convention and use the tomahawk for a gavel to call the pioneers to order; and instead a swearing vengeance against the pale face, he set up and make a big talk on how to make a state. The Injin is civilized and aint extinct no more than a rabbit. He's just beginning to feel his breakfast food."

Hotgun's monologues testify to how much Indian people were affected by popular notions about themselves. Although politically conservative, Hotgun nonetheless accepts the

belief that Indians were uncivilized prior to contact with mainstream society.

Importantly, Posey's letters document both the political changes taking place in Indian Territory and the nation at the turn of the century, and the personal changes which Indian people endured as a result of acculturation. During his lifetime, Posey saw radical changes taking place in Indian Territory. Most importantly, there was a shift in land tenure from tribal title to private ownership. This process of allotment bred its own problems as Indian people, for whom individual ownership of land ran counter to traditional lifeways, struggled to adapt to this new way of thinking, and as fraud in governmental offices increased, many times with the end result of non-Indians successfully stealing land from Indian people. These changes in land tenure were accompanied by radical changes in social and political life. The tribes which occupied Indian Territory tended to be more acculturated to American society than other tribes because their traditional lifeways paralleled mainstream ways to a certain extent. In a short period of time, government officials encouraged tribes in Indian Territory to set examples for other tribes by rapidly developing constitutional governments, instituting public school programs, as well as adopting the dress, housing, religion, and commercialism of mainstream society. Changes occurred so quickly that political factions resulted. On one side were the conservatives, or traditionalists---as represented by Hotgun and Tookpafka Micco---who supported adhering to traditional ways. In opposition were the progressives, Indian people like Posey who supported changes in the name of progress. Complicating matters further was the division caused by proposed statehood.

Posey addresses these concerns and others with both satire and humor in his Fus

Fixico letters. Having been taught by his parents from an early age that humor has value, Posey uses it to reach out to his audience, finding that wit is an effective medium to discuss serious issues. Novelist James Welch [Blackfeet/Gros Ventre] observes that humor is "based on presenting people in such a way that you're not exactly making fun of them, but you're seeing them for what they are and then you can tease them a little bit. That's a lot of Indian humor---teasing, and some plays on words; Indians are very good at puns" (Coltelli 192). Fixico's teasing, use of Creek dialect, and plays-on-names all originate in his Creek tradition and the stories which his mother told him. According to Carol Hunter, "Posey knew well the Creek propensity for joking and teasing, for he engaged in it all of his life. Perhaps he feared that readers outside Indian country might not understand that special relationship between the teaser and the teased [had he accepted offers for increasing his audience] (Hunter 42). Had Will Rogers not succeeded Posey, Posey would likely be known now as the greatest Indian humorist.

*Will Rogers*

Born November 4, 1879, in what would later be called Oologah, Oklahoma, but then the Cherokee Nation, Will Rogers was only six years younger than Alexander Posey. What separated the two were the different paths that each pursued: while Posey remained in Indian Territory, then Oklahoma, as a newspaper-man and tribal official, Rogers quickly left the area to seek success in the outer world. Rogers's father was an astute cattle rancher, from whom Rogers acquired a love for living on the range, working with horses, raising cattle, and roping. Both parents were mixed-blood Cherokees, making Rogers number 11, 384 on the Cherokee Nation rolls. Clem Rogers, Will's father, eventually

accumulated sixty thousand acres of land in what is currently northeastern Oklahoma, and owned thousands of beef cattle. Clem did not own this acreage but rather served as a caretaker of it for the Cherokee Nation. Later, after the Dawes Commission redistributed the land in Indian Territory with the Curtis Act, Clem Rogers's ranch would shrink to only the 148 acres allowed to him by allotment (Carter 25).

Born to an affluent family, Will's father was not only a successful business-man, but also a judge and statesman who served five terms as a senator in the Cherokee Nation, a government and country unto itself before statehood. While growing up, Will learned about Cherokee history from his parents and from neighbors in the community, and as well, learned about African heritage from the freed slaves who worked as farmhands and cowboys on Rogers's ranch. Throughout his life, Will was proud of his Cherokee blood, though he lived in a period of discrimination. He once said, "My father was one-eighth Cherokee Indian and my mother was a quarter-blood Cherokee. I never got far enough in arithmetic to figure out how much injun that made me, but there's nothing of which I am more proud than my Cherokee blood" (Carter 15).

Disappointed at the number of fences going up in Indian Territory and lured by stories of great opportunity for riches working as a cowboy in Argentina, Will convinced his friend, Dick Paris, to book shop passage to Buenos Aires. Paris grew homesick quickly but Will decided to stay in Argentina and learn about the cattle industry. Making only 25 cents for every head of cattle which he roped, Will only earned between $5 and $8 a month. Frustrated that his plans had not turned out as he had expected, he then traveled to Africa to work as a cowboy. It was in Africa that Rogers, 23 years old, signed on as

"The Cherokee Kid: Fancy Lasso Artist and Rough Rider," making $20 to $25 dollars each week. Gradually, Will's career as a roping artist/humorist blossomed and he found himself traveling to several countries and to many states in America as an entertainer with different western show companies. Finally, his salary grew to an astronomical $1000 a week when he became part of the *Ziegfeld Follies*. Eventually, Will's career expanded into other areas of entertainment: he began to write a weekly column for the McNaught Syndicate, the success of which led to Will becoming involved in the radio industry, and eventually, films. By the time of his death, Rogers had written thousands of newspaper columns, hundreds of weekly syndicated articles, and six books. He had also worked as a radio personality and made over forty-six silent motion pictures, twenty-one sound films, reigned for three years as the leading male actor, and was the highest paid actor in Hollywood, earning upwards of a million dollars for a multi-film deal (Carter 78).

Much of Rogers's success stemmed from his wit. Before leaving Indian Territory Rogers occasionally worked as an amateur roper in local entertainment shows. At one of these shows he was asked to speak to patrons before a barbecue dinner. Rogers said, "This is a mighty fine dinner." Pause. "What there is of it." The guests laughed, much to Rogers's horror. He thought he had made a major social gaffe. He tried to cover it up by saying, "Well, there is plenty of it." Another pause. "Such as it is" (Carter 26). Again, the guests laughed. Later, Rogers incorporated one-liners such as these into his roping acts, becoming the first lasso artist to have a running commentary as part of his program. Often, his humor was self-deprecating---poking fun at one's self while doing so to others---which is a hallmark of Indian humor For instance, at one show Rogers told the crowd,

"Now, folks, this is a pretty good stunt...if I can do it." During another performance, he quipped, "Swinging a rope isn't bad...as long as your neck's not in it." And, "Out west, where I come from, they won't let me play with this rope...think I might hurt myself" (Carter 42-43).

About humor, Rogers said, the way to make a joke effective is to "make it look like it was not a joke" (Carter 53). In "How to be Funny," an article which appeared in the September 1929 edition of *American Magazine*, Rogers has fun describing an interview in which a student at the University of Nebraska asked him how to be funny. Some of the questions and Rogers's answers include:

> "Is the field of humor crowded?"
>
> *Only when Congress is in session.*
>
> "What talent is necessary? Must one be born with a funnybone in his head?"
>
> *Its not a talent, its an affliction. If a funnybone is necessary I would say that in the head is the place to have it. Thats the least used of a humorists equipment.*
>
> "What field of Humor offers the best field now and which is most liable to develop?"
>
> *Well, I think the "Nut" or "Cuckoo" field is the best bet now, and from what I saw of modern America, I think "Nuttier Still" or "Super Cuckoo" will be more apt to develop.*
>
> "In training what should one aim for?"

*Aim for Mark Twain, even if you land with Mutt and Jeff.*

"Whats the best way to start being a Humorist?"

*Recovery from a Mule kick is one thats used a lot. Being dropped head downward on a pavement in youth, has been responsible for a lot. And discharge from an Asylum for mental cases is almost sure fire.*

"How should one practice for it after starting it?"

*By reading Editorials in Tabloid Magazines and three pages of the Congressional Record before retiring every night.*

"Should one jot down ideas?"

*No! There will be so few that you can remember them.*

"Does College training add to your chances?"

*Yes, nothing enhances a mans humor more than College. Colleges and Ford cars have been indispensable to humor.*

"Do you think it does any good to play the Fool and wit at social gatherings?"

*Not if they will feed you without it. But if you feel that you need the practice and just cant remain normal any longer, why go ahead. Everybody will perhaps want to kill you, and may. As for Social gatherings, I never knew of a Humorist getting into one if it had any social standing.*

Rogers's self-deprecating quips demonstrate his one-liner style. He makes fun of what humorists do, even though he himself was (and is) noted for being one of the best

humorists in America. Not only that, his remarks show that Rogers enjoyed needling politicians and making references to popular culture. Like Posey, Rogers makes use of misspelled words, deliberate grammatical errors and punctuation problems. From the start of his writing career, Rogers was adamant that editors leave any mechanical errors in his texts because they were done deliberately and reflected his down-home style.

Joking aside, Rogers understood the power which humor possesses, whether delivered in a radio address, a news column, a magazine article, or even as dialogue in a film. According to Joseph Carter, "Will Rogers was not a joke teller; he was a humorous commentator on real happenings, trends, and people" (Carter 67). Very quickly, Rogers realized that the public trusted his views and that he had the power to mold public opinion with his comments. Likewise, he learned that humor is a powerful tool when used effectively.

Many of Rogers's most famous barbs concern politics. In "Diary of the Senate," Rogers makes fun of the Senate for "trying to find $2 billion that it already had spent, but didn't have." The day-by-day diary runs:

> Monday---Soak the rich.
>
> Tuesday---Begin hearing from the rich.
>
> Tuesday afternoon---Decide to give the rich a chance to get richer.
>
> Wednesday---Tax Wall Street sales.
>
> Thursday---Get word from Wall Street: lay off us or you will get no campaign contributions.
>
> Thursday afternoon---Decide we are wrong on Wall Street.

Friday---Soak the little fellow.

Saturday---Find out there is no little fellow. He has been soaked until he drowned.

Sunday---Meditate.

Next week---Same procedure, only more talk and less results.

Rogers's joke underscores a frustration which Alexander Posey shared---that government accomplishes little, if anything. Rogers suggests the process is endless. The Senate meets each week, going through the exact process in every meeting with the end goal of raising money. Discovering that its tactics are fruitless, it nonetheless endlessly repeats the same useless process, each time with the same result. Rogers's criticism is pertinent in the present-day as many citizens express frustration that the government feeds off of its constituents only to accomplish little.

In another joke, Rogers quips:

> Another trouble with politics, it breeds politics. So that makes it pretty hard to stamp out. The only way to do it is at the source. We got to get birth control among politicians.

Again, Rogers expresses his concern that government is out of control. Characteristic of his style, he introduces a subject---the growth in politics---and addresses it seriously, at least for a moment. Then, he surprises his audience by doing the unexpected: undercutting the topic with a one-liner which actually summarizes more effectively the serious point which Rogers is making. Here, Rogers's one-liner is uproarious---solving big politics by giving politicians birth control to keep the political process from reproducing even more---

yet sobering because many average Americans felt helpless to do anything about the growth in government.

One of Rogers's favorite topics is making fun of politicians for being dishonest. Rogers banters:

> Imagine a man in public office that everybody knew where he stood. We wouldn't call him a statesman, we would call him a curiosity.

Or:

> A man's thoughts are naturally on his next term more than his country.

And:

> Once a man holds public office, he is absolutely no good for honest work.

Similarly:

> Shrewdness in public life all over the world is always honored. Honesty in public men is generally attributed to dumbness and is seldom rewarded.

A running commentary throughout Rogers's writing is his dissatisfaction with the politicians who make important decisions for the people in America. At one point, a rumor surfaced that Rogers might make a run for the Vice-Presidency, much to the public's delight. In this, Rogers found a grand opportunity to joke about why he *should* be nominated, not realizing that the public would take him seriously. In an article for *Life* magazine, he begins by joking that Charles G. Dawes was only nominated as vice-president "on account of his profanity." About this, Rogers jokes, "Now I never tried cussin' in public, but I guess I could learn to get used to it before a crowd." This was just one qualification which Rogers listed for why he, too, should be nominated to run for the

Vice-Presidency. The others include:

> Another big reason why I should be nominated is I am not a Democrat.
>
> Another still bigger reason why I should be nominated is I am not a Republican. I am just progressive enough to suit the dissatisfied. And lazy enough to be a Stand Patter.
>
> When the President has to go anywhere, the Vice President has to go and speak or eat for him. Now I could take in all the dinners for I am a fair eater. I could say, "I am sorry the President can't come, but he had pressing business." Of course, I wouldn't tell the real reason why he didn't come, so I am just good enough a liar to be a good Vice President.
>
> I am not much of an after-dinner speaker, but I could learn two stories, one for dinners where ladies were present, and one for where they were not.
>
> I have no dress suit. The government would have to furnish me a dress suit. If I went to a dinner in a rented one, they would mistake me for a Congressman.
>
> I know I can hear a lot of you say, "Yes, Will, you would make a good vice president, but suppose something happened to the President?"
>
> I would do just like Mr. Coolidge. I would do in there and keep still and say nothing. He is the first President to discover what the American people want is to be let alone.
>
> P. S. I was born in a log cabin.

When Rogers realized that the public took his light-hearted speech seriously, he quickly

abated their hopes by assuring in one of his newspaper columns that "There is no inducement that would make me foolish enough to run for any political office." When the rumors continued, he stormed back in another column,

> "Let's stop all this damned foolishness right now. I hereby and hereon want to go on record as being the first Presidential, Vice Presidential, Senator, or Justice of Peace candidate to withdraw. I not only 'don't choose to run,' but I don't ever want to leave a loophole in case I am drafted and I would use 'choose.'"

Unable to maintain the serious tone, Rogers then cites the real reason for his decision not to run as being a lack of funds. "[No funds] has shown up to now, so that's really the reason for this early withdrawal. Politics has got so expensive that it takes lots of money to even get beat nowadays."

For all his barbed wit, Rogers was actually an amiable man who enjoyed meeting even the politicians who were the subject of so many of his jokes. In fact, Rogers's most famous statement may actually be the one in which he admitted, "When I die, my epitaph, or whatever you call those signs on gravestones, is going to read 'I joked about every prominent man of my time but I never met a man I didn't like.'" Unable to resist the urge to make even his epitaph a moment for humor, Rogers added, "I can hardly wait to die so it can be carved. And when you come around my grave, you'll probably find me sitting there proudly reading it" (Carter 142).

By the time of his death, Rogers had found success as a writer, an actor, a rancher, an entertainer, and a political commentator. In all of his endeavors---whether tramping

around Argentina as a young man looking for a quick buck, or entertaining the President of the United States---Rogers was fast to share his humor. As an adult reflecting upon his life, Rogers remembered that others often credited his mother with her son's sense of humor. Roger's writes "folks...told me what little humor I have comes from her" (Carter 16). Even as an adult who had accomplished so much because of his wit, Rogers modestly calls his humor "little," downplaying the impact which his humor had on America at the time, and on generations to come.

*Dan Madrano*

Though lesser known, Oklahoman Dan Madrano deserves comment as a native humorist following in the traditions of Alexander Posey and Will Rogers. *Heap Big Laugh*, Madrano's only book, was written in honor of Daniel C. Madrano, Madrano's son, a pilot who died in 1943 in a World War II military skirmish. "Like most young stalwart Indian boys," Madrano writes in his dedication, "Daniel loved funny, humorous Indian stories, especially those where the uneducated fullblood attempts, in his awkward, broken English, to imitate the educated white man." Madrano's book is an impressive collection of the stories and jokes which his son loved hearing while he was growing up. Including jokes which mostly originated on reservations or in native communities, Madrano deliberately includes few jokes from well-known Indian humorists like Will Rogers. Instead, he consciously chooses to present jokes "from the world of anonymity, from unheard of persons who comprise our Indian world." The anecdotes which Madrano includes document the kinds of jokes which were being told by Indian people in the early twentieth century and record---as with Alexander Posey---some of the lifeway changes

which they underwent due to increasing contact with mainstream society.

About humor in Indian Country, Madrano writes:

> It is quite obvious that many contemporary writers contend that the Indian has no sense of humor, and that the context of his personality is void of any conception of wit; that, indeed, is as far from the actual truth as day and night. Quite to the contrary, in reality, the average Indian, as a general rule, lives, acts, and conducts his whole life through the media of his native wit and humor. Everything he undertakes is shrouded in light fun, and through his keen, sensitive eyes and mind, he sees fun, humor, and joy in making someone else, or himself, the jester, or the proverbial goat.

Significantly, Madrano points out how important humor was in the everyday life of Native Americans in the early twentieth century. As later chapters will note, humor continues to serve a major role in native living, an indication of wit's special place in traditional tribal cultures. The jokes in *Heap Big Laugh* address subjects as varied as religion, education, farming, travel, clothing, law, romance, women, behavior, medicine, speaking and writing the English language, and music, only to name a few. Like Alexander Posey and Will Rogers, Madrano also spends some time joking about American politics, a reminder that Indian people were as interested (and as frustrated) with politics as non-Indian people.

For example, in "Delegate to Congress," Madrano writes:

> Sidemeat Cholly was delegate his tribe to th' Washington, th' D. C. He was sent to look at big book, he don't read, bud shore seen um lots picher on walls Congress rooms. He say, "Congress got some of th' best

members what money can buy." He say, "You can lead a mans to Congress, but you can't make heem think." He say, "All operation by Congress are directed by bloc-heads, 'an when Congress take a vacation, they don't do anything then nuther."

Sidemeat Cholly is the foremost joke-teller in many of Madrano's stories. Like Alexander Posey's Hotgun, Sidemeat Cholly speaks in dialect. Here, Sidemeat Cholly makes fun of the politicians in Congress, joking that they are incapable of thinking or accomplishing anything, sentiments which Will Rogers shared in his witticisms.

Sidemeat Cholly's "A Replacement" serves as a nice follow-up to this joke. Here, Cholly criticizes the government for its Indian policies, joking that the government "is trying to replace th' red Injun with red tape." The full barb goes:

> Sidemeat Cholly, he say, "When I got it back from th' Washington, the D. C., I shore was make a lot of mad on 'count of them gov'ment fellas in them Indian office. Now they is trying to replace th' red Injun with red tape; thet shore ain't good, too."

Cholly's criticism reflects the attitude which many Indian people had (and have) with government organizations responsible for overlooking Indian affairs. Rather than serving as aids to Indian communities as they transitioned to mainstream society's practices, Indian offices often found any good intentions which they had buried in governmental bureaucracy and paperwork. Similar criticism is heard in the present-day in relation to organizations like the Bureau of Indian Affairs (see chapter 6).

"Political Animal" is reminiscent of both Posey and Rogers. Again, Sidemeat

Cholly is the narrator:

> Sidemeat Cholly was tole me other day thet them politicians he shore funny animals. He say, "They are so busy hey don't have time to be honest; jus' like cat, sit on fence, squall an' yell all night and keep both ears to th' ground."

Posey was especially critical of politicos who straddled a political fence, or position, without making a clear commitment to either side. In the early twentieth century this widespread practice was a real problem for people living in Indian Territory because it impeded progress of any type from being made. Rather than taking a position and making decisions regarding important political issues like Statehood, politicians tended to remain indecisive, biding their time to see what decision-makers in Washington, D. C. would recommend. This produced a chaotic state in which the citizenry became increasingly frustrated with, and distrustful of, politicians who were supposed to represent their views and yet did not do so.

One of Madrano's best digs at politicians is in "A Candidate's Expense Account." Here, Enoch Birdtrot, a full-blood Indian, is made fun of when he files his expense report with the Oklahoma State Election Board for the political campaign which he engineered while running for a prominent county office. Though not made clear, it is likely that Enoch Birdtrot is a fictional character, devised by the joke-teller(s) only to mock the extensive expense reports of politicians in Oklahoma. The report reads:

> 1. I drive man Fod Model T 23,500 mile, which gov'ment buy for me for vote get it purpose.

2. I haul 743 kid all over county to schools, for the same purpose.

3. I haul 319 farmer, 27 cows, 60 pig, 4 sows, 2 hog, 26 goat, lead 4 horse, 1 dagone mule, and 50 chickens and 10 rooster.

4. I been kiss 230 baby, shook hand with 7210 man, 235 woman, squeeze th' hand of 40 of 'em, 42 widow, 2 grass, 1 almost, and 1 old.

5. I got bite by 4 dogs, 1 at night, 2 in morning, and 1 after dinner.

6. I hung out on fence 21 washings and 34 on lines.

7. I churned 5 times, got 20 pounds butter and drunk four gallon of milk, and ate 7 pounds of cheese, 10 boxes of crackers, 4 pound of raw onions, and took ½ gallon of castor oil.

8. I was baby sitter 21 nights and 4 days. I sang 59 songs and danced 18 square dances and 20 waltzes, 16 one-step, 10 Rumba, 5 jitterbug, and 1 Blackbottom.

9. I cut 14 cords of wood, milked 75 cows, fed 90 hogs, clean the barn for 60 horses.

10. I dug 360 post holes, dug 1 well, spaded 19 rows of potatoes, picked 110 pounds of cotton, chewed 4 pounds of tobacco, cussed 10, 491, 644 times

11. I shocked 65 acres of wheat, cranked 49 cars, and got my arm broke twice.

12. I visited 864 people in four hospitals, flirted with 9 nurses, got cussed out by 8 and th' other was deaf.

13. I attended 61 box suppers, 21 socials at churches and schools, ate 165 donuts, drank 10 gallons of coffee and ate supper with 310 wooman, proposed to 16 old maids, 19 widders, 11 grass, and 10 sod; I was accepted by all except one and have 8 breach of promise suits pending.

14. I bought 18 chances on quilts; got drunk 10 times; got throwed in jail twice; lost my false teeth either at the Legion or at the Indian Stomp Dance.

15. I joined 5 churches and was baptized in each one, three times by drowning.

16. I promised jobs to 101 men, labors, walkers, and just sitters, shovel and spade P. W. A. trained.

17. I promise th' same kind to 98 woomans, who all wanted to be receptionist in my office or my home.

18. I told 10, 974, 644 lies; wore a mechanical smile or grin 229 days; let runts or kids and demacraps run over me.

19. I had 4 car wrecks, 6 fights, was in hospital 2 times for 6 days each, and I spend um $99.99 until I losted 'count an' was defeated 999 votes, tha's all.

As it proceeds, Birdtrot's report becomes increasingly ludicrous: telling over ten million lies, proposing to more than 50 women, promising jobs to nearly 200 people, and wearing a "mechanical smile or grin" for 229 days. Even so, the report is a pointed stab at the superficiality and lack of ethics typified by politicians. Though more than half a century

old, the joke is still pertinent in the present-day as politicians are criticized for their artificiality and lack of substance.

Madrano's book also features several jokes which poke fun at Whites. In "Agreeable Society," Whites are teased for thinking that they have something to teach Indians, though the Indian people laughingly admit that they already know all of the lessons which the Whites are dispelling. It reads:

> A group of Indians were talking about the requirements necessary to become a member of the exclusive local society in their community. An old full-blood spoke up and said, "Now lissen fellas's, if you want to belong to society, you gotta be 'greeable an' let um teach you what you already know."

The joke is a dig at the educational programs which non-Indian people offered to Indians during this period of transition, largely as a way of forcing their beliefs and practices onto Indian communities. Here, this custom is reduced to a joke, making the Whites seem dense for their attempts at acculturation.

In "Keep Um Honest," an Indian man jokes about the character of the Whites whom he knows:

> Amos Wolftail always managed to keep an old shot gun standing in the corner near his bed. One day a friend asked, "Why do you keep that loaded gun in your bed room all the time? Aren't your white neighbors honest?" "Yah, Yah," replied old Amos, "they is honest, I guess, but th' gun is to help keep um more honest."

Though most people are aware that the early Americans feared Indian people, largely due to their prevalent acceptance of the preconceived notions about them, it is rarely acknowledged that this xenophobia was also experienced by Indian people as they encountered White people and their differing ways. Here, the Indian man assures that Whites are honest---undercut, in part, by his "I guess"---yet admits that he will keep a shotgun nearby in order to encourage the continuance of this honesty.

As in the present-day, inter-tribal joking---mostly good-natured teasing done by Indian people at the expense of members of other tribes---was popular in the early twentieth century. Madrano catalogues several inter-tribal jokes. One of the best is called "Knowing your Tribes":

> Henry Nickelson, a mixed-blood Cherokee and an old time Field Clerk with the Bureau of Indian Affairs, in Muskogee, Oklahoma, always prided himself on being able to tell exactly to what tribe a person belonged just by looking at him. One day a group of Indians were conversing when Hank came along. One of the Indians, knowing about Hank's braggadocio, asked if he could tell to what tribe each of them belonged. "Sure," replied old Hank. "You," pointing to a big fat fullblood. "You are an Osage." He was right. "And you," pointing to another bystander, "I would say you are a Caddo." Again he was right. "And you," pointing to a rum soaked stuffed fullblood, "I would say you are a Choctaw." "Nah, I ain't," answered the old buck with considerable assurance. "I been sick 'bout six mont's tha's what make me look that away. I am fullblood Cherokee."

Certain tribes do have distinguishing physical traits, making it possible to identify what tribe a person belongs to just by looking at him or her. Here, the joke is on Choctaws, with Henry Nickelson, a Cherokee, teasing Choctaws for drinking alcohol.[24] Ultimately, the joke turns on Nickelson when "the old buck" reveals that he is actually Cherokee but that he has been sick, making him look Choctaw.

Another good example of inter-tribal humor appears in "Bull Shippers." In this joke, three full-blood Indian men are bragging about which of their tribes is the best performer in the cattle industry, each trying to outdo the other. The joke goes:

> Three fullbood Indians, an Apache, a Kiowa, and a Sioux, were having a friendly drink and talking about the great achievements of their respective tribes in the cattle business. The Apache said, after several drinks, "My tribe he ship to Chicagie 100 bulls las' year." Whereupon the Kiowa said, "My tribe he ship 200 bulls to Kansas City las' year an' this year we going ship 500." The old Sioux not wanting to be outdone said, "My tribe he shipped 2000 bulls to Omaha las' year and this year we going ship 4000 bulls an' mebeso more, to Chicagie." Whereupon, the poor old Apache sensing he was outdone said, after another drink, "Oh hells, you fellas

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[24]This is also a reminder that alcohol used to be prohibited in Indian Territory. Many of the arguments in favor of statehood for Indian Territory involved this issue of Prohibition. Even though the illegal production and distribution of alcohol was big business in Indian Territory, some people supported statehood simply because it would mean that the larger alcohol companies known for producing quality brands could sell their merchandise in Indian Territory. Others opposed statehood for Indian Territory for this same reason. Regardless, Madrano includes many jokes and anecdotes about the use of alcohol in Indian Country in the early-to-mid twentieth century in *Heap Big Laugh*, showing what a concern it was becoming at the time.

oughta be bigger bull shippers than us, on account you got more bull than what we got, tha's why."

The jokes hinges upon popular slang. When the Apache man tells the Sioux that his tribe "got more bull than what we got" he is playing-on-words. According to the Sioux man, his tribe *does* have more bulls than the Apache or Kiowa tribes. Of course, this statement is only brought about because of the growing spirit of braggadocio in the exchange between the men, and is likely affected because of the increasing number of alcoholic drinks which each man is having. The Apache's play-on-words, however, is also an insult. By telling the Sioux man that his tribe is full of bull he suggests that Sioux people are pompous without merit. Jokes salted with this type of inter-tribal teasing are popular in present-day Indian Country (see chapter 6).

Madrano's influence as a humorist has not been as far-reaching as Will Rogers, nor even perhaps as extensive as Alexander Posey's. Like Posey, Madrano knew political follies first-hand because he served in the Oklahoma State Legislature in the 1940s and early 1950s. Whereas Rogers and Posey both found professional success because of their humor, Madrano's goal, in part, was to honor the death of his son. In addition, Madrano writes in the Foreword to *Heap Big Laugh*, "Through [this book] the author strives to convey to the world at large that the Indians are truly a humorous race. They seek with mirthful anticipation the solace and comfort which emanate from the indulgence of wholesome and innocent humor." Madrano's work shows that humor continued to serve an important role in Indian communities during and after the acculturation processes which occurred in the early twentieth century. This, in turn, reflects the significance which

wit played---and plays---in traditional ceremonies. The remainder of this study explores how this spirit of humor continues in the present-day and shows that this, in fact, is a reflection of the sacred role which humor played/plays in tribal cultures.

## Chapter Three

### Trickster as Culture Bearer, Comic Relief, and All Around Scoundrel

Non-Indians tend to interpret Trickster, when confronted with his/her/its presence in traditional stories or in modern literary and artistic forms, only as a model of comic relief. However, while it is true that Trickster's antics do often approach sheer buffoonery, and are intended to make audiences laugh, his role extends far beyond that of a mere comic. Trickster is both joker and god, destroyer and healer, criminal and moralist, all in the same package. Alan Velie explains it in this way:

> As the name implies, the trickster is, on one level--probably the most important--an amoral practical joker who wanders about playing pranks on unsuspecting victims. But he is far more complex than that. The same figure, in the same set of tales, appears to be alternately an evil spirit and a benevolent deity, a mortal and a god, a creator and a destroyer, a culture hero and a villain. At times he is an ideal citizen, a model to tribal members; at others he is a totally amoral being who flouts the most sacred taboos with impunity. With all the fluctuations, certain things about the trickster are predictable: he is always a wanderer, always hungry, and usually oversexed. (44)

Kenneth Lincoln reiterates much of the same dichotomy when he writes that "The spirit of Trickster infuses god, fool, superhero, and devil all rolled into one" (Lincoln 257). Lincoln also equates Trickster with being the "comic disarranger who dissolves boundaries, unsettles certainties, shakes up fixed ideas, and twists the stiff tail of long-

faced moralists" (142).

Trickster is replete with contradictions, yet serves a pivotal role in traditional storytelling, and in contemporary tribal cultures. Both a humorist who entertains, and a teacher who educates, Trickster occupies an elusive role which is ever-changing. In his study of the Winnebago Trickster cycle, Paul Radin asserts that Trickster teaches his audience how not to be, and how not to act. Trickster's instruction through the use of negative example ironically reinforces traditional beliefs and values. Trickster's comedic moments, then, serve as both comic relief and entertainment, as well as act to emphasize his sacred role as moral guide, healer, and educator. The comedy can be so wildly humorous at times, however, that it is difficult to recognize Trickster's spiritual function. This leads Kenneth Lincoln to assert that the Western mentality typically sees Tricksters only as a "lowly clown to relieve serious pressure" (66).

Although Tricksters do certainly exhibit clown-like behavior, sometimes for sheer entertainment and sometimes for more important reasons, their roles almost always supersede those which are normally attributed to a mere clown. Moreover, Tricksters continue to serve important functions in contemporary tribal communities, emphasizing Trickster's continuing role as a culture bearer. Traditional Trickster stories are told to both children and adults, and new stories about Trickster's experiences in the modern world (many of which play with the dual nature of Trickster) are being crafted by contemporary Native American artists and writers. In fact, Trickster's presence is widespread in today's literature, from Gerald Vizenor's [Chippewa] chaotic, and at times nonsensical, postmodernist renderings in *Bearheart: The Heirship Chronicles* and

*Griever: An American Monkey King in China*, to A. A. Carr's [Laguna Pueblo/Navajo] fanciful portrayal of Trickster as a vampire in *Eye Killers*, to Ronald B. Querry's [Choctaw] more traditional depiction of Trickster in *The Death of Bernadette Lefthand*.[25] Since recognizing Trickster's dual nature as both comic and spiritualist is pivotal for fully understanding his significance in tribal cultures, this chapter will examine works by Louise Erdrich [Chippewa], and Louis Owens [Choctaw], writers who depict the full dimensionality of Trickster as both buffoon and healer.[26] The chapter closes with a discussion of a select number of the artistic renderings of Trickster as envisioned by contemporary artist Harry Fonseca [Maidu/Portuguese/Hawaiian], whose playful depictions of Coyote once prompted him to state that "I make him do all kinds of things I wouldn't have him do if my face were up there" (Lincoln 148).

*Louise Erdrich*

Louise Erdrich was born in 1954 in Little Falls, Minnesota. Today, her writing career is one of the most prolific and notable of contemporary Native American writers. The recipient of several distinguished writing awards, Erdrich's career blossomed after the 1984 publication of her first novel, *Love Medicine*. Since then Erdrich has published additional novels, including *The Beet Queen* (1986 ), *Tracks* (1988), the prequel to *Love Medicine*, *The Bingo Palace* (1994), a sequel to *Love Medicine*, and *Tales of Burning*

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[25]A. A. Carr and Ron Querry do not depict Trickster with comic undertones.

[26]By discussing only these two writers, I do not mean to limit my suggestion that Trickster plays an important role only in a limited number of works. Rather, Trickster is important in many texts. I choose to limit my discussion to two novels simply because I wish to thoroughly emphasize the multi-dimensionality of his characterizations in these works.

*Love* (1996), a sequel to *The Bingo Palace* and likely Erdrich's funniest novel; has co-authored several books with her late husband, Michael Dorris; and has penned two books of poetry, *Jacklight* (1984) and *Baptism of Desire* (1989). Erdrich's prose is noted for its poetic imagery and also its widespread appeal. Reading one of Erdrich's novels is like reading about one's own family, replete with its eccentricities, scandals and hardships, yet full of life.[27]

About humor, Erdrich has stated, "...there's such a sense of humor and irony in Native American life, in tribal life. I mean, that's one of the things that does not get portrayed often enough--that there's such an irony and humor" (Chavkin 68). Erdrich's novels are rooted in humor, subtle and ironic, even when tragic situations are occurring. *Love Medicine*, in particular, is charged with comedic moments, yet many readers miss this humor because they focus too much upon the adversities which the characters endure. Erdrich acknowledged the different responses which Indian and non-Indian readers have after reading *Love Medicine* in an interview: "In talking to tribal people who've read the book, the first thing they say is, 'Oh yes, that funny book.' It's not like they self-consciously pick out the humor, but on the whole it's funnier than a lot of critics who read it who were kind of saying this is devastating" (Lincoln 239).

Much of the humor in *Love Medicine* centers around Lipsha Morrisey, one of the

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[27]In *Keeping Slug Woman Alive*, Greg Sarris suggests this very idea when he writes, "Families bickering. Families arguing amongst themselves, drawing lines, maintaining old boundaries. Who is in. Who is not. Gossip. Jealousy. Drinking. Love. The ties that bind. The very human need to belong, to be worthy and valued. Families. Who is Indian. Who is not. Families bound by history and blood. This is the stuff, the fabric of my Indian community. It is what I found in Louise Erdrich's Chippewa community as I read *Love Medicine*" (117).

most memorable modern representations of a Trickster in contemporary Native American fiction. At times a simpleton whose dialogue is infused with malaproprisms, Lipsha is nonetheless a tender heart who means well.[28] In the often anthologized chapter titled "Love Medicine," Lipsha's Trickster qualities are most evident. The chapter opens with Lipsha revealing that he possesses the "touch," a healing medicine which allows him to "know the tricks of mind and body inside out without ever having trained for it" (231). However, Lipsha doubts his medicine, prompting him to confess that "From time to time I heal a person all up good inside, however when it comes to the long shot I doubt that I got staying power" (234). Lipsha's admission is revealing because it is Erdrich's first warning to readers that Lipsha may be a Trickster, and it foreshadows a coming scene in which Lipsha misuses his power, a decision which leads to his grandfather's death.

A defining character trait of Tricksters is that they play tricks on other people, yet often become the victim of these very tricks in the course of their plotting. Lipsha is no exception. After his beloved grandmother, Marie, asks him to make a love medicine to rekindle and redirect her husband's affection back to her, and away from Lulu Lamartine, Nector's longtime mistress and Marie's lifetime nemesis, Lipsha pauses at the danger:

> ...when she mentions them love medicines, I feel my back prickle at the danger. These love medicines is something of an old Chippewa specialty.

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[28]Here is a select sampling of some of Lipsha's malaproprisms: stating "I was in a laundry" rather than "I was in a quandary (234); referring to God smiting the "Phillipines" rather than the Philistines (236); miscalling Lulu's paracete a "paraklete," another name for the Holy Spirit (243); and saying that he is "misconstructing" the relationship between Marie and Nector rather than "misconstruing" it (338). Some of Lipsha's other malaproprisms can be found in passages on pages 238, 241, and 338.

> No other tribe has got them down so well. But love medicines is not for the layman to handle. You don't just go out and get one without paying for it. Before you get one, even, you should go through one hell of a lot of mental condensation. You got to think it over. Choose the right one. You could really mess up your life grinding up the wrong little thing. (241)

Unfortunately, Lipsha does *not* heed his own advice. Opting against the "mental condensation" (an example of his trademark malaproprisms) which he should engage in before acting, Lipsha devises a love potion: he acquires the hearts of a pair of turkeys rather then the hearts of geese, birds that mate for life, and feeds them to his grandparents so that they *too* will mate for life. Of course, in typical Trickster fashion, Lipsha's plot quickly goes awry. After firing what Lipsha refers to as "two accurate shots" at a pair of geese in a lake, Lipsha is dumbfounded: "...the thing is, them shots missed. I couldn't hardly believe it" (244). However, his depression at failing to acquire his targets is short-lived. Soon he convinces himself that taking an "evil shortcut" (245) and purchasing the hearts of two dead turkeys from the local supermarket will be just as good as the geese hearts. He instinctively realizes that his actions will pervert the love medicine, yet ignores his intuition:

> As I walked back from the Red Owl [store] with the rock-hard, heavy turkeys, I argued to myself about malpractice. I thought of faith. I thought to myself that faith could be called belief against the odds and whether or not there's any proof...what I'm heading at is this. I finally convinced myself that the real actual power to the love medicine was not the goose

heart itself but the faith in the cure. I didn't believe it. I knew it was wrong, but by then I had waded so far into my lie I was stuck there. (245-246)

Lipsha soon makes matters worse by blessing the turkey hearts himself after first a priest, and then Sister Mary Martin de Porres of the local convent, both refuse to do so.

The stage is now set for Lipsha's medicine to go amiss. Marie persuades her husband to eat the turkey heart, which she has prepared "smack on a piece of lettuce like in a restaurant and then attached to it a little heap of boiled peas":

> "What you want me to eat this for so bad?" [Grandpa] asked [Grandma] uncannily.
>
> Now Grandma knew the jig was up. She knew that he knew she was working medicine. He put his fork down. He rolled the heart around his saucer plate.
>
> "I don't want to eat this," he said to Grandma. "It don't look good."
>
> "Why it's fresh grade-A," she told him. "One hundred percent."
>
> He didn't ask percent what, but his eyes took on an even more warier look.
>
> "Just go on and try it," she said, taking the salt shaker up in her hand. She was getting annoyed. "Not tasty enough? You want me to salt it for you?" She waved the shaker over his plate.
>
> "All right, skinny white girl!" She had got Grandpa mad. Oopsy-daisy, he popped the heart into his mouth. I [Lipsha] was about to yawn loudly and come out of the bedroom. I was about ready for this crash of wills to be

> over, when I saw he was still up to his old tricks. First he rolled it into one side of his cheek. "Mmmmm," he said. Then he rolled it into the other side of his cheek. "Mmmmm," again. Then he stuck his tongue out with the heart on it and put it back, and there was no time to react. He had pulled Grandma's leg once too far. Her goat was got. She was so mad she hopped up quick as a wink and slugged him between the shoulder blades to make him swallow.
>
> Only thing is, he choked. He choked real bad. A person can choke to death...(248-250)

Indeed, Nector *does* choke to death, followed by Marie's collapsing onto the floor in shock, and then Lipsha fainting. The scene is a comedy of errors, quite humorous in its telling, yet also tragic in its outcome. Nevertheless, it is fitting for a Trickster. Lipsha conceives of a trick to use against his grandfather, who has been flirting with Lulu Lamartine, but rather than seeing it through its entire process correctly, he takes a shortcut and it has a calamitous outcome. Moreover, Lipsha becomes the victim of his own trick. He brainwashes himself into believing that his touch will succeed, even though he has only had minor successes in the past, and must now live knowing that his actions led to his grandfather's death.

Despite the comedy which is concurrent almost every time Lipsha appears in a scene, he also serves a more important role in the novel: that of healer. Lipsha realizes that there is an imbalance in the community. In "Love Medicine," he links this imbalance to the gods who no longer listen to the Chippewas when they pray. Lipsha explains that

the Christian God had been "defeaning up on us" for a long time, while the Chippewas have forgotten how to ask their own gods for help because "to ask proper was an art that was lost to the Chippewas once the Catholics gained ground" (236). Because his people have lost their ability to reach out to the spirit world, Lipsha understands that the tragic events which he sees occurring around him are a direct result of this spiritual vacuum:

> How else could I explain what all I had seen in my short life--King smashing his fist in things, Gordie drinking himself down to the Bismarck hospitals, or Aunt June left by a white man to wander off in the snow. How else to explain the times my touch don't work, and farther back, to the old-time Indians who was swept away in the outright germ warfare and dirty-dog killing of the whites. In those times, us Indians was so much kindlier than now. (236)

Consistent with many tribal beliefs, Lipsha understands the inter-relatedness of events. When one improper event or thought occurs, it possesses the power to disrupt the well-being not only of the community, but of the universe itself. This balance is fragile and can be broken when only one individual behaves improperly. In Lipsha's eyes, this balance was disrupted when Chippewas lost their spiritual focus. As a result, hardships and personal tragedies have occurred, and continue to occur, within the community. King's violent outbursts, Gordie's alcoholism, and June's apparent suicide are all attributed to this imbalance, as well as Lipsha's unreliable touch, and the genocide of Native peoples in the United States. Only Lipsha, who at first appears to be simple-minded, articulates this important revelation.

Moreover, it is Lipsha, acting as the novel's protagonist, who undergoes the most significant personal growth in the narrative. At *Love Medicine's* onset, Lipsha is uncertain about his heritage and feels that he does not belong. By the novel's close, Lipsha has discovered that his mother was June and forgives her for abandoning him as a child; he forgives his step-brother King for repeatedly telling him while they were growing up that he was not a "real" child in the family and for abusing him; and he discovers that his father is renowned Gerry Nanapush (342). Ironically, Trickster is the character who enjoys significant identity growth, a lesson to readers that forgiveness leads to healing, and an important reminder that Trickster figures are more than just comic relief.

Interestingly, Lipsha shares his Trickster status with his father, Gerry Nanapush. In fact, the name Nanapush is Erdrich's playful jest on readers, for the name is patterned after the names interchangeably attributed to the Chippewa Trickster in traditional storytelling, Nanabush, Manabozho, and Wenebojo (Lincoln 240). His name aside, Gerry conveys the dichotomy which is characteristic of Tricksters. His son, Lipsha, is both a bumbling simpleton and a wizened healer, while Gerry is described as "both a natural criminal and a hero" (118). He is a criminal because he repeatedly finds himself in situations where he is prompted to break the law; he is a hero because he always manages to escape from the jails which hold him, or as Gerry puts it, "No concrete shitbarn prison's built that can hold a Chippewa" (341).

Gerry's trouble first begins when he gets into a fight in a local bar with a cowboy who asks him whether it is true that "a Chippewa [is] also a nigger" (201). Gerry retaliates by kicking him in his groin, thinking that the White and Indian witnesses will tell

the police that his actions were provoked. However, he soon discovers that "there is nothing more vengeful and determined in this world than a cowboy with sore balls" (201) and finds himself in court. From this point forward, the scene is a comedy of errors:

> A local doctor testified on behalf of the cowboy's testicles and said his fertility might be impaired. Gerry got a little angry at that, and said right out in court that he could hardly believe he had done that much damage since the cowboy's balls were very small targets, it had been dark, and his aim was off anyway because of two, or maybe it was three, beers. That made matters worse...Only one good thing came from the whole experience, said Gerry, and that was that maybe the cowboy would not have any little cowboys, although, Gerry also said, he had nightmares sometimes that the cowboy did manage to have little cowboys, all born with full sets of grinning teeth, Stetson hats, and little balls hard as plum pits. (202)

Possibly patterned after Leonard Peltier, itself an insider joke by Erdrich, Gerry is imprisoned for his crime despite the cowboy's intentional provocation of him in the bar.[29]

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[29]Leonard Peltier, a Sioux man, is currently imprisoned in Leavenworth. In 1972, the American Indian Movement (AIM), a politically militant group which was very active in the early 1970s but continues in the present day to secure and expand the rights of Native peoples, and of which Peltier was a member, organized a vast march to Washington which was ironically called "The Trail of Broken Treaties." While in Washington, the marchers seized the Bureau of Indian Affairs for several days while the FBI attempted to regain control of the protest. Meanwhile, on the Pine Ridge Sioux Reservation, a conflict was taking place between several members of AIM and Dick Wilson, tribal chairman. People living on the Reservation were regularly killed by the all-powerful tribal police force which was called "Wilson's Goon Squad." Angered by the growing violence on the reservation, several Indians requested that AIM intervene. Several years passed and little changed as the the Siouan community experienced more conflicts with Wilson's

After this, Erdrich jokingly narrates that this event made it "difficult for Gerry, as an Indian, to retain the natural good humor of his ancestors in these modern circumstances" (202). This event marks Gerry as a criminal, but his subsequent criticism of the judicial system, and his repeated escapes from jail, soon earn him the respected title of "famous politicking hero, dangerous armed criminal, judo expert, escape artist, charismatic member of the American Indian Movement, and smoker of many pipes of kinnikinnick in the most radical groups" (341). It is this scene which first introduces readers to the possibility that Gerry may be a Trickster because it is this bar-room brawl, and the subsequent comedy in the courtroom, which establishes Gerry's dual reputation as both a criminal and a hero.

In addition to Gerry's bumbling inability to maintain his trick---successfully escaping from jail without being caught---and his huge appetite for food (leading to repeated comments by other characters about his sheer size), sex, alcohol, gambling and laughter, all character traits which are hallmarks of Tricksters, Gerry is most noted for his shape shifting ability, itself an important criterion which distinguishes Trickster figures. In scene after scene, we witness Gerry's "eellike properties in spite of his enormous size" as he manages to worm his way into a six-foot-thick prison wall and vanish, possibly by "rubb[ing] his own belly for luck," a playful reference to Santa Claus (200); squeeze

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Goon Squad. At the same time, Indian people everywhere were increasingly growing frustrated with the FBI. Two years later, in 1974, a conflict occurred on the Pine Ridge Reservation which led to the deaths of two FBI agents and two young Indian men. The only man convicted in the killings was Leonard Peltier, whom many believe was the victim of a corrupt arrest and unfair trial (Hilden 131). Now, Peltier enjoys an almost mythic reputation among tribal communities. Celebrated by many for his activism, Peltier's imprisonment has elevated him to martyr status within Indian communities and he serves as a role model to many. Erdrich taps into this history in her portrayal of Gerry, whom like Peltier, enjoys both a criminal and a hero status.

himself through a hospital window to drop three stories down (after an unexpected and effeminate "elegant chorus girl kick") "like a fat rabbit disappearing down a hole" (209)[30]; and, to scale thin copper pipes up four stories of a building in order to get to his son, King's, apartment, all despite his apparently enormous size. Lipsha explicitly links such activities to Gerry's shape-shifting ability when he reflects

> I knew my dad would get away. He could fly. He could strip and flee and change into shapes of swift release. Owls and bees, two-toned Ramblers, buzzards, cottontails, and motes of dust. These forms was interchangeable with his. He was the clouds scudding over the moon, the wings of ducks banging in the slough... (361)

Because he is a Trickster, Gerry possesses the ability to alter his physical shape, allowing him to squeeze through tiny areas despite his weight of more than three hundred pounds. However, because he is a Trickster, a figure known for devising elaborate tricks against others which often backfire and "trick" the Trickster, Gerry often ironically becomes the victim of his own tricks. In addition, because many of Gerry's shape-shifting moments are linked to his escape from jail, examples of tricks which Gerry plays on his jailers and the judicial system, Gerry repeatedly finds himself being caught and re-imprisoned, which are examples of his tricks going awry.

At the end of the novel, after Lipsha and Gerry discover that they are father and son, they plan a trick against King. For Lipsha, King has been a nuisance his entire life,

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[30]Tricksters are often depicted as rabbits in much traditional storytelling, especially in Southeastern tribes.

always reminding him that he is an orphan who does not belong; for Gerry, King represents a betrayal, for they were once imprisoned together and King used information which Gerry trusted him with to lessen his own sentence. The trick unfolds during a card game, after Gerry scales four stories of pipe to get to King's apartment. The atmosphere is charged: King is afraid of Gerry, and with good reason, while Lipsha is thrilled to meet "The famous Chippewa who had songs wrote for him, whose face was on protest buttons, whose fate was argued over in courts of law, who sent press releases to the world..." (352), and who happens to be his father. Lipsha's motivation is innocent: knowing that King is uncomfortable with Gerry, he wants to play the card game to get back at King for his childhood betrayals, and to show a solidarity with his newly discovered father. Gerry's motivation is darker: patterned after the Chippewa Evil Gambler, a traditional figure who plays hand games with members of the tribe, and who literally wins the life of the competitor if he/she fails at the game, Gerry is poised for revenge. The game is charged with danger:

> "I'm interrupting here," said Gerry. "Please excuse my butting in without knocking." He knocked on the table now. "Deal me in?"
>
> "We were playing five card stud," [said Lipsha].
>
> "Stud. That's not quite appropriate for this one here," he said smoothly, indicating King. "Five card punk's more like it." King smiled a sick, tight grin and took up his hand of cards.
>
> "Tell your wife to take her knuckles off that dirty frypan which she means to sling at my head," Gerry calmly continued.

Lynette took her hand out of the sink with a little squeak and rushed past us. We heard her pick up the phone in the next room then slam it down again. Presumably the line was no longer properly connected.

"*We must decide*," (italics are mine for emphasis) said Gerry seriously, taking a ragged toothpick from his breast pocket and sticking it in his mouth, "*what we are playing for*."

King felt much better, or seemed to, when he glanced at his cards. "I got money," he said. "I got money in my account."

"We're not playing for your rubber check," Gerry said. "You probably used your payoff up by now. We won't play for money. *But we got to play for something*, otherwise there's no game."

King sat there bracing up his shoulders. He was coming back to his own. "Aw c'mon," he said. "Who told you I turned evidence. I never did."

"I heard the tapes," said Gerry, with a pursed smile full of snake's milk. "Tapes of things I told nobody but you, my friend. *Yes, we got to play for something. We got to have high stakes, otherwise there is no game*."

"What did you come here for?" blurted King. He tried to laugh but he had to put his cards down to hide his shaking hands. "Whaddyou want?"

"*I want to play*," said Gerry very clearly and slowly, as if to a person who spoke a different language. "*I came to play*." (355-356)

The scene is fraught with both urgency and threat. King is visibly shaken by Gerry's quips about wanting to play for high stakes, not to mention his mere presence, and there is a

clear suggestion that Gerry cut the phone lines to King's apartment before scaling the pipes. Fashioned after the Evil Gambler, Gerry's repeated comments about wanting to play for high stakes assume a more significant, and frightening, importance.[31] Lipsha, who appears nonplused at the exchange, does not quite realize the danger in the conversation. It is Lipsha, however, who redirects the tension when he suggests that they play for the car which King purchased with June's insurance money:

> "June's insurance," [Gerry] said wonderingly. I could see how his mind leapt back, making connections, jumping at the intersection points of our lives: his romance with June. The baby given to Grandma Kashpaw. June's son by Gordie. King. Her running off. Me growing up. And then at last June walking toward home in the Easter snow that, I saw now, had resumed falling softly in this room.
>
> I could tell Gerry had not come here with precise notions on revenge, even though the testimony King gave had cost him years. Gerry Nanapush was curious and plagued by memory. He'd come here out of these. Only the urge to see the rat's life with his own eyes could have caused him to scale copper pipes four stories up and squeeze through that small kitchen window...
>
> "Let's play for the car," Gerry agreed. "June's car." (356-357)

King does not want to play for the car because it represents his only connection to

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[31]It is important to remember that while Gerry is patterned after Trickster figures and the Evil Gambler in this scene, these are actually two different mythic figures which were depicted as enemies to each other in traditional tales.

June, but he is outnumbered by Lipsha and Gerry. Pitted against Tricksters, King has no chance. Gerry and Lipsha cheat by crimping the edges of the cards, the final connection which reveals that they are father and son. The deftly engineered trick between these father and son Tricksters unfolds and King loses the car. The car then becomes the catalyst for Lipsha's life changes: he uses it to secretly transport Gerry across the border into Canada, but only after Gerry welcomes him as his son, stating, "You're a Nanapush man" (366). Lipsha's identity is complete: through forgiveness, and learning who his father and mother are, he starts to feel like he belongs.

Interestingly, while Gerry and Lipsha reflect basic Trickster characteristics---the penchant for finding themselves on the other side of their tricks, the shared "touch," a certain comedy in their experiences---there are differences between them as well. The most obvious are Gerry's ability to shape shift, a skill which Lipsha does not possess, and a certain edginess to his presence. This dangerous quality is most apparent in the card game where Erdrich patterns Gerry after the Evil Gambler; though Gerry ultimately accepts the car as his reward for winning the game, the suggestion is clear that he originally had darker stakes in mind. Nevertheless, Gerry also serves an important role in the community: viewed as an activist for the rights of Indian people, Gerry assumes celebrity status, and becomes a respected symbol for standing up for what one believes in despite the possible consequences. In comparison, Lipsha, who is more bumbling in his actions, is nevertheless good-natured. He means well, even when his plans backfire (sometimes tragically, as in the case of the love potion), and possesses a certain charm. An innocent, he at times appears simple-minded, but he actually serves an important role

in the text. An odd choice for a teacher, Lipsha nonetheless educates us about the importance of forgiveness and family. Although his comedic narration and experiences often provoke laughter, typical of Tricksters, he is much more than just a comic figure or clown. By forgiving King for abusing him, June for abandoning him, Gerry for not claiming him, and trying to help those around him, Lipsha serves as a model for love, emphasizes the importance of family, and shows that forgiveness can bring healing and personal growth. This character development shows that Lipsha is both a comic figure as well as a spiritual figure who teaches those around him through both positive and negative examples.

Both Gerry and Lipsha possess complex dual natures, hallmarks of Tricksters, and they serve important roles. By depicting them as Tricksters, Erdrich participates in a traditional Chippewa Trickster storytelling tradition, yet also updates it for modern readers, emphasizing that culture is not static. She has fun with their characterizations, especially with Lipsha, yet also recognizes the multi-dimensionality of Trickster. Most importantly, she shows that Tricksters, while humorous, offer more than comedy. They teach by example, sometimes negative example, and show people how to live their lives.

*Louis Owens*

Louis Owens, who is of Choctaw-Cherokee-Irish descent, was born in Lompoc, California (a coastal community) on July 18, 1948 (Emmons 37). An American literature and creative writing professor at the University of California at Santa Cruz, Owens is now recognized more for his fiction than the more than one hundred critical articles and reviews which he has authored in academic and literary journals. The recipient of

numerous literary endowments, Owens says that he "write[s], in part, to explore [his] own identity as a mixed-blood American of Choctaw, Cherokee, and Irish-American heritage, and...to explore the dilemmas of all mixed-bloods in America, and...to illuminate our relationships with the natural world" (Trosky 336-337). Owens admits that he was not raised Choctaw. In fact, it was not until he was an adult that he began to actively pursue learning about his Choctaw heritage, and to identify himself with his native background. Owens is now the author of several novels, including *Wolfsong*, *Nightland*, *The Dark River*, *The Sharpest Sight*, and *Bone Game*, and numerous critical texts, such as *Other Destinies: Understanding the American Indian Novel* and *Mixedblood Messages*, as well as several which examine the work of John Steinbeck. Two of Owens's novels, *The Sharpest Sight* and *Bone Game*, examine the life of Cole McCurtain, a character whose life parallels Owens's in many ways.[32] Foremost in each novel is Cole's doubt regarding his ancestry. In *The Sharpest Sight*, Cole is just a teenager who is only beginning to learn about his Choctaw heritage and family. Although a middle-aged man by *Bone Game*, and much more knowledgeable about his heritage, Cole begins to doubt whether he really is an Indian, and feels trapped by his mixed blood status. It is in *Bone Game* that Owens provides us with another memorable, and fully developed, version of a modern Trickster figure.

Like Lipsha and Gerry, Alex Yazzie, professor of anthropology at the University of California at Santa Cruz (the campus where Cole teaches, and, incidentally, also where Owens currently teaches after leaving his position at the University of New Mexico),

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[32]A third novel in this series is expected soon.

captures the dual nature of Trickster. A cross-dressing comic, Alex provides much of the humor in the novel, yet he also serves a more important role: that of teacher and guide to Cole, who is becoming increasingly doubtful of his Indianness, and who, as a result of this identity crisis, has attracted an evil to him. In a clever literary nod to Erdrich (itself a playful joke for readers who are familiar with both authors), Owens patterns Alex after Gerry. "Against the law is my middle name," Alex proclaims, reminding us of Gerry's hero-criminal duality (26). It is Alex's first appearance in the novel, a scene which is rooted in comedy, that initially underscores Alex's Trickster qualities.

The passage opens with the university asking Cole to assist in what it calls a "rather difficult situation at faculty housing" (23). When Cole arrives at the site of the university's concern, he finds Alex, a "young man with a long black ponytail, wearing only a black pleated skirt and running shoes with no socks," field-dressing a deer on the manicured lawn of faculty housing (24).[33] He reminds Cole of "a laughing predator, a fox or coyote," a reference to traditional forms of Trickster figures, when Alex looks up and grins wickedly at Cole, instantly recognizing Cole to be the only other Indian professor on campus (25). Cole has been brought to the site to diffuse the situation because a crowd is gathering, and the university's vice chancellor is desperate, stating, "He can't do this...it's a violation of state game laws as well as university regulations" (24). The sight of Alex, a cross-dressing Navajo professor, bloody hands and deer entrails at his feet, creating a spectacle at a California university, is hint enough that Alex's unconventionality marks him

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[33]In Louise Erdrich's *Tales of Burning Love*, published two years after Owens's *Bone Game*, Erdrich depicts Gerry as a cross-dresser. It is common for contemporary Native American writers to respond to each other's work in this manner.

as a Trickster. The ludicrous conversation which follows as Cole and Alex first introduce themselves to each other strengthens this impression:

> "Explain to him that [his actions are] against both state and university regulations," the vice chancellor said desperately at Cole's shoulder.
>
> "You look Navajo," Cole said, turning away from Spanner. "Is that a skirt you're wearing?"
>
> "Alex Yazzie. Salt Clan, Born-for-Water. Chinle." He extended a bloody hand and then looked down at the hand and took it back with a shrug. "It's an Evan Picone. You think it's too short, too daring?"
>
> "Cole McCurtain. Choctaw-Cherokee-Irish-Cajun, Mississippi and Oklahoma by way of New Mexico and California. Looks the right length to me."
>
> "They seem a bit nonplussed, don't they?" Alex Yazzie grinned. This fine animal gave himself to me. I was driving up the hill over there, just going along you know like I always do, when he jumped in front of my truck. I didn't see him till it was too late. Luckily, I had pollen with me. You see, I need some sinew for a special project, and I figured I might as well also make some venison stew, maybe even turn out a little jerky in my townhouse and offer some to my colleagues." He glanced at the crowd and then looked down at his skirt. "Unfortunately, I stained my new skirt. As you can see, however, I had enough foresight to remove my blouse and jacket. Also my heels. You ever tried to field dress a buck in heels?" (26)

The conversation's absurdity, as Alex dismisses the farce of field-dressing a deer on university property while he fusses over his designer clothing, emphasizes the humor which is characteristic of Trickster tales, and also shows Alex playing his first trick, this time targeted at the university. However, Alex also demonstrates his special intuition as he sarcastically jokes to Cole, "You're the new Indian they hired in literature, a poor mixedblood trapped between worlds and cultures if I can believe my eyes" (26). Alex's words mock the stereotype which many people, including Indians, have of mixedbloods: that they must feel culturally displaced, as if they do not belong. There is also wisdom in his comment, however, because Alex soon discovers that Cole *is* doubting his Indianness, a foreshadowing of events to come. Moreover, Alex's explanation that he offered pollen to the deer's spirit before harvesting its meat shows that Alex is a traditionalist, and is spiritually sensitive to the natural world. This will be important to remember when Alex later assumes the role of guide to Cole.

The scene humorously closes with Cole catching Alex's Trickster spirit, as he jokingly warns the university officials:

> We have to be very, very careful. By the way he's painted himself, I can tell that this man is a Navajo *heyokah*, a sacred warrior-clown. They're notoriously volatile. You should also be aware that once a Navajo has completed his deer dance, he's bonded with the animal spirit. And Navajos are well-known in the Indian community for becoming insanely violent if separated from their meat once they've bonded. We could have a very politically incorrect situation here, not to mention a dangerous one. The

> political ramifications could be unpleasant at best for the university and everyone involved; after all, we're dealing with the cultural traditions of an indigenous person of color, a real Indian. (27)

Cole's warning is nonsense: he fuels the fear of the university officials by suggesting that they are culturally insensitive, and that Alex may become violent if he is forced to stop his ceremony. Moreover, he fabricates absurd information about Navajo traditions, mocking the ignorance of the university representatives, and continuing the comedic spirit which infuses the scene. Cole's reference to Alex as a *heyoka*, however, hints that Alex is a Trickster, something he explicitly confirms when he later warns his daughter, Abby, who begins to express a romantic interest in Alex, "My friend is a trickster, Abby. Don't ever forget that" (136). Alex concludes the scene, in typical Trickster fashion, by striking a romanticized pose for the crowd, "eyes focused eastward, across the bay, knife half-raised in his right hand, offering the crowd the dramatic profile of a warrior," and jokingly telling Cole to tell the university spokespeople that "the buck stops here" (28). Always the comic, Alex cannot resist the last opportunity to ironically mock the crowd's stereotypes of Indian people.

Throughout the novel, Alex repeatedly finds himself in comedic situations such as this one, all of which are reminders that Alex is a Trickster. From his outrageous proposal that anthropologists dig up a Puritan cemetery in Boston to perform cranial measurements on the Puritans, test their teeth and bones for dietary information, and locate artifacts to sell to collectors---all digs at anthropologists who have desecrated Native American burial grounds with the excuse of pursuing scientific knowledge---to his humorous imaginings

about "what it would have been like if our ancestors had had CNN" and could have reported "all the raids, successful vision quests, hunting and trading parties, [and] tribal politics" of Indian people (155), Alex continually serves as a source of comedy. One of his most memorable tricks involves Custer, a trained guard dog which Alex rescues from the pound, and who a Lakota police officer jokingly names after General George Armstrong Custer because of his golden hair. Alex purchases Custer to protect Cole and Abby---Navajos traditionally believe that dogs are sensitive to the presence of witches---yet also confesses that he wanted to save Custer from euthenasia. Unfortunately, though a professional guard dog, Custer had a violent upbringing and needs therapy---"in a regular home environment like you have here," Alex facetiously tells Cole---to be domesticated. Cole jokingly responds, "I appreciate your thoughtfulness, Alex, but we don't need a killer to protect us from killers" (148). Nevertheless, Alex is adamant that Cole and Abby keep Custer:

> The pound people said he didn't have a name before. His owner was a crack dealer who just called him Dog. He had a deprived upbringing--a dog with no name, guarding a crack house--and I figured I could kill two birds with one stone, so to speak, by getting him for you. He's a professional guard dog. They said it took five animal control people with nets to get him out of that house. The Lakota cop said they wanted to shoot him. He must have really felt like Custer, seeing all those guys coming. But he needs a regular home environment like you have here. It'll straighten him out, like therapy." (147-148)

Alex's intentions are good: he knows that an evil is attracted to Cole and that he needs protection, yet his solution makes matters worse. Now Cole must contend with the witchery which targets him while also caring for a two hundred pound mastiff, once a violent drug dog, that must be given eight thyroid pills a day, will not allow anyone else to sit on the couch with him, and cannot eat human food because it will give him diarrhea. Alex delights in the humor of the situation, but Cole is nonplused.

Eventually, Alex's trick on Cole, though well-meaning, backfires, and Alex, the typical Trickster, is left to deal with the consequences. The scene opens with Alex and Cole finding Custer, poisoned to death, in the backyard. Rigor mortis has already set in, and there is an urgency to get him buried before Abby gets home. Alex volunteers to bury him, not realizing what a laborious task this will be, while Cole retrieves Abby from campus. For an hour, Alex digs, alternating between using a pick, a heavy metal bar, and a shovel. He remembers his father once burying one of their sheep dogs, folding his legs in the grave to look as if it were sleeping, and decides that this is what he wants for Custer. Nothing is this simple for a Trickster, however, and the scene soon degenerates into pure comedy:

> [Alex] went to where Custer lay. With difficulty, he got both arms around the dog's vast midsection and began backing toward the grave. Dropping the body at the edge of the hole, he squatted to fold the long legs, only to discover that the legs were as rigid and unyielding as steel. Rigor mortis had seized Custer.
>
> "Goddamnit." He swore the oath softly and wiped his forehead.

Laboriously, he raised Custer to his feet, propping the dead animal against his thigh. Hooking his arms around the midsection once again, he lifted the dog and stood it in the hole. The grave came up to the dog's belly.

"That was your last stand, Custer," he muttered as he dragged the animal out of the hole and laid it on the exhumed gravel.

Twenty minutes later, with the pick ringing on granite, he levered Custer back into the hole. The head, shoulders, back, and tail stood clearly above the surface of the earth.

Dragging the body from the hole, he dropped it and picked up the heavy bar. The bar bounced off the granite slab in the bottom of the grave, and he dropped it and shoved his hands beneath his armpits, wincing with pain.

He stood back and looked at the hole. To widen it enough for a sideways Custer would take too long. Abby would be home in fifteen or twenty minutes. It was too late to try a new hole somewhere else.

He went to the shed and emerged with a chain saw. (191-192)

The passage is laden with black humor, from Alex's clever pun about Custer's last stand, to his desperate use of the chain saw to cut Custer into a size that will easily fit into the grave.[34] Nonetheless, the comedy is appropriate because Alex is a Trickster. He conceives of a playful trick against Cole---purchasing Custer---and now finds himself the victim of his own trick as he struggles to bury Custer before Abby gets home.

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[34]The scene is also a clever tribute to James Welch's *Winter in the Blood*, a novel which closes with a funeral scene in which the protagonist's grandmother's casket will not fit into the gravesite, and must be jumped on in order to make it fit. This scene is discussed in Chapter 7.

Though consistently comical, Alex also serves a more important role in the novel: that of guide and teacher to Cole. It is clear from the novel's onset that Alex and Cole are opposites; Alex is a traditionalist who respects and practices his Navajo peoples beliefs, whereas Cole is struggling with his Choctaw identity. It is Alex, in fact, who first recognizes that Cole suffers from more than just loneliness and alcoholism, and he gives Cole's condition a name: ghost sickness. Alex teaches Cole about being Indian, advising him that his frightening dreams are a reflection of reality and that he must be careful because an evil spirit is attracted to him. Cole finally understands that he needs help and asks his father, a medicine man in training, and Uncle Luther and Onatima, both medicine people, to travel from Mississippi to California to aid him. Meanwhile, Alex engineers a sweat ceremony, and a peyote service, both conducted at Cole's house, to help in restoring the balance which has been partially severed by Cole, and his involvement with the witchery. Alex is instrumental in helping Cole to understand the role which he plays in the growing witchery, and why the ceremonies are so important for helping to maintain the universe's fragile balance. Moreover, Alex serves as a protector to Cole. He does what he can to help insure Cole's safety, from arranging two healing ceremonies, to advising him about spiritual matters, to purchasing Custer because he believes that "dogs don't like ghosts or witches," a conviction which is rooted in his Navajo traditionalism (96). In addition, Alex protects Cole's daughter. Ironically, this garter-belt-high-heels-dress-wearing Trickster is also a sixth-degree black belt, and he uses this ability to defend Abby when she is attacked.

Though a contemporary Trickster, Alex remains true to his Trickster predecessors:

he plays tricks on other people, yet also becomes the victim of his own tricks. Additionally, he is characterized by comedic and entertaining behavior, and works to maintain the spiritual balance when it is disrupted. This last point is crucial for it reminds us that humor often serves a sacred role in Native cultures, and that comedy can heal, as well as entertain. Importantly, Alex conveys the duality which is typical of Tricksters, whether traditional or contemporary: a cross-dresser, Alex provides the novel with its comedy as he repeatedly finds himself in humorous situations, and dispenses memorable one-liners. Moreover, he is also very wise and serves as a friend to Cole, as well as his spiritual guide. It is this emphasis upon both the comedic and spiritual roles of Trickster which helps Trickster to transcend the Western conception that Trickster is only a clown. Trickster is clown, minister, and culture bearer, depending on the moment.

*Harry Fonseca*

Trickster is so important to tribal cultures that he also makes frequent appearances in contemporary Native American art. Harry Fonseca, who is of Maidu, Portuguese, and Hawaiian ancestry, is perhaps best known for his playful Trickster portraits. Born in 1946 in California, Fonseca grew up in the Sacramento area and first became interested in Trickster as a teenager when his uncle, a Konkow Maidu elder, took him to a sacred ceremonial dance. "We were watching the dances," Fonseca explains. "It was late, maybe two in the morning, the dances were very serious, very sacred. When into the round-house comes this dancer who makes fun of the other dancers. I didn't know what was going on. I was told it was Coyote" (Lincoln 139). During the ceremony, Fonseca began to make sketches of the dancers, but the dancers took the sketches from him when

they realized what he was doing. Fonseca remembers being despondent, angry that his sketches were taken away, and his uncle telling him on the way home, "They must have taken your drawings, but they can't take away what's in your mind. Now go home and do this" (Lincoln 139). Though the dancers felt the need to protect the ceremony from the public's eyes, Fonseca first discovered Coyote as an imaginative and compelling subject on this day. Years later, Fonseca began to produce an impressive body of work featuring Coyote in both traditional and contemporary settings. It is this work which today insures Fonseca's place in Native American art.

Stylistically, Fonseca works with flat areas of color and two-dimensional forms. His influences include Fauvism, Primitivism, Traditional Indian Painting, and, especially, Pop Art. Fonseca's Coyote paintings tend to be pan-Indian, drawing upon a multitude of Trickster traditions rather than focusing only upon his own Maidu heritage. According to art scholar Rennard Strickland [Osage/Cherokee], Fonseca's Coyote "grins, snickers, sings, dances, and cavorts in a world made suddenly absurd by his presence. In Indian mythology, Coyote is the universal Trickster, armed with the cutting tongue of a fool, who becomes the mirror reflecting the world's follies" (Wade 284). Fonseca has fun with the image of Coyote, playfully juxtaposing him against both the Indian and mainstream White worlds. Because Fonseca shows Coyote in modern settings, Fonseca dismantles traditional stereotypes which assume that culture is static; instead, Fonseca emphasizes the continued significance of Trickster in tribal cultures, highlighting Coyote's role as culture bearer. Moreover, because Coyote is depicted in contemporary situations, Fonseca visually insists that his viewers recognize that Native people are firmly rooted in the

present, and not merely the past, and that their traditions are ongoing. On this subject, Fonseca states, "I believe my Coyote paintings to be the most contemporary statements I have painted in regard to traditional beliefs and contemporary reality. I have taken a universal Indian image, Coyote, and have placed him in a contemporary setting" (Archuleta and Strickland 95). Fonseca's work is profuse, and the Coyote portraits presented in this section represent only a small sample of his renderings.

"When Coyote Leaves the Reservation (a portrait of the artist as a young Coyote)"[35] (Figure 13) is characteristic of the playful humor which pervades Fonseca's art. Featured in a modern setting, Coyote stands in front of a vivid, burnt-orange brick wall. He has traded in his traditional appearance for a more contemporary look: blue jeans, white t-shirt, black leather jacket, platform shoes, and a silver hoop in his right ear. Despite his trendy appearance, we can still see his Coyote qualities: a bushy tail and canine head. Interestingly, his appearance invokes popular culture: Coyote's pose is reminiscent of a young James Dean, best known for his ability to capture the spirit of rebellious teenage angst in the few films which he completed before his death. The many zippers on his leather jacket remind us of the Michael Jackson craze of the early 1980s, which prompted clothing designers to incorporate zippers on everything from blue jeans to shirts to jackets. The platform shoes and silver earring are typical of the hippie movement of the late 1960s, and early 1970s. The over-sized shoes---here platform shoes, but in other Coyote portraits, chunky sneakers---is Fonseca's signature. This is a more contemporary

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[35]The painting's title is itself a playful reference to James Joyce's *A Portrait of an Artist as a Young Man.*

Coyote, confident and hip, as he leaves the reservation, perhaps for the first time. The rendering is playful, yet also stresses the dynamism of traditional cultures, showing that Coyote remains a viable and important part of tribal life today.

This same Coyote is pictured in "Coyote in Front of Studio" (Figure 14). Once again, Coyote wears a similar outfit: baggy blue jeans, black leather jacket replete with zippers, chunky high tops, and red t-shirt. Interestingly, Fonseca explicitly unites the traditional with the contemporary by depicting this Coyote wearing an elaborate Plains war bonnet on his head, and carrying a traditional pipe bag. Ironically, Coyote stands in front of the Quail Studio, Fonseca's own art studio in Shingle Springs, holding out a handful of cigars towards the door of the studio, as if in offering. This is Fonseca's playful acknowledgment that Coyote represents a lucrative business venture for him, and that Coyote, on the verge of entering his studio, may be about to offer him another artistic vision. Or maybe Coyote is simply coming to play a trick on Fonseca, the artist, and is playfully hiding this with the promise of sharing a relaxing cigar with him? Importantly, Fonseca reminds us that Coyote, despite the scene's playful ambiguity and use of irony, is both a traditionalist and a modernist whom successfully navigates the twenty-first century[36] and continues to serve a significant role in tribal cultures.[37]

Fonseca's approach is similar in "Rose and the Res Sisters" (Figure 15), a

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[36]An important statement in response to authors like Louis Owens who depict Indian people as feeling torn between their Indian worlds, and the mainstream White world.

[37]This painting also plays with the conventional image of the cigar store Indian, also known as the "Wooden Indian," which was popular in the early and mid-twentieth century. This image was used by store-owners to advertise the cigars which they sold in their stores. Even today, the Wooden Indian can be found in some stores.

lithograph which depicts Coyote, this time in the form of a woman, as she struts her musical talent on stage.[38] Rose is dressed in a sleeveless, flowered sun dress which sexily emphasizes her breasts, and long white gloves which conceal (at least in part) her hairy arms. Around her neck she wears a choker necklace, originally popular in the 1970s, with two over-sized flowers attached. In the background are her backup singers: three other coyotes (all female), wearing Fonseca's trademark large shoes, and brandishing microphones. Notice that Rose's demeanor, like the male Coyote's in "When Coyote Leaves the Reservation," is one of confidence: with left arm on her hip, her body assuredly facing the artist, she sings, head lifted, into her microphone. About Fonseca's Coyote series, Gerhard Hoffman observes, "As Fonseca creates more and more [Coyote] characters, and their personalities develop, a whole new mythology of modern Indian life unfolds. The old ways and old stories, in all their richness, once more provide a way to understand the new" (Wade 268). By depicting Coyote as actively engaging in popular culture, Fonseca, like Erdrich and Owens, stresses that culture endures and remains an integral part of contemporary tribal life.

Fonseca's "Koshares with Cotton Candy" (Figure 17) and "Koshares with

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[38]Fonseca has many other pieces which depict Rose, both by herself and with Coyote, doing a variety of things, but always with an emphasis upon uniting the traditional with the modern. One of his most popular series is the paintings which depict Rose and Coyote re-enacting Swan Lake (see Figure 17 for an example of one painting from this series). Fonseca designed this series of paintings for his daughter as bedtime stories, with a clear emphasis upon uniting two powerful myths into one story. The series ends triumphantly with Rose and Coyote escaping the evil swan which attempts to destroy them. "I don't know how Rose and Coyote got on the [white] swan's back [and escaped]," Fonseca comments about how the series of paintings ultimately conclude. "That's not important. The thing is they didn't kill themselves and they weren't overcome by evil. They didn't let outside forces take advantage of them" (Lincoln 150-151).

Watermelons" (Figure 18) situate Coyote and his friends in a more traditional environment, at home at the pueblo and participating in sacred ceremonies. Outfitted in the traditional black and white costuming of the sacred Koshare with the pueblo visible behind him in both paintings, only the cotton candy in the first piece suggests that Coyote inhabits a contemporary era. The emphasis on the natural world in both works symbolizes the Pueblo peoples reverence for nature, and especially their belief that the Koshare can bring rain through their ceremonies. Fonseca's representation of the rainbow in each painting symbolizes the importance of the rainbow's image for Pueblo tribes. Without rain, the Pueblos' economies falter for it is the life-giving rain which nourishes their crops and livestock. The greenery which hangs around the necks of the Coyote koshares shows their commitment to maintaining the balance with the natural world, an indication of their spiritual significance.

Stylistically, these last pieces clearly show the influence of Fauvism on Fonseca's art: his use of primary colors (here augmented with softer pastels) is characteristic of Fauvism, as well as the flat surface which shows little dimensionality (also evident in the other pieces examined). Moreover, Fonseca's commitment to representing Coyote in various guises and situations, here as a sacred Koshare, but in the other pieces as a reservation Coyote, city-leather-jacketed Coyote, and a Coyote temptress, reveals the influence of traditional Indian painting upon Fonseca, and his commitment to showing that culture endures. A sense of playfulness emerges in all of the pieces: whether it is seeing Coyote "strutting his stuff" while clad in a black leather jacket, unexpectedly eating cotton candy during a sacred ceremony, ironically walking into the art studio where he is born,

dancing the lead of the classic ballet "Swan Lake" in high tops and blue jeans, or animatedly singing a do-wop, Coyote's paintings are marked by a humor which is characteristic of Tricksters. More importantly, Coyote's appearance in contemporary settings shows that Coyote is an important part of tribal cultures today. Fonseca's Coyotes, male and female, unite the Indian world with the mainstream White world, symbolically emphasizing that the two worlds can co-exist, a strong comment in response to those who suggest otherwise.

When commenting upon the future of Indian people, Dawson No Horse, a Lakota holy man, said, "We're gonna make it as we go along, addin' on an addin' on, generation to generation" (Lincoln 127). Fonseca's Coyote characters represent Fonseca's contribution to this cycle of survival. Cultures grow as time passes, evolving to meet the new needs of a people. Similarly, the contemporary Tricksters depicted by Louise Erdrich and Louis Owens show that Trickster remains an important part of contemporary tribal life. The character traits remain the same: a spiritualist and a joker, Trickster is replete with contradictions. But his/her/its role is as essential today as in traditional Trickster stories: Trickster alternately teaches us spiritual lessons, shows us how to conduct ourselves, and knows the value of a good laugh.

## Chapter Four

## A Disarming Laughter: Inter-Cultural Humor, Part I

## Dismantling Stereotypes & Making Fun of Whites

### Introduction

Henri Bergson's 1911 text, *Laughter: An Essay on the Meaning of the Comic*, remains one of the best critical examinations that studies humor. According to Bergson, "In laughter we always find an unavowed intention to humiliate and consequently to correct our neighbour, if not his will, at least in his deed" (136). Bergson stresses that humor, in its varying forms---caricature, irony, satire, wit, exaggeration---serves a utilitarian purpose: it is a social corrective, what Bergson calls a "social ragging," which aims to criticize when something is deemed inappropriate. Because "society holds suspended over each individual member, if not the threat of correction, at all events the prospect of a snubbing, which, although it is slight, is nonetheless dreaded," Bergson asserts that the public continuously monitors its behavior in order to try to avoid becoming the subject of a joke (135). When a correction must be made, however, the power of laughter is invoked: "Being intended to humiliate, [laughter] must make a painful impression on the person against whom it is directed. By laughter, society avenges itself for the liberties taken with it. It would fail in its object if it bore the stamp of sympathy or kindness" (197). One function of humor, then, is to intimidate by humiliation.

This differs significantly from traditional tribal uses of humor. Though we have already seen that ceremonies like those of the Pueblo koshares and clowns incorporate teasing as a way to correct inappropriate behavior, this teasing does not reflect the sense

of ridicule which Bergson's theory suggests. The teasing is done to convey a sense of shame and disappointment in the person who is behaving inappropriately, and to encourage this individual to take responsibility for this misbehavior, but we do not see the sense of mean-spiritedness or derision which Bergson's suggests is inherent in laughter. This attitude shifts somewhat in contemporary Native American literature and art. Although humor is still used as a social corrective, it begins to assume a more derisive voice. Kenneth Lincoln calls this type of humor "permitted disrespect," recognizing that difficult lessons are often easier to convey, and receive, when expressed humorously (Lincoln 12). In comparison, Jace Weaver [Cherokee] refers to it as "resistance literature."

In *The Sacred Hoop: Recovering the Feminine in American Indian Traditions*, Paula Gunn Allen [Laguna Pueblo/Sioux] explains that humor serves as a coping mechanism for many Native people. "Humor is widely used by Indians to deal with life," she observes (158). Poet Joy Harjo [Creek] echoes this sentiment in "Grace," a poem which examines how two people survive living in "a town that never wanted us." Their solution is "to swallow/that town with laughter, so it would go down easy as honey" (Harjo 1). Vine Deloria, Jr., one of the preeminent thinkers among contemporary Native scholars, echoes this conception when he writes that humor is

> ...the cement by which the coming Indian movement is held together. When a people can laugh at themselves and laugh at others and hold all aspects of life together without letting anybody drive them to extremes, then it seems to me that that people can survive. (167)

Humor, in all of its many forms, allows writers and artists a means of discussing painful subjects, subjects which might be too disturbing to address if they were not couched in comedic terms. "The more desperate the problem," Deloria posits, "the more humor is directed to describe it" (147). Although funny at times, much of this humor's underlying message contains bite. These theories are similar to Bergson's understanding of humor as possessing the power to criticize by using laughter as a tool of ridicule. Native theorists, however, further this paradigm by showing that humor not only opens discussions on bothersome subjects, but also helps Indian people to cope better with these troubling issues by acknowledging them through a less painful medium. It is important to add, however, that while some contemporary American Indian writers and artists do employ more acerbic forms of humor, this is certainly not true of all Native writers and artists.

Inter-cultural humor, humor which is directed to non-Indian people, is the subject of this, and the following chapter. The subject is so broad that I have chosen to divide it into separate chapters for clarity. Much of the humor reflects Bergson's theory of humor; it is a humor with sting, and is an effective way for Native writers and artists to stress important social statements in a less painful manner. "The Indian perspective," as Kenneth Lincoln paraphrases Louise Erdrich, is "postapocalyptic: the worst has already occurred with removal, declared federal war, genocide, absolutely poverty, and almost total decimation of the original populations" (Lincoln 265). Humor provides a way of addressing these concerns in a socially acceptable, and less painful, medium. Paula Gunn Allen puts it this way: "...humor is the best and sharpest weapon we've always had against the ravages of conquest and assimilation. And while it is a tiny projectile point, it's often

sharp, true and finely crafted" (Lincoln 7).

This chapter focuses on the humorous ways in which Native writers and artists respond to stereotypes. Although the issue of stereotypes has often been studied, it is important to remember that all of contemporary Native American literature and art is, in a sense, a response to these stereotypes; it is a way of saying, *"Hey, remember us? We're still around. This is the way we really are,"* despite what many of the images and texts suggest. The chapter then concludes with an examination of the jokes, both good-natured and acerbic, which are explicitly directed at Whites, a nice segue into the next chapter which explores a more militant and didactic humor.

The advantages of this resistance humor are numerous: first, it unites Indian people by recognizing that their experiences are in many ways universal, helping them to cope better with the pain which many of these subjects invoke; secondly, it serves as a social corrective to non-Indians who may be apathetic to Native concerns, or simply unaware of them; and, finally, humor provides a less threatening and painful medium for discussing subjects which are disturbing. The increasingly acerbic nature of this humor is also a telling reminder that Native cultures are not static, and that they have changed, and continue to change, as a result of contact. "The humor is a little blacker and bleaker now," Erdrich states in an interview, explaining the difference between the use of humor in old Indian stories versus the modern ones (Chavkin 23). Does this mean that humor in contemporary Native American literature and art is always critical? Absolutely not. There is an abundance of good-natured humor which pokes fun at family, other tribes, geographical locations, popular culture, and the like. Even this chapter will explore some

of the good-natured ribbing which is directed at Whites. Nevertheless, much of the humor discussed in this and the next chapter does have a dark side and intends to invoke discomfort, but it must be remembered that discomfort can often be educational.

*Part One: "Only Card-Carrying-Long-Hair-BIA-Approved-Buckskin-Wearing-Indians Allowed":* A Response to Kitsch

The stereotypes which have historically been associated with Native people are complex. The reasons why some non-Indian people have readily accepted, and continue to accept, these misrepresentations are equally complex. Most scholars agree that the genesis of these stereotypes is rooted in the writings of discoverers like Columbus and Amerigo Vespucci who first explored (or claimed to explore, as in the case of Amerigo Vespucci) American soil and began to characterize its indigenous peoples as Noble Savages and Red Devils.[39] As these writings became known to the public, their descriptions were accepted as reliable. As settlers relocated to the United States, more people began to write about the Indian people with whom they came into contact. Because many of these immigrants were encouraged to think of Native peoples according to specific paradigms before even setting foot onto American land, much of their writings reflect the general patterns first established by Columbus and Vespucci. As time passed, the stereotypes evolved, always reflecting the ideas originally found in Columbus and Vespucci, and yet changing to meet the new needs of each passing generation. When the Puritans wanted to justify their superiority over Native Americans, they portrayed the

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[39]Two invaluable sources which detail the evolution of these stereotypes, and explain their changing appeals, are Roy Harvey Pearce's *Savagism and Civilization*, and Robert F. Berkhofer's *The White Man's Indian*.

Indians as uncivilized and demonic. When missionaries committed themselves to educating Indian people about Christianity and White ways, they justified their brutality by pointing out how childlike and pagan the Natives were. As settlers migrated further West, it was simpler to think of the land's potential as being wasted and needing fulfillment, rather than recognizing that they were actually land thieves. And when the United States government slowly initiated its policies of genocide, it was easy to justify the murders by pointing out the dangers which the Indians represented.

Jace Weaver's *That the People Might Live* explains that three dominant stereotypes of Indian people have emerged over the years. The first is the Noble Savage, referred to as the "good Indian" by scholar Robert F. Berkhofer. The other two are the Red Devil and the half breed. Weaver describes that the Noble Savage is often depicted as "liv[ing] in harmony with nature in a state of liberty, simplicity, and innocence. They [are] beautiful in physique and modest and regal in bearing. Brave in combat, they [are] tender and loyal in familial and friendship relationships" (Weaver 104). The Noble Savage is typically perceived from a romanticized perspective, and is thought to possess all of the good and noble attributes which distinguish Native character. According to Berkhofer, Columbus is responsible for first creating this image of Indian people, as evident in this excerpt from one of Columbus's widely published letters, this one dated 1493:

> The people of this island and of all the other islands which I have found and of which I have information, all go naked, men and women, as their mothers bore them, although some of the women cover a single place with the leaf of a plant or with a net of cotton which they make for the purpose.

> They have no iron or steel or weapons, nor are they fitted to use them. This is not because they are not well built and of handsome stature, but because they are very marvellously timorous....It is true that, after they have been reassured and have lost this fear, they are so guileless and so generous with all that they possess, that no one would believe it who has not seen it. They refuse nothing that they possess, if it be asked of them; on the contrary, they invite any one to share it and display as much love as if they would give their hearts. They are content with whatever trifle of whatever kind that may be given to them, whether it be of value or valueless...(Berkhofer 6)

Over the centuries, this idealized representation evolved, but its basic characteristics remained the same: the Noble Savage as childlike, innocent, generous, peaceful, and noble.[40]

In contrast to the Noble Savage is the Red Devil, what Berkhofer refers to as the "bad Indian." According to Weaver, this "bloodthirsty [Indian is] heaped [with] all the negative qualities of Amer-European society, many of them associated with sex. They are naked, lecherous debauchers. They are lazy, deceitful and treacherous" (104). The Red Devil is never perceived as possessing any of the qualities of the Noble Savage, and the Noble Savage never shares any of the Red Devil's characteristics. In this same letter of 1493, Columbus hints at the existence of Red Devils, what he calls "human

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[40]Montaigne and Rousseau also helped to solidify this image of Native people in their writings.

monstrosities...[who are] very fierce and who eat human flesh," but Columbus's counterpart, Amerigo Vespucci, is likely more responsible for solidifying this image in the minds of the public in his well-known *Mundus Novus*, a 1504 pamphlet which detailed his exploration of the New World, and his contact with Indian people. Vespucci's description is fanciful and absurd, and had a great "impact upon the European imagination," according to Berkhofer because the pamphlet was widely published and even more popular than Columbus's tracts (7). I quote Vespucci at length to demonstrate the illogical nature of his assertions:

> ...The [women] have another custom, very shameful and beyond all human belief. For their women, being very lustful, cause the private parts of their husbands to swell up to such a huge size that they appear deformed and disgusting; and this is accomplished by a certain device of theirs, the biting of certain poisonous animals. And in consequence of this many lose their organs which break through lack of attention, and they remain eunuchs. They have no cloth either of wool, linen, or cotton, since they need it not; neither do they have goods of their own, but all things are held in common. They live together without king, without government, and each is his own master. They marry as many wives as they please; and son cohabits with mother, brother with sister, male cousin with female, and any man with the first women he meets. They dissolve their marriages as often as they please, and observe no sort of law with respect to them. Beyond the fact that they have no church, no religion and are not idolaters, what more can I

> say? They live according to nature, and may be called Epicureans rather than Stoics. There are no merchants among their number, nor is there barter. The nations wage war upon one another without art or order. The elders by means of certain harangues of theirs bend the youths to their will and inflame them to wars in which they cruelly kill one another, and those whom they bring home captives from war they preserve, not to spare their lives, but that they may be slain for food; for they eat one another, the victors the vanquished, and among other kinds of meat human flesh is a common article of diet with them. Nay be the more assured of this fact because the father has already been seen to eat children and wife, and I knew a man whom I also spoke to who was reputed to have eaten more than three hundred human bodies. And I likewise remained twenty-seven days in a certain city where I saw salted human flesh suspended from beams between the houses, just as with us it is the custom to hang bacon and pork...(Berkhofer 8-9)

Vespucci goes on to describe the Natives' methods of warfare as "depraved," the beautiful, yet libidinous women which he met and whom "defiled and prostituted themselves" when they were introduced to the Christian explorers, and describes the average life span of the Indians as being "one hundred and fifty years." Vespucci closes by writing "These are the most noteworthy things I know about them" (Berkhofer 9). Vespucci is an unreliable narrator whose writing is characterized by obvious exaggerations and untruths; nevertheless, the popularity of the *Mundus Novus* gave Vespucci's fanciful

ideas credibility, and, unfortunately, his wildly absurd assertions took firm hold of the European imagination and were accepted as truth.

The third stereotype is that of the half-breed. "An extension of the bad Indian image," Weaver explains, "half-breeds have no redeeming virtues. They are neither White nor Indian. As such, they are the degenerate products of miscegenation, distrusted by both cultures and fitting in nowhere" (104). This final image emerged in the nineteenth century as contact between Indians and Whites was widespread, and is the subject of much of today's American Indian literature.

Because these stereotypes are still pervasive, and are accepted to some degree by much of the public as reliable portrayals of Indian people, many contemporary Indian writers and artists work to collapse these stereotypes in their work. Sometimes these responses take the form of angry comebacks which explicitly point out and then refute the misrepresentations. Menominee poet Chrystos takes this strategy in "I Am Not Your Princess," a poem which opens by fiercely tackling contemporary misrepresentations of Indian women, and then concludes by showing what an Indian woman's life is really like: "I have work to do  dishes to wash  a house to clean/There is no magic/See my simple cracked hands which have washed the same things/you wash" (Chrystos 67). In contrast to Chrystos's explicit response to the stereotypes, many Indian writers and artists subtly work to combat preconceived notions by showing Indian people as they really are in their daily lives. Still others find that humor is an effective means of responding to the stereotypes because the humor draws the audience in, yet also educates them. According to writer Michael Dorris, "anytime Indians have humor, it undermines stereotypes, it

surprises" (Chavkin 216).

Playwright Hanay Geiogomah [Kiowa/Delaware] adopts this last strategy in "Foghorn," a play which Geiogomah describes as "push[ing stereotypes] to the point of absurdity" (Geiogomah 49). The play chronicles the relationships which Native Americans have had with Euro-Americans from the time of Columbus to the near present. In its opening, the narrator breaks into the play and assumes the persona of a New World explorer; importantly, however, this explorer is Indian. Rather than explaining why Native Americans should accept immigrants into America, what the audience likely expects, he instead sardonically addresses White people, stating:

> We, the Native Americans, reclaim this land, known as America, in the name of all American Indians, by right of discovery. We wish to be fair and honorable with the Caucasian inhabitants of this land, who as a majority wrongfully claim it as theirs, and hereby pledge that we shall give to the majority inhabitants of this country a portion of the land for their own, to be held in trust by the American Indian people--for as long as the sun shall rise and the rivers go down to the sea! We will further guide the majority inhabitants in the proper way of living. We will offer them our religion, our education, our way of life--in order to help them achieve our level of civilization and thus raise them and all their white brother from their savage and unhappy state. (55-56)

Geiogamah uses humor to point out the absurdity of Euro-American thinking. White immigrants came to America, in many cases knowing that the land was already widely

populated by Indian people. Even so, they claimed the land as their own and then, adding insult to injury, began to supplant the Native cultures and lifeways which had prospered for hundreds of years in the name of civilization and progress. Here, Geiogamah inverts history, playfully imagining that Native Americans are the explorers who travel to America, and "by right of discovery" have the authority to reclaim the land from its present occupants, the Whites. Their justification echoes that of White settlers; this time, however, the civilized ones are the Indians, while the Whites represent the "savage"[s] whose religions and cultural ways will be replaced "in order to help them achieve...civilization and thus raise them and all their white brother from their savage and unhappy state." In *Almanac of the Dead*, Leslie Marmon Silko [Laguna Pueblo] advances Geiogamah's vision further, arguing for an apocalypse which literally removes Whites from America, thus restoring the land to Indian people.

Here, Geiogamah skillfully uses humor to invert history with multi-faceted results. The narrator's speech successfully shows how Whites used their notions of Indian people as being savage and uncivilized to justify their behavior, all of which is playfully turned against the Whites by the Native narrator in a comic scene of role reversal. This allows Geiogamah to explicitly deconstruct traditional stereotypes, revealing them for all of their absurdity, but is also a way for his Indian audience to vicariously and playfully reverse roles with Whites, symbolically making them the colonizer, and the Whites, the colonized. Moreover, humor provides Geiogamah a sensitive way of invoking a distinctly painful

period of history. This underscores Geiogamah's communitist values[41], yet also helps him to symbolically unite Indian people by emphasizing their shared experience, making the grief which this moment of Contact represents a little less painful. It is reverse teasing, a humor which discounts the stereotypes by playfully redirecting them back into the mainstream White world.

In an interview with Kenneth Lincoln, Geiogamah helps pinpoint his theoretical understanding of humor by describing a role model which he has looked to in his tribe. The elder is the "most religiously significant person in our tribe," Geiogamah explains, a man who understands his religious responsibilities as the keeper of the sacred Kiowa medicine bundles, yet also knows the importance of laughter. "He was aware of every tragedy [and] every silliness," Geiogamah recounts. "He had a capacity for laughing, giggling, every old Indi'n joke, self-stereotype, that laughing concept, he was aware of all of it. He knew that Indi'ns could make fun of having lice, commodities, beat-up cars, being thrown in jail, and drunkenness and laziness, all of these things. And at the same time he had the responsibilities for maintaining the dignity, the harmony...He made no big

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[41]In *That the People Might Live*, Jace Weaver provides a helpful paradigm for understanding Native American literature. Weaver defines communitism as being "formed by a combination of the words 'community' and 'activism'. Literature is communitist to the extent that it has a proactive commitment to Native community...In communities that have too often been fractured and rendered dysfunctional by the effects of more than 500 years of colonialism, to promote communitist values means to participate in the healing of the grief and sense of exile felt by Native communities and the pained individuals in them" (xiii). Communitist texts are those which actively reflect a commitment to tribal values and peoples, and show a concern for issues which relate to Indian communities. The majority of the humorous examples presented in this study demonstrate communitist ideals. They recognize community--in this case, not only specific tribal communities, but also shared Indian experiences--and, in many examples, demonstrate an activist spirit as they tackle subjects and concerns which are important to Indian people.

deal out of it" (Lincoln 336-337). Following the example of this Kiowa elder, Geiogamah laughs at stereotypes and history, subjects with serious implications for Indian people. "I see the Indi'n capacity for humor as a blessing," Geiogamah clarifies. "And I see it as one of the fundamental miracles of our lives. It's a miraculous thing that's pulled us through so much" (336). Laughter allows Geiogamah a way of broaching troublesome subjects, and helps him to lessen the pain associated with these subjects by making fun of them.

Geiogamah similarly employs humor to make fun of the First Lady of the United States.[42] In this scene, the First Lady is introduced at a dedication ceremony; in her audience are both Indian and non-Indian people. Her speech opens condescendingly, and makes clear use of the conventional stereotypes of Indian people:

> I want to say right away that I have never seen such lovely, stoic faces as those of our Indian friends with us today. Just look at those beautiful facial lines, those high cheekbones, those wonderfully well-rounded lips, those big eyes. And their costumes? Aren't they simply tooo beautiful? Let's-give'them-a-big-hand-ladies-and-gentlemen, let's-give-them-a-big-hand." (68)

Geiogamah's characterization of the First Lady emphasizes her silliness. By pointing out the stoic quality of the Indians in the audience and making reference to their dress, she explicitly co-opts the romanticized imagery which is associated with Noble Savages, while condescendingly referring to Indian people in the third person, even though there are

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[42]By not mentioning her actual name, Geiogamah suggests that all First Ladies are generic. The formal title which he gives her, however, also has the effect of making fun of her title.

Indians in her audience. Moreover, her apparent insensitivity at her remarks underscores her superficiality. She then makes matters worse by explaining what this dedication ceremony is for:

> The idea for this new park came directly from my husband, the pres-i-dent, and his assistant, the secretary of the interior. The three of us were having tea and ladyfingers in my sitting room in the family quarters of the White House, discussing ways to beautify America, and the secretary said to the pres-i-dent, "Mr. Pres-i-dent, I have a great idea. As you know sir, some of nature's most spectacular scenery is located right on many of the Indian reservations out West. Why don't we declare one of these reservations a national park?...the Indians get very little use of them anyway. (69)

Not satisfied with the amount of land which has already been taken from Indian people, the government now ludicrously proposes taking what little land is still left to Indian communities and turning it into a tourist attraction. The First Lady's proposal undermines the sovereignty of Indian tribes, and highlights the callous attitude which has historically typified Indian and White relations. Even so, the absurdity of her words makes the scene humorous. Geiogamah means for us to laugh at the First Lady. She is so dim-witted that she actually believes that Indian people are true to the Noble Savage stereotype, and that the government's idea to turn reservations into national parks is commendable. The scene is made even more amusing because she is presenting this notion to a room full of Indians who must surely believe that they are witnessing a White woman's decline into madness. More importantly, the farcical nature of her proposal and of her patronizing demeanor

mocks the government's attitude towards Indians. According to Freud, humor is not resigned, but rebellious, and joking operates as a safety valve which allows for the release of forbidden feelings and thoughts (Morreall 111). Hence, making fun of the First Lady is in a sense cathartic; it allows Geiogamah to poke fun at the troubled relations between Indians and the government, an experience which his audiences vicariously share.

Poet nila northSun [Shoshoni/Chippewa] takes a different approach to dismantling stereotypes. Rather than explicitly pointing out what the stereotypes are and responding to them sardonically (like Geiogamah), northsun instead presents Indian people in realistic, contemporary situations, a strategy which cements Native people in the present, and shows that they are not romanticized icons, but real people with real concerns. northSun's "Love Story" humorously depicts northSun's own marriage, and her fears about what will happen to her and her White husband in the future:

> i figure we'll be together
>
> forever
>
> why not?
>
> he's so much a part of me
>
> yet strange enough
>
> that i can't take him for granted
>
> forever is until we can't be together
>
> maybe one of us dies
>
> maybe one will murder the other
>
> maybe one will just disappear

we figure if one of us gets

mentally & physically fucked up

dribblin spit

sittin in our own piss

can't even pick our nose

& lose our mind

we'll perform a mercy killing

i told him if i

roll my eyeballs twice

then look cross-eyed

it meant i was miserable and

to off me

that's presupposin i'll even have

that much control

otherwise he can assume i'm relatively

happy

observin things around me

reflectin on past events

he can leave me in a corner

watchin a flickerin candle until

i roll my eyeballs twice

& then look cross-eyed

The poem's force is rooted to its humor. By openly sharing her worries about what will happen to her and her husband in their old age, even imagining killing each other if one of them is incapacitated, northSun captures her perspective towards marriage and life. Unlike Geiogamah, northSun does not specifically invoke traditional stereotypes in her poem. Nevertheless, by acknowledging that she and her husband love each other, but that they at times also imagine killing each other, northSun defies being cast into a preconceived role like those of the Noble Savage and Red Devil. Hers is a real marriage, with both its ups and downs; depicting it realistically overshadows traditional stereotypes.

Artist Nora Naranjo Morse [Santa Clara Pueblo] also uses realism to confront cliches about Indian people. In the mixed media piece titled "A Pueblo Woman's Clothesline" (Figure 19), Morse humorously describes a Pueblo woman's every day life. On the wooden clothesline are articles of clothing: a sleeveless chambray work shirt, socks, a "Free Leonard" (Leonard Peltier) t-shirt, a dark blue bra, part of a traditional dress. Though playful, the piece also conveys a more serious message: this is the reality of a twenty-first century pueblo woman's life, a life which successfully merges the traditional with the mainstream. Its humorous approach emphasizes the reality, not the Hollywood fiction, of a modern Indian woman, reminding viewers that to "trap" Indian people in the nineteenth century is a distortion.

Luiseno artist Fritz Scholder, perhaps more than any other contemporary Indian artist, is credited with dismantling conventional stereotypes of Indian people in his photography and art. In *Indian Kitsch*, Scholder says about stereotypes, "In retrospect, the metamorphosis is clear. At the time, no one thought about it. It happened. Slowly a

cultural pollution colored every aspect of the Indian---and the non-Indian" (Houlihan). Originally, Scholder vowed not to paint the Indian "because it had become such a tremendous visual cliche...Everyone in this country had his own idea---his preconceived idea---about the Indian" (Adams 13). Nevertheless, Scholder finally relented, shocking his viewers with his renderings of Native people, paintings which often bordered on the grotesque. Despite the dark, almost angry, quality which imbues much of his artwork, Scholder is also known for pieces which directly engage the conventional Noble Savage/Red Devil stereotypes, much of which is characterized by humor. One such painting is "Laughing Indian" (Figure 20), which counters stereotypes by depicting a traditional Indian man laughing out loud. The subject appears to be situated in an earlier century due to the placement of a single feather in his long hair. A playfulness fills the scene, as evident by Scholder's vibrant use of color: the skin which is exposed by the traditional blanket which is draped over the subject's shoulder is mottled with light blue polka dots, the man wears pants with unconventional green stripes, and the background features a loud magenta pink, perhaps a wall, which draws the viewer's attention to the man's face. Most importantly, the man is laughing, a feature which refreshingly counters the prevailing, sepia-colored photographs taken in the nineteenth century (like those of Edward R. Curtis) in which the Indian subjects are posed to look grim-faced, unsmiling, and serious.

In *Indian Kitsch*, Scholder shows how entrenched traditional stereotypes of Indian people are in American culture by photographing images which he found in the Southwest (many of which advertise local businesses) depicting stereotyped images of Indian people

and/or co-opting images which are often associated with tribal cultures. "Why does one build a tepee of wood?" Scholder questions. "Why a 'humongous' arrow stuck in a parking lot? Why a Japanese car with pseudo Indian designs on the upholstery as standard equipment? Indian faces are transformed to look cute, Indian, White, or exaggerated to the point that only the cheek bones are left" (Houlihan). Scholder's photographs were taken in the 1970s, but this trend still continues: The generalized face of an Alaskan Native sells hamburgers at Oklahoma's answer to the Hard Rock Cafe, Stillwater's *Eskimo Joe's*; fans of the Atlanta Braves chant and pantomime a tomahawk chop at games; consumers buy Cherokee Jeeps, Chevy Cheyennes, and Dodge Dakotas; cooks use Land of Lakes butter, whose central advertising image is that of a romanticized Indian maiden. The images pervade American culture, highlighting how deeply these stereotypes are embedded in America's conception of itself.

Edgar Heap of Birds [Cheyenne], an artist and a professor of art at the University of Oklahoma, sarcastically responds to works which appropriate tribal images in his 1996 "Smile for Racism" campaign (see Figure 21), a direct response to the Cleveland Indians's use of Chief Wahoo as a team mascot. Heap of Birds's piece was designed as a billboard to be temporarily erected in Cleveland, timed to coincide with his art exhibit at the Cleveland Institute of Art. The controversial billboard features a childlike rendering of Chief Wahoo beside a "Smile for Racism" message. "Addressing something topical in [a community] is really important," Heap of Birds explained. "You can't just plop something down in an art museum and expect it to resonate. You've got to address something in the

community. That's how I always work" (Putre).[43] The provocative nature of the piece fueled the opinions of Clevelandites, some of whom enjoyed the sarcastic humor in the billboard's statement, and others who were annoyed by its message. Regardless, sarcasm was an effective tool for Heap of Birds to voice his message against the public's racism towards Native people. "...grave hardships exist for the living Indian people," Heap of Birds explains, "[and] a mockery is made of us by reducing our tribal names and images to the level of insulting sports team mascots, brand name automobiles, camping equipment, city and state names, and various other commercial products" (Heap of Birds, artistic statement).[44] The power of "Smile for Racism" is rooted to its humor; by making fun of the Cleveland Indians's commercialization of Chief Wahoo in both the piece's childlike drawing and its use of a provocative slogan, Heap of Birds generates discussion. Like Geiogamah, Heap of Birds uses humor to make a direct assault against the stereotypes

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[43]The public art which Heap of Birds completed in other cities has been controversial and is situated in places where people can easily see it. For instance, in Hartford, Connecticut, Heap of Birds constructed an outdoor piece to commemorate the 1637 massacre of the Pequot people. Beside civic statues of famous Connecticut war leaders, he set up 4 x 5 metal signs with quotes from diary accounts of the massacre, including "many were burned, men, women and children, others were forced out, entertained with the point of the sword" (Putre).

[44]In a conversation between Mundo, a Mexican police officer, and Hoey, his Choctaw friend, in Louis Owens's *The Sharpest Sight*, the disrespect of naming teams after racial groups is discussed. "You know what gets me sometimes?" Hoey [asked]. "It's the names of these damned teams. The Cleveland Indians, Washington Redskins, the Braves and all that. There ought to be teams like the San Francisco Whitemen, or Detroit Negroes, or New York Jews. How would you feel about the Los Angeles Mexicans?" He squinted at Mundo, who looked back at Hoey with a trace of a smile. "I guess you're right," Mundo said finally. "How about the Wasco Wetbacks, or the Guadalupe Gringos?" Hoey grinned back. "Right, or the Pismo Palefaces" (141). As the conversation becomes increasingly absurd, Owens shows the inappropriateness of naming *any* team after a racial group. The message is effective because it is couched in humorous terms.

which continue to pigeon-hole and dishonor Indian people.

Like Scholder's "Laughing Indian" and nila northSun's "Love Story," T. C. Cannon's [Caddo/Kiowa] famous painting "Collector #5, or Osage with Van Gogh" (Figure 22), attacks stereotypes by placing its Indian subject in an unexpected scene. Born in 1946 in Lawton, Oklahoma, Cannon's career suddenly ended in 1978 when he was killed in a car accident. Once a student of Fritz Scholder, Cannon's influences include Fauvism, Expressionism, contemporary art, and Traditional Indian Painting. In "Collector #5," Cannon's subject is an Osage elder. He is wearing traditional items (a bear claw necklace, moccasins, a feathered fur cap, a medallion, clothing with beadwork) and is staring at the artist, a pose which is reminiscent of the many photographs which were taken of Indian people in the nineteenth century. Even so, he is clearly fixed in the present age, as evident by the wicker chair and the Navajo rug, the print of Vincent van Gogh's "Wheatfield" hanging on the wall behind him, and the startling black wallpaper covering the wall.

Stylistically, this painting "layers" art history, showing Cannon's many artistic influences. The "psychologically charged interior space" of the painting, as W. Jackson Rushing describes it in *Shared Visions*, underscores Cannon's Fauvist style (Archuleta and Strickland 18). The vertical stripes of the wallpaper, which are juxtaposed against the horizontal lines of the window frames and the wall's baseboard, create a flat surface characteristic of Fauvist art which is relieved only by the subject's curves. This influence is further strengthened by Cannon's heavy use of vivid, primary colors---black, blue, red, and yellow. According to Rushing, Cannon's artistic influences in this piece include Henri

Matisse, and Edgar Degas, whose well-known paintings "James Tissot" and "The Collector of Prints" capture human subjects looking directly at the artist, as Cannon's Osage subject is doing here (Archuleta and Strickland 18). Though in the tradition of the early Kiowa paintings, Cannon was well-read and influenced by all of art history. Here, Cannon's use of Indian subject matter indicates his knowledge of, and contribution to, Traditional Indian painting. By incorporating the man's traditional dress within contemporary environs, Cannon shows his viewers that Native Americans successfully maintain traditional cultures while participating in mainstream society. This man is not "frozen" in the nineteenth century, as much contemporary art and photography suggests, nor is he "trapped between worlds," as Indian people are often conceived of being. Instead, like Naranjo Morse's "Pueblo Woman's Clothesline," which situates traditional clothing alongside Levi's, Cannon's painting incorporates tradition within the context of the modern world. This important statement steers viewers away from thinking of Indian people as vestiges of the American past, as the Vanishing American stereotype suggests, and instead re-conceives of Indian people as both drawing upon the traditional and the contemporary.

In *Bloodlines: Odyssey of a Native Daughter*, Janet Campbell Hale [Coeur d'Alene] reveals that her White mother encouraged her to believe in the traditional Noble Savage/Red Devil stereotypes as a way of encouraging her to behave as a young girl.

> "White people respect good Indians," my mother said rather casually as she sat darning socks and mending small tears in our clothing." I was about four at the time. I sat on the floor beside her chair, coloring in

> my...coloring book. "Good Indians are clean and neat, hardworking and sober," she said. I wanted to get away from her. I hated it when she talked like that and I could not, even to myself, articulate my feelings because I was too young. I couldn't get away because it was raining. She wouldn't let me out. No escape. "White people look down on the other kind, the bad ones, the drunken, lazy louts." I stopped coloring and went to a window and watched the rain pour. Mom's voice droned on. (113)

Even at four years old, Hale understands that her mother's words reflect bigotry, yet she is ill-equipped to respond to her assertions. As an adult, Hale finds the words to respond to her mother's, and the mainstream White world's, bias:

> She would often instruct me on being a good Indian, the kind white people approve of...I would feel the resentment rise in my blood. Why should I care? Why don't they worry about being the sort of person I respect? Why should I have to be the one to live up to someone else's expectations? Anyway trying to be a 'good Indian' was a futile endeavor. Several years before Gram Sullivan was born, General Sheridan had made his famous remarking regarding the only good Indian being a dead Indian. I didn't care to be a good Indian. (113)

Hale's angry response points to her ongoing frustration that Indian people continue to be pigeon-holed into preconceived roles, and raises an interesting issue: why should *she* be held accountable for meeting these expectations by non-Indian people when these images are false? Ironically, Hale concludes by writing that she does not want to conform to the

"good Indian" identity which her mother tries to construct for her, in part because the stereotype is contrived, but also because history shows that *no* Indian can ever be truly good, meaning worth living. Hale's words remind readers of how deeply rooted this Noble Savage/Red Devil dichotomy is in American culture, and highlights, at least for her, the futility of combating it because of pervasive attitudes like General Sheridan's.

It is this disappointment over continuing to see Indian people stereotyped which motivates many Native American writers and artists to directly *and* indirectly confront these preconceived notions in their works. One of the most effective means of challenging this thinking is through humor. Art scholar Gerhard Hoffman writes, "the cliche character of the romanticized Indian motifs, which lies in their fixedness, can be neutralized through irony" (Wade 281). Though Hoffman's statement is in response to contemporary American Indian art, it also applies to literature. Approaching the subject of stereotypes humorously allows these writers and artists a way of making fun of the stereotypes while also providing them with a less threatening medium to do so. Though not as militant as the humor which we will see in the next chapter, it is nevertheless deeply ironic, and contains bite. This is humor which promotes thought in its audience by playing with incongruities. As Kenneth Lincoln reminds, "The powers to heal and to hurt, to bond and to exorcise, to renew and to purge remain the contrary powers of Indian humor" (5).

## *Part Two: "There goes the neighborhood..."*

### *Na hollo* humor: Humor Directed at Whites

In *Portraits of "The Whiteman": Linguistic Play and Cultural Symbols Among the Western Apache*, Keith H. Basso observes that "Jokers use jokes to make sense of

Whitemen" (18). Jokes about White people are pervasive in Indian country, and also in contemporary Native American literature. Some of the jokes represent good-natured ribbing and are a way for Indian people to emphasize the commonality of their experiences. Others are more militant and contain a stinging message which both makes fun of, and criticizes, the White world. About this humor which is directed at Whites, Kenneth Lincoln points out that

> Indians generally respond to [Whites] with sharp humor, a good dose of sarcasm, resigned laughter, and a flurry of ironic 'rez' (reservation) jokes that travel the Moccasin Telegraph like wild-fire. They laugh hard and deep among themselves and grimace around Whites, exorcising the pain, redirecting their suffering, drawing together against the common enemy--cultural ignorance. They hold out for a day when the newcomers will settle down as natives in the Americas. (5)[45]

Making fun is alternately a way of making sense, criticizing, and uniting Indian people in their shared experiences and concerns. The humor ranges from playful jests to biting sarcasm and is a powerful tool for Indian people to both reveal frustrations, and to cope with mainstream influences. "When a people can laugh at themselves and laugh at others...it seems to me that that people can survive," says Vine Deloria, Jr. (Deloria 167).

A prominent theme of *na hollo*[46] humor explores the origins of Whites--how they

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[45]This last statement may be Lincoln's own personal White fantasy.

[46]*Na hollo* is the Choctaw term for white people.

came to be in this world. In *The Lone Ranger and Tonto Fistfight in Heaven*,[47] Sherman Alexie [Coeur d'Alene] presents a biting Coyote story which explains how Coyote, the creator, accidentally made White people. Samuel Builds-the-Fire, who possesses the gift of storytelling that his son Samuel Builds-the-Fire, Jr. and grandson, Thomas Builds-the-Fire, both inherit, tells the story to a group of Indian children. Alexie's account is adapted from a traditional story of the Spokanes.

> Coyote, who is the creator of all of us, was sitting on his cloud the day after he created the Indians. Now, he liked the Indians, liked what they were doing. *This is good*, he kept saying to himself. But he was bored. He thought and thought about what he should make next in the world. But he couldn't think of anything so he decided to clip his toenails. He clipped his right toenails and held the clippings in his right hand. Then he clipped his left toenails and added those clippings to the ones already in his right hand. He looked around and around his cloud for somewhere to throw away his clippings. But he couldn't find anywhere and he got mad. Then he accidentally dropped his toenail clippings over the side of the cloud and they fell to the earth. The clippings burrowed into the ground like seeds and grew up to be the white men. Coyote, he looked down at his newest creation and said, *"Oh, shit."* (134-135)

The story's force lies in its power of suggestion. Rather than explicitly recounting the troubled relationship which history eventually records between Indian and White people,

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[47]Notice the playfulness of Alexie's title.

Alexie instead leaves the reader to fill in the details which the bluntly stated "Oh shit" invokes. According to Henri Bergson, "The art of the storyteller...does not merely consist in concocting jokes. The difficulty lies in giving to a joke its power of suggestion" (64). Tribal cultures were irrevocably altered, and for many tribes, even eradicated, after contact occurred. Depicting Coyote, a Trickster, accidentally making White people from something mundane like his toenail clippings, is a humorous jab at Whites. In addition, the story is a way for tribal people to come to terms with the appearance of Whites. It helps explain why Whites came to reside in America, and lessens the pain that is attendant with this sudden arrival by reducing it all to a mistake, a trick gone awry, for which Trickster is responsible.

Like Alexie, Leslie Marmon Silko [Laguna Pueblo] also explores the possible origins of White people in *Ceremony*. The difference is that while Alexie attributes Trickster, both a god and a comedian, as being responsible for creating Whites, Silko charges witches, representations of pure evil, as the instigators. The story occurs a "Long time ago/in the beginning" before anything European came to America. The witches are gathering at a convention which Silko describes as "a contest in dark things" and likens to a contemporary baseball tournament. They dare each other with producing bad medicine when a witch who "stood in the shadows beyond the fire" steps forward. Both the tribe and gender of this unrecognized witch are unknown to the others. Before long, the witch begins to tell a story, and as the story is being told, the witch's spell is enacted. Notice the characterization of Whites in the witch's story:[48]

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[48]The italics are Silko's.

*Then [the white skin people] grow away from the earth*
*then they grow away from the sun*
*then they grow away from the plants and animals.*
*They see no life*
*When they look*
*they see only objects.*
*The world is a dead thing for them*
*the trees and rivers are not alive*
*the mountains and stones are not alive.*
*The deer and bear are objects*
*They see no life.*

*They fear*
*They fear the world.*
*They destroy what they fear.*
*They fear themselves.*
*The wind will blow them across the ocean*
*thousands of them in giant boats*
*swarming like larva*
*out of a crushed ant hill.*

*They carry objects*
*which can shoot death*
*faster than the eye can see.*

*They will kill the things they fear*
*all the animals*
*the people will starve.*

*They will poison the water*
*they will spin the water away*
*and there will be drought*
*the people will starve.*

*They will fear what they find*
*They will fear the people*
*They kill what they fear.*

*Entire villages will be wiped out.*
*They will slaughter whole tribes.*

*Corpses for us*
*Blood for us*

*Killing killing killing killing.*

*And those they do not kill*
*will die anyway*
*at the destruction they see*
*at the loss*
*at the loss of the children*
*the loss will destroy the rest.*

*Stolen rivers and mountains*
*the stolen land will eat their hearts*
*and jerk their mouths from the Mother.*
*The people will starve.*

*They will bring terrible diseases*
*the people have never known.*
*Entire tribes will die out*
*covered with festered sores*
*shitting blood*
*vomiting blood.*
*Corpses for our work.*

*Set in motion now*
*set in motion by our witchery*
*set in motion*
*to work for us.*

*They will take this world from ocean to ocean*
*they will turn on each other*
*they will destroy each other*
*Up here*
*in these hills*
*they will find the rocks,*
*rocks with veins of green and yellow and black.*
*They will lay the final pattern with these rocks*
*they will lay it across the world*
*and explode everything.*

*Set in motion now*
*set in motion*
*To destroy*
*To kill*
*Objects to work for us*

*objects to act for us*
*Performing the witchery*
*for suffering*
*for torment*
*for the still-born*
*the deformed*
*the sterile*
*the dead.* (135-137)

The witch's spell encompasses the entirety of Indian and White relations, from first Contact to a prophesied nuclear war. Silko characterizes Whites as "larva [swarming] out of a crushed ant hill" and attributes them with being responsible for the total decimation of tribal cultures, and the death of Indian people, claims which, though extreme, can be partially substantiated by history. Many tribes and their cultures *were* completely destroyed because of genocide. Silko's story, however, encompasses even the end times when the witch prophecies that Whites will eventually destroy themselves, any remaining Indian people, and every living thing in the world, when their fear and love for death eventually lead them to "explode everything" with nuclear bombs.

The other witches respond to the spell with unexpected fright:

...the other witches said

"Okay you win; you take the prize,

but what you said just now--

it isn't so funny

It doesn't sound so good.

We are doing okay without it

we can get along without that kind of thing.

Take it back.

Call that story back. (138)

The witches have gathered at this conference of evil to try to outdo each other's magic. Ironically, even *they* try to lighten the mood by telling the witch to reverse the spell, that this is even too much for them. It is easy to imagine them looking at each other, eyebrows raised, hands in the air, admitting defeat. This is the piece's dark humor. Even witches, who are unconscionable, find the magic unacceptable. Kenneth Lincoln's understanding of dark comedy is applicable here: black humor is a "play with pain, the humor in hurt. The potential offense charges the joke, teases the norm, and gambles on picking up the audience's attention, even negatively. To play 'dirty' and get away with it is an offbeat, especially postmodern art" (270). Silko's story is controversial, yet also thought-provoking, encouraging readers to think about the complicated relationship between Indians and Whites.

There are also a lot of jokes which tease Whites for being in America. Choctaw writer LeAnne Howe's short story entitled "Biodegradeable [sic] Indians" confounds stereotypes which assume that Indian people are not funny, but always stoic and serious, by focusing upon a character named Harry Bull Coming, a budding Cheyenne comedian who hones his craft at the Red Race Hideaway[49] in Tulsa, Oklahoma. Howe humorously describes the bar as a "hang-out where would-be warriors fought old battles and tried to remove the American Indian's cosmic brain scars of the last century" (5-6). During his first performance as a professional comedian, Harry tells a joke which resonates with

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[49]The bar's name is itself a joke.

Alexie's humor:

> Say...we're all skins here, right? What do you think our ancestors thought when they saw all those white people pouring into town...You know, those Plains tribes probably looked out across the bald prairie, at the mass of European humanity--THE GREAT UNWASHED--and said, "Oh shit, make that one bottle of whiskey to go, please." It's enough to make you savage!" shouted Harry emphatically. "We was nice to them peoples. Give 'em year round hunting licenses...free parking spaces...clean air!...I don't know about you guys, but me and my family, we're still in a state of shock. That's why we're all so stone faced. I mean shit. We tried to talk to those bastards once and look what happened. We got the Indian head nickel and a few beads, and they got the rest of the entire fuckin' country. If we start talkin' now, who knows what they'll want next?" (9)

After having had years to ponder the differences which were wrought to Native cultures and lifeways as a result of contact, it is not surprising that a bitter edge enters the jokes regarding this contact. Notice how Harry plays with the notion of the Red Devil stereotype by joking that watching the Whites pour into America was enough to make Indian people become "savage." Moreover, he toys with the popular image of the drunk Indian---made even funnier because he delivers his joke in an Indian bar---when he imagines the Plains tribes' frustratingly saying, "Oh shit, make that one bottle of whiskey to go" when they see the Whites moving into their area. Harry's monologue pokes good-natured fun at Whites, yet also underscores the frustration of watching a race move onto

and take over a land with little or no disregard for its inhabitants.

Jokes about this period of Contact abound in Indian country. A much repeated quip says that when Columbus first landed in America, one Indian turned to another and lamented, "There goes the neighborhood." Another joke makes fun of Columbus calling Native people "Indians" because he mistakenly thought he had landed in India: "Indians?" the joke jests. "It's a good thing they weren't looking for Turkey." In *Custer Died For Your Sins*, Vine Deloria, Jr. remembers seeing a cartoon frequently posted in Indian communities which depicts a flying saucer landing in an American town while an Indian watches. The caption reads, "Oh no, not again" (148). A similar cartoon (see figure 23) features a traditional Indian man carrying a protest sign which takes a dig at Whites by stating, "Deport Illegal Immigrants." Charlie Hill [Oneida] sallies that the "first English immigrants were illegal aliens--'Whitebacks, we call 'em,'" and imagines the Algonquins asking their white visitors, "You guys gonna stay long?" (Lincoln 6). Frank Marcus [Taos Pueblo] jokes that "Historians have found the first treaty the United States government ever signed with the Indians. It states that the Indians can keep their land 'for as long as the river runs clear, the buffalo roam, the grass grows tall, and the mountains stand proud--or ninety days, whichever comes first'" (Lincoln 20). The oft-repeated joke "Message for the Moon" clowns:

> When NASA was preparing for the Apollo project, they did some astronaut training on a Navajo Indian reservation. One day, a Navajo elder and his son were herding sheep and came across the space crew. The old man, who only spoke Navajo, asked a question, which his son translated.

> "What are the guys in the big white suits doing?" A member of the crew said they were practicing for their trip to the moon. The old man got really excited and asked if he could send a message to the moon with the astronauts. Recognizing a promotional opportunity for the spin doctors, the NASA folks found a tape recorder. After the old man recorded his message, they asked the son to translate. He refused. So the NASA reps brought the tape to the reservation, where the rest of the tribe listened and laughed, but refused to translate the elder's message to the moon. Finally, NASA called in an official government translator. He reported that the moon message said, "Watch out for these guys; they've come to steal your land."

Similarly, Jim Northrup [Ojibwe] kids, "Why is the white man in such a hurry to get to Mars?" The answer? "They think we have land there" (Northrup 13). Or, "Why do you call it a Rez instead of a Reservation?" Punch-line: "Because the white man owns most of it" (Northrup 226). Will Rogers even joked,

> Mr. Coolidge asked me about being part Indian, an if I dident come from Oklahoma. I was telling him yes, and why I had to leave there, and was just on the verge of asking for Executive clemency, when he up and said, "I am part Indian. My folks had Indian blood." Well, I commenced asking right away about the tribe, and where did they come from. He said he dident know the exact tribe, but he knew that away back his Ancestors had Indian blood. I wanted to kinder drag him in with our Cherokees...Then he

> told me it was some tribe up in New England. Well, that let him out of our tribe. I knew it wasent the Cherokees. If my tribe ever settled in New England with all the rest of North America to pick from, they certainly wouldent be known today as the most highly civilized tribe in America. That's the bunch of Indians up there that let the Pilgrims land. That showed right there they dident know anything. Why, it took the Pilgrims 300 years of constant education before we let them land in Oklahoma with us, and then we made one of our only mistakes. (from "to His Constituents")

In "The Approximate Size of my Favorite Tumor," Sherman Alexie writes that "Humor [is] an antispectic that clean[s] the deepest of wounds" (164). Though amusing, these jokes are also cathartic. By joking about Whites, the jokesters help themselves and others to cope with loss---loss of land, loss of sovereignty, loss of cultural practices. Though joking does not eradicate the pain and hardships associated with the past, it is a conduit for gentle protest, and helps symbolically unite Native people in their shared experiences and frustrations.

Chrystos's poem "Dear Indian Abby" has fun with its protest of the fascination which some Whites have of Native Americans. The poem begins with a frustrated Indian woman known as *Sincerely Puzzled* writing to the equivalent of the Indian Abby van Buren, the newspaper guru known for dispensing advice. She writes about the Whites who rudely follow her around, searching for insight about the Native wisdom and magic which Indian people are stereotypically believed to possess:

What should I do

about those ones who try to crawl down my throat

bulging eyes are going to Understand

me or Else

Get some of my spirit  get some of my magic

OOOOOHHHHHHHOOO they want it

Want to explain how I could have a better grasp

of Native issues if I read this book or that by some

white person  Want me to listen to them with traps

dangling from their back pockets

Gonna get some  gonna get some of me now

from *Sincerely Puzzled*

Chrystos underscores the fervor of the Whites who pester the woman by writing about their "bulging eyes" and their fanatic desire---emphasized by capitalizing the words--- to "Understand [her] or Else." Their behavior is even more offensive to the woman because they suggest that she can better learn about Indian people by reading the observations of Whites, a way of trivializing her own experiences. Indian Abby's response is playfully malicious:

Dear Puzzled, Best thing to do is tell them you've heard

there's a great Indian wise woman named Whale Rabbit

over anyplace around 3,001 miles away

& you're real sure

she's patiently waiting for them to show up

& they'd better hurry cause her fee goes up in 2 weeks

& your fee for giving them the directions is only $350

Don't forget to smile

as you wave goodbye

*Yours Truly, Indian Abby.* (21)

The sardonic advice seeks just revenge on the Whites: tantalizing them with the thought of a pseudo-wise woman who will tell them secrets if they arrive in time, but only after paying exorbitantly for directions to the bogus establishment. What sweet revenge against the non-Indian people who make such pests of themselves in quest for everything Native! Jim Northrup pokes fun at the same mentality when he jokes, "Do Indians have psychic powers?" His answer? "I knew you were going to ask me that, I just knew it" (Northrup 12).

Louise Erdrich's *Love Medicine* gets in on the fun when Nector Kashpaw remembers reading *Moby Dick* for all four years of high school English.

> "You're always reading that book," [Nector's] mother said once. "What's in it?"
>
> "The story of the great white whale," [Nector replied].
>
> She could not believe it. After a while, she said, "What do they got to wail about, those whites?" (125)

About this scene, Erdrich states, "[This] never really happened but I just laughed out loud. It's what this woman would say, because there's such a sense of humor and irony in

Native American life, in tribal life. I mean, that's one of the things that does not get portrayed often enough--that there's such irony and humor" (Chavkin 68). Nector's mother misunderstands Nector's remark; even Nector admits that he tries to explain the *Moby Dick* story to her, but she refuses to believe him when he says that there was once "a fish as big as the church." "Who would?" he quips inwardly (125). The humor is in her playful wisecrack about Whites, for it not only plays off of a pun---"wail" for "whale"--which makes fun of Whites, but also reminds us that Native Americans have faced many hardships over the years. Couching the underlying serious meaning in a joke makes the troubled history between Indians and Whites a little less bitter.

"I see the Indi'n capacity for humor as a blessing...however hard their lives were, there always had to be something funny," Hanay Geiogamah states (Lincoln 336). Jokes about Whites are a playful way of adjusting to American life, and to the changes which tribal cultures endured because of Contact. When Charlie Hill makes fun of General Custer, joking that a nude painting which depicts Custer's last words records him as having said, "Look at all those fucking Indians!" Hill makes light of a tense moment in Indian-White relations---the war at Little Bighorn---but not out of disrespect to Indian people (Lincoln 7). Hill's joke reminds his audience that relations between Indians and Whites during the nineteenth century were strained with violence. Joking about this period of time and the overt racism which existed is a way of diffusing the pain which this period wrought.

While some of the humor directed at Whites is militant, as in the example from Silko's *Ceremony*, many are good-natured in spirit. Will Rogers once quipped,

"Everything is funny as long as it is happening to somebody else." This theoretical understanding of humor, though true much of the time, is not always the case. Humor is often found in the most unlikely of situations, and about the most unexpected of subjects. Joking about Whites is alternately a way of coming to terms with the past---if one can joke about it, one can deal with it---and a way of uniting Indian people in their shared experiences and frustrations.

## Chapter Five

## A Disarming Laughter: Inter-Cultural Humor, Part 2

### Resistance Humor

Humor which is directed at others can be both funny and critical at the same time. The preceding chapter included many examples in which we saw writers and artists using humor in its many forms to dismantle stereotypes and poke fun at Whites. Humor which borders on the militant---resistance humor which clearly contains social criticism, yet does so humorously, especially through the use of irony and sarcasm---is the subject of this chapter. Even so, many of the examples presented in the former chapter, jests which were grouped according to subject matter, could easily comprise part of this analysis for they are both humorous and didactic. The pieces which I present here are not exhaustive; they represent only a sampling of the literature and art which uses humor to convey an underlying message. For all of the examples which I include here, there are many others---both humorous and serious---whose foci are critical, and which frequently generate discussion. The tones vary from gentle criticism to rigid militancy, yet all share a commitment to pointing out concerns and issues which are significant to Indian people. Even so, it would be short-sighted to think that all of Native American literature is a literature of resistance, or that all of Native American art is an art of resistance. Protest is a key concern to many Native writers and artists, but it is not always the focus.

With that caution in mind, we can now look at the poetry of Chrystos, a poet whom Maurice Kenny [Mohawk] calls a "Bad Ass Poet," a term which Kenny borrows from Geary Hobson's [Cherokee/Quapaw] assessment of nila northSun's work. In

*Firepower*, Chrystos writes, "I assert that poetry without politics is narcissistic & not useful to us. I also believe that everything is political---there is no neutral, safe place we can hide out in waiting for the brutality to go away" (Brehm 75). A poet whose work centers around activism, Chyrstos tackles issues as varied as American politics, the treatment of Native people in America and in other parts of the world, feminism, mixed blood, the rights of homosexuals, White wannabees, land theft, genocide, forced sterilization of Indian women, racism, sexism, and what it means to live in a country---America---whose history with Indian people is clouded with brutality. Anger characterizes much of her poetry, making some readers uncomfortable with the frankness and didacticism which are hallmarks of her writing. In an authorial statement which prefaces *Not Vanishing*, Chrystos writes:

> Much of the fury which erupts from my work is the result of seeing the pain that white culture has caused my father. It continues to give pain to all of us. I am not the "Voice" of Native women, nor representative of Native women in general. I am not a "Spiritual Leader," although many white women have tried to push me into that role. While I am deeply spiritual, to share this with strangers would be a violation. Our rituals, stories, & religious practices have been stolen & abused, as has our land. I don't publish work which would encourage this--so you will find no creation myths here. My purpose is to make it as inescapable as possible, what the actual material conditions of our lives are. Hunger, infant mortality, forced sterilization, treaty violations, the plague of alcohol &

> drugs, ridiculous jail terms, denial of civil rights, radiation poisoning, land theft, endless contrived legal battles which drain our wills, corrupt "tribal" governments, harassment & death at the hands of the BIA & FBI are the realities we face. (*Not Vanishing*, Preface)

Much of Chrystos's poetry debunks traditional stereotypes of Native people and shows how destructive these generalizations can be when they are accepted as truth. In addition, she demonstrates a commitment to discussing issues---often with a militant voice---which are important to tribal communities.

Despite the anger which informs much of her poetry, Chrystos can also be humorous, especially when doing so is a way of underscoring a serious issue. In "Anthropology," Chrystos mocks the anthropological texts which view Indians purely as specimens, not human beings, and which examine all elements of Native cultures with microscopic detail, all justified in the name of scientific inquiry. Chrystos's approach, however, is to sarcastically turn this microscopic eye onto her White counterparts:

> We have been conducting an extensive footnoted annotated indexed & complicated study of the caucasian culture hereafter to be referred to as the cauks for ease in translation.
>
> The most important religious ritual, one central to all groups, is the mixing of feces & urine with water. This rite occurs regularly on a daily basis & seems to be a cornerstone of the culture's belief system. The urns for this purpose are commonly porcelain, of various hues, although white is the most frequently used. The very wealthy rulers have receptacles of carved

> onyx or malachite with gold-plated fixtures. We have been unable to determine what prayers are said during this ritual because of its solitary nature & the fact that the door to the prayer room is always shut.
>
> The main function of the majority of non-city dwellers is the production of an object called a lawn. Numerous tools for the cultivation of this lawn are sold in the marketplaces. It appears also to have a sacred character, as no activity occurs on it & keeping it short green & square is a constant activity...(*Dream On* 78-79)

The poem maintains this sardonic wit throughout. Though some readers may find Chrystos's suggestion that Whites worship a toilet bowl offensive---and this is one of her milder poems---it must be remembered that Chrystos uses exaggeration to emphasize the extremism which typifies the behavior of some anthropologists who disrespectfully analyze the lifeways of Indian people. According to Henri Bergson, exaggeration is just one form that comedy can take. Moreover, he reminds us that exaggeration must possess "a touch of the diabolical" in order to successfully communicate its message (26). Chrystos's poem eventually turns to more serious matters as she begins an overt critique of mainstream White culture: she suggests that Whites send the seriously ill away to be treated by third parties so that they will be out-of-sight; that handicapped children are shuffled off to "jails" (children's homes) because they are an embarrassment to their parents; that senior citizens, elders who should be respected, are also jailed in nursing homes because they are a bother; and that animals are needlessly imprisoned in zoos for recreational purposes. The poem ends:

> Our data is yet incomplete. We hope by 1992 to have a more comprehensive overview, at which time a traveling exhibition of artifacts (including exhumed bodies to illustrate their burial practices) will tour for the education of all. Their attitude toward all non-cauk peoples is extremely hostile & violent. Many of our researchers have been massacred & yet, in the interests of science, we persevere. (79)

Chrystos ridicules anthropologists by mocking the condescending tones and attitudes which typify much of their work about tribal communities. Fellow poet Wendy Rose [Hopi-Chowchilla Miwok] provides context for Chrystos's sarcasm in her own poem on the same subject, "Indian Anthropologist: Overhanging Sand Dune Story." At the end of this poem, Rose refers to a statement made by Claude Levi-Strauss, who writes in *Tristes Tropiques*, "There is no more thrilling aspect for the anthropologist than that of being the first white man to visit a particular native community..." (Hobson 382). It is this superior attitude which Chrystos mocks as she inverts it angrily back onto White anthropologists. Her superficial analysis of White culture---its apparent worship of the toilet bowl, the sacred nature of lawns---parallels the ludicrous generalizations which many anthropologists make about tribal cultures. Moreover, by mocking the way that some of mainstream society treats its disenfranchised---the elderly, the handicapped, orphaned children---and pointing out the disrespect with which animals are treated---locking them up in cages at zoos---Chrystos criticizes White society, finding its beliefs lacking when compared to Native ways.

Chrystos takes a similar approach in "The Okeydoekey Tribe," a poem which

sarcastically shows White people as thinking of themselves as constituting a tribe of their own. The sarcasm in the poem's title warns of the ridicule to follow:

> ...The Okeydoekey tribe has one of the widest ranging territories of any group known to man. They are very similar in this respect to cockroaches, ants & rats, all of whom have an identical widespread distribution. There has been much speculation about the method of their dispersal, but the currently accepted theory is that they made such a mess wherever they went that they were in constant need of new territory. Rumor has it that they plan to colonize outer space if they can find any place with enough resources to sell.
>
> They celebrate all major occasions with a liquid distilled from rotted fruit or vegetables. They consume as much of this as they can in an effort to be happy. This often fails. They do not seem to have any other method of enjoying themselves. Some members have stopped using this liquid, as they find it disagreeable & go to meetings to talk about it instead.
>
> The Okeydoekey people will, in fact, meet for almost any excuse & will often argue long into the night about who should speak first or what shape the table they sit at must be. We have long been puzzled by the importance of the table but apparently this is closely guarded information, as none of our informants could offer a clue.
>
> We have found that when attempting to communicate with the Okeydoekey people, who are, as a general rule, very primitive, that it is

> best to offer money first, as this is their abiding love & concern. We recommend large amounts of cash before any independent inquiry is conducted into their habits. (*Dream On*, 145)

Again, Chrystos adopts a sneering tone to criticize mainstream White culture. She begins by mocking its high regard for colonialism, a subject which Native American writers frequently allude to in their work, and makes fun of this drive to relocate to new places by suggesting that White culture's regard for the land is so little that "they [make] such a mess wherever they [go] that they [are] in constant need of new territory." Though she does not explicitly draw parallels between White and tribal cultures, Chrystos's point is clear: Native communities traditionally regard the land with respect and treat it with care, believing that this is one important way of maintaining a spiritual balance with the world. Holding this belief in contrast to the mainstream culture's attitude towards, and treatment of, the land, Chrystos finds mainstream ideology lacking.[50] She then tackles issues of alcoholism, suggesting that alcohol is a crutch which the dominant society uses in an attempt to find happiness, and criticizes its reverence of materialism and money. Though extreme, Chrystos's message is clear: by making generalizations about White culture, Chrystos reminds readers that Indian people and tribal communities have long been subject to similar misrepresentations. Focusing the same type of microscopic analysis which has

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[50]In *When Nickels Were Indians*, Patricia Penn Hilden [Nez Perce] describes the different perspective which traditional Indians have towards the land when compared to Euro-Americans in this way: "Lakota tradition (like most Native American tradition) demands that individual Native people behave towards the whole world as though everything in it---a tree, a rock, a cloud---is a 'relative,' living, growing, existing as humans exist, following its/her/his path through life. As every tribal person recognizes, the difference between us and Euro-America is, in Duane Niatum's words 'precisely this sense of coming from the land and not to it'" (108).

characterized the studies of Native cultures upon mainstream White culture allows Chrystos to invert the stereotypes, revealing them for their absurdity. Moreover, couching the message in irony also provides Chrystos with an effective form of culture critique. The poem's overall message is geared to making fun of generalizations, yet the ironic voice also allows Chrystos to point out the superficiality which she sees as marking the dominant culture.

Louis Owens enters the same conversation in *Bone Game*. Alex Yazzie, Navajo Indian and a self-professed Trickster figure, proposes digging up the graves of the Puritans as part of his anthropological research at the University of California at Santa Cruz. Drawing parallels with the anthropologists who justify desecrating Native burial grounds in the quest for scientific knowledge, Yazzie explains, "My basic argument is that it's imperative we Indians learn more about Puritan culture. Puritans had a significant impact on us" (180). He then describes his project in more detail

> In the proposal I said we would document everything from the health and disease patterns of colonial settlers to burial custom, diet, nutrition, and social status. We'll do cranial measurements to figure out how intelligent the Puritans were, compared to us, and test teeth and bone samples for dietary information. (180)

Alex's words reference the Craniometry movement of the early nineteenth century, a scientific movement which studied the size of the brain, shape of the skull, and the nature of the skull's suture, in an attempt to hierarchically rank different races. The leader of the American School of Craniology, Samuel George Morton, argued that because the skulls of

Whites averaged 92 cubic inches, while the average skull of a Native American averaged 75 cubic inches, that the White race must be superior (Berkhofer 58). Morton later used his cranial measurements to argue that Whites are superior to African-Americans, thus justifying slavery. In the 1854 text *Types of Mankind: Or, Ethnological Researches*, scientist J. C. Nott records the presumed intellectual differences, all tested by using theories of craniometry, of the various peoples in the United States:

> Intelligence, activity, ambition, progression, high anatomical development, characterize some races; stupidity, indolence, immobility, savagism, low anatomical development characterize others. Lofty civilization, in all cases, has been achieved solely by the "Caucasian" group. Mongolian races, save in the Chinese family, in no instance have reached beyond the degree of semi-civilization; while the Black races of Africa and Oceanica no less than the *Barbarous* tribes of America have remained in utter darkness for thousands of years...
>
> Furthermore, certain savage types can neither be civilized or domesticated. The *Barbarous* races of America (excluding the Toltecs) although nearly as low in intellect as the Negro races, are essentially untameable. Not merely have all attempts to civilize them failed, but also every endeavor to enslave them. Our Indian tribes submit to extermination, rather than wear the yoke under which our Negro slaves fatten and multiply. (Berkhofer 58)

Nott goes on to discuss Choctaw and Cherokee peoples, refuting the notion that these two

communities of the Five Civilized Tribes are more advanced than other tribes.[51] Nott argues, "The pure-blooded savage still skulks untamed through the forest, or gallops athwart the prairie. Can any one call the name of a single pure Indian of the *Barbarous* tribes who---except in death, like a wild cat---has done anything worthy of remembrance?" (Berkhofer 59). Nott's words provide context for Yazzie's proposal. Combining a general disregard for Native peoples with scientific inquiry produced a plethora of nineteenth century studies analyzing the minute details of Native Americans and their cultures, to both verify the superiority of White society when compared to these "primitive" societies, and to record the lifeways of peoples who were thought to be vanishing. Because of this, many trajedies occurred: graves were desecrated, sacred and utilitarian objects were confiscated for the purpose of collecting, and the skeletons of Native peoples were exhumed for scientific inquiries and museum display.

It is this callous contempt for a people's right to respect which Yazzie mocks in his proposal. Acknowledging the shock with which the Boston community will undoubtedly greet his proposal, Yazzie nevertheless dismisses their concerns and argues that scientific inquiry must prevail

> Some of those Boston people may be a little squeamish about us digging up their ancestors, and that's understandable, but, hey, that's science...We can't allow their primitive superstitions to stand in the way of science. And

---

[51]In the nineteenth century, tribes belonging to the Five Civilized Tribes were thought to be more civilized than other tribal communities because many members of these tribes had adapted their lifeways to White culture. This is just another example of how non-Indian people judged Indian people and their practices by the values and practices of White society.

here's the best part. Those graves are probably full of artifacts, buttons from Puritan clothes, whalebone corsets, dildos, things we can sell to collectors. And skeletons, of course. (180)

Alex's proposal is intentionally absurd. Nonetheless, his humor underscores the disregard with which Indian people and their cultures have been treated, here ironically inverted back upon White society. Explaining that even now the "remains of twelve thousand Native people [are housed] in the Hearst Museum at Berkeley," Yazzie criticizes the scientists, collectors, and museum curators who continue to view Indians as specimens rather than human beings.[52] His wit provides a way of shocking readers out of their complacency, as well as educating them about an important part of Indian-White relations. It also functions as a tool to make "tolerable what is unthinkable," as Paula Gunn Allen suggests (Allen 159); or, as Yazzie reminds us, "humor's what gets Indians through the tough times" (190). By addressing a painful subject humorously, and re-directing this pain back onto White scientists, Louis Owens highlights the inhumanity of treating another person with such indifference, and, in part, helps to diffuse the hurt which grave-robbing has caused.

In the first stanza of "The Native American Broadcasting System," Sherman Alexie mocks anthropological pronouncements about Indian people and their cultures:

Five hundred years from now, archeologists will discover

---

[52]In *Ghost Singer*, Anna Lee Walters [Pawnee/Otoe] enters this discussion by depicting the spirits which belong to the skeletons, artifacts, and personal belongings housed in the Native Peoples collection of the Smithsonian Institution as haunting the museum and physically seeking revenge against the White curators and scientists who refuse to allow the skeletons and items to be returned to the appropriate tribes.

a bowling ball buried beside the body of an Indian chief.
Research papers will be published in the academic journals proving the existence of a large fifteen-pound globe-like organ
in a majority of late twentieth century Native Americans.
"Although the organ itself was petrified," states an expert,
"We were able to ascertain that its purpose was to absorb excess
quantities of fluids, most likely alcoholic in nature."

Alexie's poem shows the genesis of a generalization: taking an isolated incident---finding a mundane object like a bowling ball in the grave of an Indian man---academics run amuck, making the illogical leap that this bowling ball is actually a physiological organ, and that it has ossified after five hundred years because of the subject's alcoholism. Alexie's irony is both humorous and sobering. Spoofing anthropologists is a funny way of showing the absurdity of some of the scientific generalizations which have been made about Native Americans. Sadly, however, Alexie's poem suggests that five hundred years from now, scientists and academics will still have a condescending attitude towards Indian people and their cultures. Why else will they still endorse grave robbing---which is now against the law---for if they did not exhume this man's grave, how did they come to possess this "artifact," the bowling ball? Why else will they stereotypically assume that all Indians are alcoholics? Why else will they suggest something as absurd as equating a bowling ball with a physical organ? Alexie's poem uses humor to indict academia, and its continuing fascination with, and generalization of, all things Native.

Much like Chrystos and Owens reverse the anthropological perspective upon

scientists, Woodrow Crumbo's [Creek/Potawatomi] watercolor titled "Land of Enchantment" (Figure 24) reverses tourism's scrutiny of Native Americans by humorously re-focusing this scrutiny upon the White tourists. The painting depicts an Indian woman holding up a woven blanket to sell to several watching tourists while a small girl, perhaps her daughter, cradles a White doll in her arms. Their dress suggests that they belong to a Southwestern tribe, a feature which is confirmed by the topography--the desert sand and blooming cactus. Several other blankets are lying on the saddle of the mule behind the woman, as well as a woven basket. On the ground at her feet are two clay bowls, presumably also for sale. Of foremost importance in the piece is Crumbo's depiction of the White tourists: a skinny White man with a camera around his neck, ready to take pictures of the Indian people he encounters; a buxom White woman who is impractically wearing heels given the desert setting, and who appears to be stuffed into the short, overly tight dress which she is wearing, a nice contrast to the modest, traditional cotton dresses which the Indian woman and girl are wearing; and, a red-haired boy who appears to be about the same age as the girl, who is openly watching her with interest, yet appears to be a bit shy, given the slight inward turn of his right foot and the hands behind his back. The tourists have already made purchases elsewhere: the boy holds an Indian drum in his hand, the woman is wearing several turquoise and silver bracelets, as well as a necklace, and the man wears a conch belt.

Significantly, the White woman peers *down* at the Indian girl (lending a condescending feeling to her observation) through a pair of hand-held glasses as the man, with right hand on his hip, in a gesture of arrogance, watches. A dilapidated wooden sign

on the edge of the road frames the scene's humor with its ironic words: Land of Enchantment. The saying is a reference to New Mexico's state slogan, yet ironically suggests that the "Land of Enchantment" motto is a misnomer. For whom is this a land of enchantment? Certainly not to the American Indians who live in the Southwest and are regarded by many as tourism curios. In addition, Crumbo depicts his Indian subjects in a state of transition, as evidenced by the little girl holding a White doll, the Indian woman learning to sell her wares for profit, and the White tourists who look upon the Indians as curiosities, and collect their hand-made items as souvenirs. Depicting this underlying historical text---Indian people learning to adapt to the dominant society---underscores an important transition in the lifeways of Native cultures. Framing this with the ironic words of the state slogan, which importantly is featured on a broken-down and ragged sign, suggests that this major cultural transition is a negative shift for tribal communities. Most importantly, however, is Crumbo's humorous criticism of the White tourists who, even today, view Indian people as novelties to be studied.

Harry Golightley, a fictional Indian artist whose name is a pun of Holly Golightly, a character in *Breakfast at Tiffany's,* is invented by art critic Rennard Strickland, along with a cast of other fictional characters, to discuss contemporary Native American art. Golightley states, "Modern Indian art is...funny--funny because the tragedy is so great that our only salvation is in laughter, in our sense of humor. We have to see the irony in our lives; only then can we go on. Indian art has to be more than high-styled dens and game rooms filled with rugs, and more than socialites decked out in turquoise. Indian art must speak of Indian problems and potentials" (Wade 298). Speaking through Golightley,

Strickland recognizes the complexity of modern Indian art, including its use of humor, especially irony, to address issues and concerns which are important to Native people. In "Land of Enchantment," Crumbo uses pictorial irony to make fun of White tourists, and to show the social and cultural adjustments which tribal communities have made because of contact with other peoples in America.

Artist Bob Haozous [Apache/Navajo] similarly employs humor as a form of social correction in his piece entitled "Apache Pull Toy" (Figure 25). Co-opting the traditional image of the pull toys which delight young children---pull toys of lawnmowers, small animals with legs that move as the toy is pulled, a clear plastic container in which brightly colored balls explode as the toy is moved---Haozous's pull toy offers a bleaker vision: that of a cowboy bent on one knee with guns drawn, one already aimed at an unseen target, the other moving into position. The unseen target is the Apache child indicated in the title, the child at whom the cowboy's guns are aimed. Moreover, because Haozous depicts the cowboy wearing a *white* hat, supposedly the hat worn by *good* guys, the piece suggests that this cowboy's actions are justified. Haozous says that he tries "to deal honestly and directly with reality in my art and that reality encompasses both ugliness and beauty" (Archuleta and Strickland 98). In this piece, Haozous uses irony to showcase the savagery which marked Indian-White relations in the nineteenth century, one that willingly marked Indian children as targets of murder, and even paid for their scalps as proof that they had been murdered.[53]

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[53]For more about this, see Ward Churchill's impressive 1997 historical text *A Little Matter of Genocide*. Churchill even provides a list of the various prices which were paid for the scalps of the victims, depending upon whether the victim was an adult male, an adult woman, or a child.

Roxy Gordon's [Choctaw] "A Taste of Indian Culture" makes fun of the White instructors who opt to teach in reservation schools because of the lure of "high starting salaries" or because they, like the anthropologists in the previous examples, are fascinated with everything Indian. Mildred, an Indian woman who directs the bilingual education program at a Lakota public school, laughingly tells him about the whoopee cushion which she uses to play jokes on the non-Indian instructors. "And then they wanted to eat dog," Gordon remembers Mildred dramatically adding to her story. The rest of the poem recounts Mildred's experience with these White instructors and their desire to eat dog:

Those young white teachers
wanted a taste of real
Indian culture.
Rabies is running wild
on the reservation and
all the dogs are vaccinated and
you don't eat pup from a vaccinated bitch.
But the teachers had a feed and
wanted dog so Mildred sent somebody out
to kill a rabbit. She cut its head
off and skinned it. Mildred said its
little tailbone looked just
like puppy. They boiled it up and
left it floating whole in the pot.

The teachers all came and stared stricken but

took, every last one of them,

at least one little bite.

I asked Mildred, "Did you ever tell them?"

"No," she says, not quite smiling,

"Nobody ever told them."

I imagine those teachers back home in

Minneapolis or wherever,

telling their relatives and college friends

about their year helping disadvantaged

Indian kids, telling how they got into

the real America, how they knew people

with names that sound like zoological

descriptions, about how they

swallowed their white skins and

swallowed a bite

of dog.

And I do

seriously

wonder if they tell their relatives and

college friends about the

whoopie cushion. I'd really like to know

how the folks back home get

their story of

Indian culture.

Gordon never clarifies whether Mildred is a real person, or whether this event actually occurred, though it is likely that the poem is based in Gordon's own life experiences. The poem's message is two-fold: first, it makes fun of the White women for romanticizing Lakota people and their culture. It is for this reason only, their desire to be able to tell their friends and family that they had a "taste (Gordon's playful pun) of real Indian culture," that they insist upon eating dog before leaving the reservation. Secondly, Gordon criticizes non-Indian people for continuing to see Native Americans according to popular misconceptions. Rather than telling about the whoopee cushion, which will debunk stereotypes and show that Lakota people are firmly rooted in the present and that they, like everyone else, enjoy practical jokes, Gordon imagines the teachers instead hawking their dog-eating experience because this is what they believe will authenticate them to others as having experienced "real" Indian culture. Like the previous examples, Gordon uses humor as a tool to make fun of others, in this case White women, and to make a more serious social statement.

In *The Antelope Wife*, Louise Erdrich uses humor to highlight several pressing concerns for Indian people. Oddly, this humor is provided by an unexpected deliverer of comic relief: a character named "Almost Soup," a dog who uses his cunning to escape becoming the family's dinner one night, thus accounting for his name. Almost Soup humorously attributes his survival directly to his "dog wit. Dog skill. Medicine ways I

learned from my elders, and want to pass on now to my relatives" (75). As the novel progresses, Almost Soup becomes a metaphor for Indian people in general, allowing Erdrich to discuss issues which are important to Native Americans, yet strangely voicing these concerns through the narration of a dog. The chapter which first introduces readers to Almost Soup, begins with the dog Almost Soup telling about his naming ceremony, taking pride in his ability to escape the soup pot, boasting that his name "has given so many of our breedless breed hope, the name that will live on in dogness down through the generations" (79). In this chapter alone, Almost Soup tackles issues as important as blood quantum, the Land Bridge theory, the importance of ancestors, and the teaching value of storytelling, all while making jokes about the practice of Ojibwas eating dogs.

Importantly, Erdrich's characterization of Almost Soup never becomes too cute, which is the inherent danger of personifying a dog and making him an important narrator and character in the novel. Instead, she raises matters which are discussed in Indian country, yet ironically addresses and understands them through the perspective of a dog whom Erdrich characterizes as possessing an Indian world view. Blood quantum is one of the issues which Erdrich refers to when Almost Soup confesses that he possesses mixed blood:

> There is a little of a coyote in me, just a touch here in my paws, bigger than a dog's paws. My jaws, too, strong to snap rabbit bones. Prairie-dog bones as well. That's right. Prairie. I don't mind saying to you that I'm not a full-blood Ojibwa reservation dog. I'm part Dakota, born out in Bwaanakeeng, transported here. (75)

Almost Soup's admission that he is mixed blood---part coyote, part prairie-dog, part Ojibwa, and part Sioux---alludes to the growing discussion in Indian country about who constitutes an Indian: Is it only someone with full blood? Does having mixed blood imply that one is somehow "less" of an Indian? Can someone with little blood quantum still be considered an Indian? Is there a hierarchy which ranks Indian people according to how much blood they possess? Do individuals claim Indian ancestry just because they are wannabees?[54] This issue has pervaded much of contemporary Native American literature, though it is becoming less of a major concern in the present day. This accounts for why Victor introduces himself to a White girl as being full-blood in *The Lone Ranger and Tonto Fistfight in Heaven*, while Thomas Builds-the-Fire, Victor's storytelling companion, remarks, "I'm half magician on my mother's side and half clown on my father's," a playful admission of his mixed blood (66). Patricia Penn Hilden reveals that she felt confused about her racial identity when growing up, stating "Not sufficiently White, I was also not anything else" (Hilden 117). nila northSun's poem "shadow knew nothing was my cousin" sadly documents the downfall and eventual suicide of a woman who feels that she does not belong because of her mixed blood:

shadow is

my cousin

shadow was

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[54]Many jokes in Indian Country make fun of the blood quantum issue. A popular one quips, "What's the number one question asked at the registration desk at the Indian hospital?" The punch-line: "Where do I go to get my Indian Blood tested? I NEED TO KNOW.....how much Indian I am."

my cousin

hated herself

because others hated her

whites hated her

called shadow

apple indian

whites saw only INDIAN

fat drunk greasy squaw

shadow didn't know

what she was

my cousin

killed herself

nothing new

we have lots of cousins

both

dead & alive

sometimes

both

with the same shadow

Traditionally, tribal members were not concerned with blood quantum, believing that world view was more important than the degree of Native ancestry one possessed. For instance, Peter Pitchlynn was a tribal leader of the Choctaws for many years despite

his mixed blood status, and many tribes recognized as members of their communities anyone who lived with them, including people without even any Native ancestry. Blood quantum, an issue which the United States government first introduced[55] when it began to identify who was, and who was not, to be considered an Indian in order to discern who among the non-enrolled, non-reservation Indians was eligible for federal aid, prompts writer LeAnne Howe to state matter-of-factly, "I think...[blood quantum does matter], I think traditionally, we don't look at blood quantum, that's just an invention of the twentieth century, because with blood quantum, we'll fuck ourselves right out of existence. Maintain a blood quantum standard and pretty soon nobody fits that and kaboom! We're gone, you're de-tribed" (*Native Playwright's Newsletter* 25). Unfortunately, even Indian people (especially in academia) harshly criticize each other regarding whether they are "Indian enough." About this, Kelly Begay [Navajo] writes in *Indian Country Today*, "I can tell you that I'm truly alarmed at what seems to be a concerted drive to create an exclusionary class of people who by their own doing will undo themselves in the end (and destroy all Indian people in a few generations)...Any legal definition of any person, place, or concept also creates a concomitant drawing of parameters which not only protect, but exclude as well. If only the legally defined Indian can call him or herself Indian, then all the rest (who might be full-blood but unable to fulfill tribal blood-quantum requirements) are left out in the cold" (Hilden 209). Almost Soup's admission reminds us of the increasing importance of this discussion in both American politics, and in Indian country, as more and more people begin to debate what constitutes

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[55]Today, many tribes set blood quantum limits for membership.

Indianness.

Almost Soup also tackles the question of how Indian people came to be in America: "I was the son of a blend of dogs stretching back to the beginning of time on this continent. We sprang up here. We had no need to cross on any land bridge. We know who we are. Us, we are descended of Original Dog" (76). Almost Soup's remark invokes, and then renounces, the popular Land Bridge theory. First introduced in 1590 but still popular in some places even today, this theory posits that there was once a land bridge near Asia which connected the Old World to the New World, thus accounting for the diversity of peoples throughout the world (Berkhofer 36). Almost Soup's comment mocks this popular theory, asserting that his dog community has a creation story which explains their origin: they are descended from Original Dog, the first dog to be created, and have always been in America. Erdrich uses Almost Soup's story as a humorous metaphor to mock those who suggest that America originally had no Native peoples, and that Native Americans were only the first peoples to inhabit America because they were the first to cross this Land Bridge thousands of years ago. Almost Soup's words emphasize his pride in his identity and symbolize the pride which Indian people feel towards their own cultures, ancestors, and creation accounts.

Lastly, Almost Soup emphasizes the importance of storytelling for telling a people (or, in his case, a dogdom) who they are: where they come from, who their ancestors were, and how they should live. He relates two survival stories from his own life---avoiding the soup pot when he was a puppy, and his naming ceremony---and then provides a detailed list of advice (based upon his own dog experience) to instruct his

descendants about how they should live their lives:

> Eat anything you can at any time. Fast. Bolt it down. Stay cute, but stay elusive. Don't let them think twice when they've got the hatchet out. I see cold steel, I'm gone. Believe it. And there are of course all sorts of illnesses we dread. Avoid the bite of the fox. It is madness. Avoid all bats. Avoid all black-and-white striped moving objects. And slow things with spiny quills. Avoid all humans when they get into a feasting mood. Get near the tables fast, though, once the food is cooked. Stay close to their feet. Stay ready. But don't steal from their plates. Avoid medicine men. Snakes. Boys with BB guns. Anything ropelike or easily used to hang or tie. Avoid outhouse holes. Cats that live indoors. Do not sleep under cars. Or with horses. Do not eat anything attached to a skinny, burning string. Do not eat lard from the table. Do not go into the house at all unless no one is watching. Do not, unless you are absolutely certain you can blame it on a cat, eat any of their chickens. Do not eat pies. Do not eat decks of cards, plastic jugs, dry beans, dish sponges. If you must eat a shoe, eat both of the pair, every scrap, untraceable..." (79-80)

Almost Soup's monologue is pure comedy, yet it also reminds us that storytelling---Trickster stories, stories about a tribe and its experiences, familial stories, survival stories---serves an important function in Native cultures. Stories connect a people to their ancestors and traditions. Moreover, they provide a sense of belonging to a community, and to the larger universe. People inherit strength, and the knowledge that they can

survive despite any hardship which may arise, through the stories which they hear.

Theoretically, these works reflect Jace Weaver's communitist paradigm by being oriented around community and showing a commitment to activism. The texts, both literary and artistic, demonstrate an abiding commitment to tribal values and peoples, yet also show concern for issues which are relevant to Indian communities by discussing them openly. Issues as varied as grave robbing, blood quantum, stereotypes, and American politics are raised, all with at least the partial intent of opening dialogue about concerns which affect Indian people and communities. While many other Native American writers and artists do the same in their works, not all employ humorous or ironic means to do so, as in these examples and those in the preceding chapter. Salting the discussions with humor allows the writers to raise troubling issues in a less threatening medium, thus generating more discussion in the public, and is also an effective way of making strong social criticisms.

Much of the humor is deliberately meant to shock. George Santayana considers this type of joking to be both unpleasant and pleasant: "The incongruous and the degraded displease us...[even so] The shock which they bring may sometimes be the occasion of a subsequent pleasure, by attracting our attention, or by stimulating passions, such as scorn, or cruelty, or self-satisfaction (for there is a good deal of malice in our love of fun)" (Morreall 93). Santayana's assertion is a direct attack on the Incongruity theorists who assert that humans by nature enjoy being shaken up by incongruity and absurdity; Santayana instead posits that we enjoy incongruity only because it excites us mentally, thus bringing us pleasure, and not because we simply enjoy being unsettled. "There are a

great many topsy-turvy worlds possible to our fancy, into which we like to drop at times," he explains. "We enjoy the stimulation and the shaking up of our wits. It is like getting into a new posture, or hearing a new song" (93).

Sigmund Freud's *Jokes and Their Relation to the Unconscious* posits a slightly different theory of humor, arguing that joking serves as a safety valve which releases forbidden feelings and thoughts in a socially acceptable way. When we express what is usually suppressed, Freud argues, the result is a cathartic release of the repression which typically inhibits us. "Humor is not resigned; it is rebellious," Freud claims (Morreall 113). Freud distinguishes between two types of jokes: innocent jokes, whose aim is the joke itself and the laughter which accompanies it, and tendentious jokes, jokes with a deliberate "purpose [which] run the risk of meeting with people who do not want to listen to them" (Freud 90). Among tendentious jokes are hostile jokes, jokes which "[serve] the purpose of aggressiveness, satire, or defense," and obscene jokes, jokes which "[serve] the purpose of exposure" (97). Freud's theory is especially useful for understanding how the jokes in this and the preceding chapter in part operate. As children, we are taught that it is wrong to use what Freud calls "abusive language," fighting words which make fun of and ridicule others, especially those whom we consider to be adversaries. Hostile jokes, however, provide a socially acceptable form of aggression: "by making our enemy small, inferior, despicable or comic [through joking invectives], we achieve in a roundabout way the enjoyment of overcoming him" (103). The benefit of this form of joking is that it "guarantees...a reception with the hearer which they would never have found in a non-joking form, in spite of the truth they might contain" (103). Joking about the desecration

of graves, American politics, academia, the coming of non-Indian people to America, White tourists, and stereotypes (only to name a few) provides Native American writers and artists with an effective form of social criticism. In many cases, the criticism is directed outwards to non-Indian people, and is a way of chiding inappropriate behavior. Yet, the jokes also help to unite Indian people by revealing shared experiences, observations, and frustrations.

In *Indian Killer*, Sherman Alexie introduces readers to a character named John Smith, a young Indian man who is raised by White parents after his fourteen-year old mother gives him up for adoption. Smith imagines various tribes which he might belong to because he does not have any information about his past. One day Smith attends an Indian basketball game in his community and is startled by how different all of the Indians physically look—"There were Indians with brown hair and paler skin. Green-eyed Indians. Indians with black blood. Indians with Mexican blood. Indians with white blood. Indians with Asian blood"—but he is most struck by their behavior: "They were talking, telling jokes, and laughing loudly. So much laughter. John wanted to own that laughter, never realizing that their laughter was a ceremony used to drive away personal and collective demons" (Alexie 21). Smith's observation echoes Freud's representation of humor as a safety valve, here likened to a sacred ceremony. Joking about "personal and collective demons," those affecting both the individual and the community, helps to drive these demons away.

Many of the jokes are hostile: they are directed to non-Indian people and contain social criticism. John Morreall argues that "in hostile humor, our expression of feelings of

superiority at our enemy's downfall...can boost our enjoyment of the incongruity involved" (Morreall 136). Morreall's theory is that we tell incongruous, or disconcerting, jokes because we are motivated by a practical concern: "Some situation that matters to us is judged not to be as we want it to be, and we are motivated to react in various ways that have the potential of improving the situation itself or at least our relation to it. The world has somehow slipped out of control, and we are motivated to bring it back into control" (Morreall 191). Joking, then, is both an outlet to release frustrations, personal and collective, and a social corrective. Salting discussions about issues which affect Indian people with humor is a more effective way of reaching a non-Indian audience; the humor is a less threatening vehicle to discuss troubling issues, thereby making this audience more likely to listen to the criticism, and it is also an effective means of showing the seriousness of an issue. Moreover, it binds Indian listeners together: "humor [is] an antiseptic that clean[s] the deepest of personal wounds," argues Alexie in *The Lone Ranger and Tonto Fistfight in Heaven* (164). Addressing issues which are typically associated with pain and frustration helps to alleviate this pain and frustration, at least in part. In addition, it has a didactic function, teaching those who are more likely to recognize, or be open to, the social criticism when it is couched in humor.

## Chapter Six

### Inter-Tribal Humor: Jokes for Indians

In *Indi'n Humor*, Kenneth Lincoln observes that to see Indian people as possessing a sense of humor is to see them as *real* people, and not according to preconceived ideas. Lincoln chides those who think of "Indians" and "Humor" as being oxymoronic. "American Indian humor remains a mystery, if not an oxymoron, to many: 'A book on *what*?' people reply in disbelief to my research," Lincoln reveals (5). Lincoln's assertions point to a problem with roots in previous centuries. Expecting Indian people to *live down to* traditional stereotypes of them is the equivalent of negating their humanity. Romanticized-into-oblivion Noble Savages are not expected to possess wit; they are only assumed to be stoic, wizened, and one with nature. The same pigeon-holing is true of the Noble Savage's counterpart, the villainous Red Devils. To see an Indian person *outside* of these misrepresentations is to see them as multi-dimensional human beings; in other words, as *real people* who fall in and out of love, have both good and bad qualities, who worry about family problems, jobs, and how next month's bills will be paid, and who enjoy a good joke just like the next person. For many, acknowledging this reality is just too much; they far prefer to think of Native Americans according to specific models because it satisfies something in them.

The previous chapters confirm that humor has been an important part of tribal cultures---elevated, in some cases, even to the sacred---and that Indian people possess diverse forms of wit. Unlike the preceding two chapters which concentrated on humor directed outwards to non-Indian people, both good-natured and biting, this chapter

examines "internal" humor, jests between Indian people themselves. The joking assumes a variety of forms, from making fun of people who belong to other tribes, to teasing about life on the reservation and what it means to be an Indian in the twenty-first century, and, in some cases, to criticizing the American government for its treatment of Indian people. "When a people can laugh at themselves and laugh at others and hold all aspects of life together without letting anybody drive them to extremes," writes Vine Deloria, Jr., "then it seems to me that that people can survive" (Deloria 167).

Many of the jokes which Indian people tell each other involve poking fun at other tribes. In *Bone Game*, Alez Yazzie tells a joke which has been popular throughout Indian country: "You hear the one about the Lakota and Navajo families who exchanged sons for the summer? When the Navajo kid got home his family asked him how it was, and he said, 'Ruff.' When the Lakota boy got home and his family asked him, he said, 'Baad'" (190). The responses are a play on words, another form that humor can assume according to Henri Bergson. Indeed, the Navajo boy may have found the Lakota reservation to be rough, but his comment also invokes the great body of humor which is associated with the Lakota people having eaten dogs in the olden days in order to survive. In contrast, the Lakota boy's comment pokes fun at the Navajo people's penchant for raising sheep. The two largest tribes in the United States today, the Navajo and Sioux enjoy a good-natured rivalry. Though geographically distant from each other, the jokes are a playful way of acknowledging this competition.

Another playful joke about the Sioux is told by R. David Edmunds [Cherokee] in a paper delivered at Colorado State University in 1974:

> At the start of World War I, two young Sioux men from the Cheyenne River Reservation decided to enlist in the navy. Since they never had been off the reservation, they planned to take the train to San Francisco and to enlist after they arrived. The train ride across the Rockies was interesting, but it didn't fascinate them half as much as the hustle and bustle of the San Francisco waterfront. They left the train and walked around for several hours when they began to get hungry. They saw no restaurants, but one of them finally spied a man with a vending cart over which a sign announcing "Hot Dogs" was hung. Now...since they were Sioux, they thought they were familiar with such a menu, and so they decided to give the man's product a try. They walked over to the vender and ordered two servings. He took their money and handed them each a sandwich wrapped in a small paper sack. As they walked away, one of the young men opened his sack, stared at the bun, took it out, looked inside, turned pale, and then in disbelief, turned to his friend and asked, "My gosh! What part of the dog did he give you?" (Tyler 151)

The humor is two-pronged, making fun of the Lakota practice of eating dogs but also sexual in nature. The humor is not mean-spirited but playful, yet also shows the transitional period of Native Americans as they began to serve in the American military and also to fight in wars.

Another joke which ultimately pokes fun at Whites but only by first making fun of Lakota people is the well-known recipe for Dog Head Stew:

> Carefully prepare one medium dog head, removing teeth from jaw bones and hair, putting these aside for future use. Into Kettle, add heaping handfuls of camos bulbs and cattail roots. The eggs from two medium-size salmon may be combined with water to cover, and place over fire and bring to boil for three hours. It is customary to observe the rites of preparation in order to have all present appreciate the dish that will begin the feast. At the proper moment, using the ceremonial arrow, impale the dog head and bring forth for all to observe the excellence of the dish. Then allow fifteen to thirty minutes for all whites to excuse themselves and leave for home. Bury stew in back yard and bring forth the roasted turkey with all the trimmings. In this way, a 15 pound turkey will do. The others have been invited to the feast...and the fact they didn't stay is their tough luck. (Witt and Steiner 75-76)

The joke is on the Whites in much the same way that Roxy Gordon's "A Taste of Indian Culture" mocks the White women for wanting to eat dog before returning to their lives off of the reservation. A great deal of pomp and pseudo-ceremony augment the making of Dog Head Stew, all for the benefit of the White guests in order to try to horrify them into leaving the dinner party. Once they are gone, the stew is thrown away and the real feast of turkey is brought forth.

Kenneth Lincoln gets in on the fun when recapping jokes which he has heard about the Sioux: "What's a Sioux picnic?" he quips. "A six-pack and a puppy." Or, "What do the Sioux use for cattle feed?" "Puppy Chow." Or, What do Sioux fast-food chains

serve? The answer: "Pup-in-a-Cup" (Lincoln 64). And, "What did the Sioux say when he finished his dinner?" "Dog gone" (63). Scholar Robert Easton records a similarly flavored joke in "Humor of the American Indian": "Is it true that you Indians eat dogs?" the tourist asked the young Pawnee. "Yes sir," replied the Indian, "but good eatin' dogs is mighty scarce since the price of sausages has gone up"' (39-40). About this humor which pokes fun at other tribes, LeAnne Howe states, "If we can tell [jokes] about ourselves, then it's OK...I grew up in a community that told really rank-tious [sic] jokes about every different tribe, offensive. This was Indians stereotyping other Indians, and it was OK" (Native Playwrights' Newsletter 23).

It is a good thing that Howe has this attitude because Roxy Gordon, a fellow Choctaw, makes fun of her, other Choctaws, and the Sioux, in his poem "Unfinished Business":

> Arthur DeRosier said the Choctaws were
> pretty good fighters once way back
> And might have caused the white folks
> a lot of trouble, but
> they learned early on that
> fighting hurt business--cut profits
> too much.
> LeAnne and I get drunk and we have arguments
> about the Choctaws. LeAnne says she likes
> Choctaws first, all other Indians after that and

whites and everybody else follow. I tell her
I must not be a very good Choctaw because I never
could figure out how to make a goddamned dime. And
besides those Choctaws are so damned happy, going
around laughing while I go around depressed and
fatalistic like some Sioux.
Lafferty describes several old Choctaws, all fat like most
Choctaws (and LeAnne doesn't care for that fat description
at all)--these old Choctaws are sitting side by side and
for no discernable reason, one by one, they start to
laugh. Their corpulent bodies shake with almost
silent laughter. The Choctaw Chuckle. Lafferty
says when two strange Indians met in the old times,
if they each burst into laughter, then they'd know
they were both Choctaw.
LeAnne says the Sioux don't think Choctaws are
real Indians.
LeAnne goes about Indian time as if
she invented it. She has taken it
to new, undreamed-of heights. Instead of
hours late or even days late, LeAnne is likely to be
weeks late (no page numbers).

Gordon's poem makes light of several subjects: old-time Choctaws' finesse as business-men and business-women, the Choctaw sense of humor, Indian Time (a source of much joking in Indian country), the oft-quoted Siouxan saying, "It's a good day to die," and the size of Choctaw people. Non-Indian people are likely to miss Gordon's playful jests because his humor depends upon reading the jokes from within the cultures, not as outsiders. "Joking appears...as culture-in-action," Lincoln argues. "Indi'n humor...projects a perfect inner circle of play-sphere...to gauge how we read one another across the Buckskin Curtain" (Lincoln 19). This joking allows Indian people to have fun with being Indian, recognizing and understanding each other's tribal differences, and also, in this example, allows Gordon to have some fun with Howe on a personal level.

A Navajo teasing a Choctaw is playfully recorded in *Bone Game*. Alex Yazzie, Navajo Trickster, teases his friend Cole McCurtain for being Choctaw, knowing that his ancestors were farmers, not horse people. "We have horses," Alex proudly states about the Navajo. "I guess those Indians down in the South [meaning Choctaws] never had horses." Alex's words are a playful dig at Cole's ancestry which targets the traditional Choctaws who had a proclivity for agriculture and business. Cole's rejoinder?

> Are you kidding? Choctaws invented horses--blooded racehorses, thoroughbreds, quarter horses, even Tennessee Walkers and Shetland ponies. It's a little known fact. The Spanish caught the ones that escaped from us. At first they just ate them, but soon the primitive Spaniards were veritable centaurs in armor. Choctaws even invented those little bitty suckers that were running around during the Paleozoic period. Navajos

invented camels.

Not to be outdone by Cole's one-upmanship, Alex retorts, "The Paleozoic?...I can see little bitty Choctaws riding those little bitty horses. Navajos invented Choctaws" (50).

In *Custer Died For Your Sins,* Vine Deloria Jr. offers his own inter-tribal joking: "Sioux announce that safe-conduct passes are available to Chippewas at the registration desks. Chippewas retort that if the Sioux don't behave they will relocate them again. Southwestern tribes innocently proclaim that their chili is very mild when in reality they are using asbestos pottery to serve it in. And the northern tribes seem always to take large helpings, which they somehow manage to get down amid tears and burnt mouths" (163). Deloria explains that "everything is up for grabs" when one Indian teases another (163). The jokes, however, are good-natured: poking fun at the competitive relationship which existed between the neighboring Siouan and Chippewa peoples, teasing Southwestern people for their penchant to make flaming hot chili, masked as being "mild," and ribbing northern tribes for their hearty appetites, even when faced with eating red-hot chili. James Welch [Blackfeet] continues this jokesterism in *Winter in the Blood.* The nameless protagonist of this work has been dating a Cree woman, much to his grandmother's disdain (historically, the Cree were scorned by the Blackfeet). Throughout the novel the narrator informs us that his grandmother is "plott[ing] ways to slit her throat. One day the flint striker would do; another day she favored the paring knife she kept hidden in her legging" (5). The grandmother never does vanquish her "enemy" (the narrator's word) but she does spend a considerable amount of time pondering different forms of possible death for the girl.

Jim Northrup teases Chippewa people when he jokes, "Why do Shinnobs make better lovers?" The punch line: "A lot of them don't have to get up and go to work in the morning" (13). Louise Erdrich joins the fun in *The Antelope Wife*, teasing the Chippewas for their traditional love medicines, delivered in an elaborate joke which is told by a dog:

> "Not too long ago I overhear these three dogs. A Ho Chunk dog. A Sioux dog. Ojibwa dog, too. They're sitting in the veterinarian's office waiting room talking about why they're here. The Ho Chunk Winnebago dog says, "Well, the other day they were eating that good stew they make, just lapping it up right in front of me. That night they put the cover on the stew pot but they forgot to put the pot away. So I sneaked into the kitchen and I took the top of that pot in my teeth, set it down careful, and ate all the rest of that stew. Then I got in the garbage and ate the bones and the guts of everything that went into that stew. Then I wanted to sleep but oh, by that time I had the worst stomachache. I just had to go. I barked, but the Winnebagos, you know they sleep good. They never even stirred in their sleep, so, well, I just went ka-ka all over the house. Now, I guess, they're so mad they're going to put me to sleep. What about you?"
>
> "Me," said the Sioux dog, "I have a similar story. You ever heard of the stew the Dakotas make with guts? It's mighty good, and my owner had a big plate of that plus all the makings for Indian tacos in his pickup one day. He was driving home and I was proudly sitting in the cab of the truck when he stopped. He got out, left me sitting there with all that good stuff and I

just couldn't help it. I wolfed it all down. Every bite. Man, was it ever good! But then I waited and waited and my owner, he was having a good time, and he didn't come back. I tried to hold it for a long time but finally, well, I just had to go. I went all over that cab of his pickup. Boy, when he came back, was he ever mad! First he was going to eat me but then he decided that was too good a fate for me. He brought me here. I'm going to be put to sleep too. And you, what about you?"

"Well me," said the Ojibwa dog, "I was sitting on the couch one day just dozing off. I was half asleep and my owner, she likes to vacuum her house in the nude, she was doing her usual housework. She was working on the carpet right in front of me and usually, even though I'm not fixed, I've got a fair amount of self-control. But then she bent over right in front of me and I just lost it. I went right for her."

"Sexually?" asked the others.

"Yeah," the Ojibwa dog admitted.

"Gee," said the other dogs, shaking their heads, "that's too bad. So she's putting you to sleep too."

"Gaween," said the Ojibwa dog, modestly. "You know us Chippewa dogs, we got the love medicine. Me, I'm getting a shampoo and my nails clipped." (127-128)

Northrup and Erdrich's jokes poke fun at their own tribe, showing that this joking is not just reserved for making fun of other tribal communities. Today, the jokes tend to be

more pan-Indian; thus a Hopi man make fun of a Choctaw even though the two have never met. This inter-tribal joking is a way for Indian people to feel connected to each other in the mainstream world in much the say way that other groups tell jokes about themselves.

Although some of the jokes directed at other tribes are antagonistic, most of them are good-natured. Some playfully recount old rivalries between tribes which were geographically close to each other, whereas others make fun of the way a specific tribal community did things. In some cases, however, the jokes make fun of tribes which were distrustful of each other. About this, Sherman Alexie writes, "...tribal distinctions [can be] much more important than economic ones. The rich and poor Spokanes may hang out together, but that doesn't necessarily mean the Spokanes are friendly with the Lakota or Navajo or any other tribe. The Sioux still distrust the Crow because they served as scouts for Custer. Hardly anybody likes the Pawnees" (179). Vine Deloria, Jr. recounts a joke of this nature:

> In 1964, Billy Mills, a Sioux from Pine Ridge, South Dakota, won the ten thousand meter run at the Olympics in Tokyo. Justly proud of Billy, the Sioux went all out to inform other tribes of his achievement. One day [the Sioux] were bragging about Billy's feat to the Coeur d'Alenes of Idaho, who politely nodded their heads in agreement. Finally the wife of the chairman, Leona Garry, announced that Mills' running ability did not really surprise the Coeur d'Alenes. "After all," she said, "up here in Idaho, Sioux have to run far, fast, and often if they mean to stay alive." (164)

The joke openly alludes to the hostility between the Siouxan people and the Coeur d'Alene and, as Deloria points out, "That ended the discussion of Sioux athletic ability for the evening" (164). Similarly, the joke which quips, "What do you get when you cross a Navajo and a sheep---RETARDED SHEEP," shows that some inter-tribal jokes can be mean-spirited.

Much joking also revolves around Indian life today. Thus, Diet Pepsi becomes a metaphor for sobriety in Sherman Alexie's *The Lone Ranger and Tonto Fistfight in Heaven* because alcoholism is a growing problem on the Coeur d'Alene reservation.

> "Give me another beer" [Adrian says].
>
> "Hey, we don't drink no more, remember? [Victor reminds]. How about a Diet Pepsi?"
>
> "That's right, enit? I forgot. Give me a Pepsi."
>
> Adrian and I sat on the porch and watched the reservation. Nothing happened. From our chairs made rockers by unsteady legs, we could see that the only traffic signal on the reservation had stopped working. (44)

The scene's joking is two-fold: presenting Diet Pepsi as an alternative for alcohol[56] and making fun of life on the reservation, where so little happens that chatting about the not-working traffic light is news.

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[56]In a later scene Alexie underscores the growing problem of alcohol abuse on his reservation when Adrian quips, "He looks good," a statement made in response to seeing one of the rising new teenage basketball stars on the reservation. "Yeah, he must not be drinking," [Victor responds]." "Yet." [Adrian states.] "Yeah, yet," [Victor agrees] (45). *Bone Game* provides added context for Alexie's message when Alex Yazzie sarcastically accuses Cole McCurtain of being the "worst Indian cliche of all time" when he learns of Cole's alcohol problem (145).

The reservation is also a subject which invokes much joking. Erdrich delivers a barbed jest in *The Antelope Wife*, once again delivered by a dog, this time who is recounting a story which he once heard about a canine outbreak in Minnesota which prompted a large dog-catching expedition. There are three dogcatchers in the joke: one from a "crack Norwegian dog-catching school," a Swedish man, and an Indian dogcatcher. All spend the morning catching dogs until their trucks are filled; at lunch, they decide to take a break but forget to lock the trucks. This is when the joke begins:

> When the dogcatchers came back from lunch, then, first thing they looked into the back of their trucks. The crack Norwegian dog-catcher's truck was totally empty and so was the Swedish truck. But the Ojibwa dogcatcher's truck, though unlatched the same and only chained, was still full of dogs. "This is something, though," said the Swede and Norwegian to the Ojibwa. "How do you account for the fact all our dogs are gone and yours are still there?" "Oh," said the Ojibwa, "mine are Indian dogs. Wherever they are, that's their rez. Every time one of them tries to sneak off, the others pull him back. (223-224)

Erdrich's joke plays off of the conflicting role which the reservation plays: as both a refuge for Indian people, yet also a trap of sorts for those who want to leave the reservation in order to find a job elsewhere, move to an urban locale, or go to college. About the reservation, Sherman Alexie quips an often told joke in Indian country, "Reservation University...[the place where] every Indian is an alumnus" (39). Meanwhile, Jim Northrup jokes, "Why do you call it a Rez instead of a Reservation?" The punch-line: "Because the

White man owns most of it" (226).

Contemporary musician Jack Gladstone [Blackfeet], acclaimed singer, songwriter and storyteller, writes songs which depict the lifeways of the Northern Plains peoples, including their lives before contact, life in transition after contact, and life today. His subject matter also explores other tribes, specific Indian people (like Jim Thorpe), events which are important to remember in Native history, mythological figures (like the Trickster), and ceremonial practices. His music is a blending of the serious and the humorous, and often requires audience participation when performed live. In his 1997 song "Napi Becomes a Wolf," Gladstone tells the traditional story of Old Man Napi, Blackfeet Trickster, who shape-shifts into a wolf, all because he wants to see what a wolf existence is like. The chorus of the song repeats the phrase, "When Napi Became a Wolf." In a live performance in Tahlequah, Oklahoma which I recently attended, Gladstone asked his audience to howl like wolves every time he sang this chorus. What erupted was a cacophony of howls, laughingly delivered by people of all ages and backgrounds; what was once a quiet audience of strangers was now bonded together in the moment, reminding all of us that traditional stories are communal; they are meant to be shared, are vibrant, and require participation. After the song Gladstone reminded that Trickster stories are "not an old textbook." They are "within us [and are] part of our psychological and spiritual tapestry."[57] Gladstone humorously likened traditional stories like this one to "software programming," stating that the stories reflect the "values,

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[57]All of Gladstone's quotes were made at a performance which he delivered at Northeastern State University in Tahlequah, Oklahoma on April 13, 2000. Gladstone's performance was part of the 28th Annual Symposium on the American Indian.

beliefs, principles, structures and morals of our [Blackfeet] culture." This story teaches Blackfeet children that it is good for them to behave like the wolves whose power comes from their commitment to each other. In Gladstone's words, this song "reminds us of wolf power" and "[teaches us] to learn to cooperate and work as a team, as a tribe."

Gladstone's playful 1995 blues song "Hudson Bay Blues" depicts the establishment of the first trading post in Blackfeet country in 1793, with the reminder that events like this one signaled drastic changes to the traditional lifeways of the Northern Plains tribes. The song opens with a Blackfeet man who is riding his horse when he unexpectedly (and humorously) learns through the "moccasin telegraph" that something strange has come to the land:

I was riding on my pony
hunting bison on the plains
When the moccasin telegraph
reported something strange
There was someone building
lodges made with stone and logs
They had bushes on their faces
and funky looking dogs.
They were loading off big bundles
from triple wide canoes
Full of trading items, out of sight,
creation sang the blues.

"Tomorrow's our grand opening.

Grab your robes and furs.

We'll wheel and deal and feast and

drink until you Injuns purr."

Notice that Gladstone writes that "creation sang the blues" as the merchandise from the "triple wide canoes" is being unloaded, a reminder that this event, among others, would herald significant changes to Blackfeet culture. Notice also the condescending attitude which the store owner has towards the Blackfeet man as he states, "We'll wheel and deal and feast and drink until you Injuns purr." The next stanza reveals that this store owner prepares the Blackfeet for shopping by introducing them to alcohol:

With horses and dogs all piled

high with skins

It was unfamiliar territory we had

wandered in

A bushy faced Napikwan (White

Man) said,

"Sit, we'll smoke and drink."

As we prepared our sacred pipe,

those Napikwans just winked.

When the smoke was over, they

said, "We've got a gift for you

That'll fill your head with visions,

make you strong and happy, too."

We didn't quite know what to think

before we drank that rum.

It was firewater, devil starter, rabbit

on the run.

The Blackfeet offer their wares to the store owner after sharing the "sacred pipe" with him; his response is to jokingly wink at his co-worker and then offer the "gift" of alcohol to the Blackfeet. Gladstone's chorus states, "They got us ready for shopping/They got us ready for shopping/Yeah, we were ready for shopping/At the Hudson's Bay Company." When the song is performed live, Gladstone asks his audience to playfully repeat each verse of the chorus back to him.

What did the Blackfeet shop for? In jest, Gladstone answers,

We wanted...

Flint locks, wool socks,

Coffee beans, denim jeans,

Iron awls, musket balls,

Powder horns and pretty shawls

Blankets, buttons, bolts of flannel,

Silver bells and tallow candles,

Sugar, flour, dark molasses

Colored beads and looking glasses

Pale ale, gin and brandy,

Fine wine and hard rock candy

Ride through service was awful

handy.

This stanza is delivered in quick-fire pace with barely time for a breath. Gladstone then moves the song to the present, showing what the Blackfeet shop for today:

Now we've got...

Spandex, gore-tex,

Nike airs, gummy bears,

Ceiling fans, fryin' pans,

Turkey, veal, shrimp or Spam

Sales cycles, sports rackets,

Roller blades and team jackets.

Keyboards to surf the net on a

tidal wave of debt

MasterCard, Visa Card

Christopher Columbus (Discover)

Card

American Express, Lord,

Every kind of card.

Once again, Gladstone follows this with the chorus, "Oh, we can't stop shopping/We can't stop shopping/We can't stop shopping/At the Hudson's Bay Company." In his live performance in Tahlequah, Gladstone delivered this song with many verbal quips,

explaining that in the old days, Blackfeet "didn't have Wal-Mart, K-Mart, or shopping centers" but they did have the Hudson's Bay Company. Because there was no written word at the time, only the "spoken word to inform us," Gladstone said the Blackfeet had to resort to "shopping lists...[long pause]...memorized." He added, "[The Blackfeet] didn't have currency in those days, they had furrency" and then reminded that this "outlet mall" provided the Blackfeet with their first firearms. Gladstone likens today's warehouse shopping clubs like Sam's, Price Club, and Costco to the "fur trading posts [but on] steroids," and jokingly clowns that Christopher Columbus once said, "Ah, it pays to discover," a playful reference to the Discover credit card. Gladstone closed the song by joking, "At Furco we cheat the other tribes and pass the savings on to yours."

The "Hudson Bay Blues" portrays a time of transition; for the Blackfeet, it is a time of great change as they are first introduced to alcohol and guns through the trading company, and their contact with White settlers, especially traders, increases. Also, it is a time of economic change for America as the push from cottage industries into factories begins to take shape. This song captures this transformation, yet also playfully makes fun of shopping as it grows into a pastime. The humor is rooted in its playful portrayal of the first store in this area, compared to the mega shopping complexes of today, yet is also sobering because this store marked significant changes for Blackfeet culture.

Cartoonists also join the fun. In the January 1974 edition of *Wassaja*, a cartoon which playfully criticizes government bureaucracy, and which would soon become well-known in Indian country, was first published. "Implementing our Indian Programs" (Figure 26) makes fun of a task which should be simple---hanging a tire swing from a tree-

--but is made impossible by government bureaucracy. The cartoon depicts the proposals of five government agencies, each with different ideas regarding how to best hang the swing. The Bureau of Indian Affairs (itself the brunt of many jokes in Indian country) suggests hanging the swing from three ropes, one on each side of the swing, and one in the middle, making it impossible for any child to ever even enjoy the swing. The Army Corps of Engineers responds with its own proposal: hanging the swing from the middle of the tree's trunk, which means that the swing actually lays on the ground, useless. The Department of Housing and Urban Development counters by suggesting that the tree be cut in half, propped up with supports, and that the swing be hung so that it swings back and forth between the cut in the middle of the tree, once again useless. The last frame of the cartoon delivers the final barb: a simple picture of a tree with a tire swing hanging from it by one rope, and the words "What we really wanted" underneath it, the cartoon deftly criticizes governmental agencies for being inept. This same feeling is underscored in Roxy Gordon's joke: "Who invented the Bureau of Indian Affairs?" The punch-line: "Someone who was really mad at us" (Gordon 85). A final BIA joke from Indian country: "When a bureaucrat from the detested Bureau of Indian Affairs pontificated, 'We must bring the Indians up to our cultural level,' an Indian man corrected him, 'You mean down to your level. You want us to get out of our safe canoe and into your sinking battleship'" (Eastman 73).

Cartoonist Vincent Craig [Navajo] states that "Indians can relate humor to anything. They get a laugh out of any type of situation. Whether it is hardships, poverty, adverse conditions, happy conditions, whatever, Indians can find something to laugh

about" (Lincoln 96). Craig's 1977 cartoon depicting an encounter between a White man and an Indian does just that (see figure 27). The two men are standing outside of a small airport hangar with one airplane parked beside it. The White man, with requisite tourist camera around his neck, points to the sky and proclaims to the Navajo man, "Look Chief...Heap big iron bird!!" The Navajo man, wearing blue jeans, tennis shoes and a cowboy hat, with hands nonchalantly in his jean's pockets, replies, "That's an airplane...you turkey!!" The cartoon pokes fun at the primativist and condescending attitude which many non-Indian people have of Indians, here made blatant by the White man's use of the stereotypical"Tonto Talk," while underscoring that Indian people are firmly rooted to the present.

The "Indian Glossary" takes a similar approach as it sarcastically offers definitions for terms which are familiar to Indian people:

> **Indian Reservation**--our land set aside for us "as long as the grass shall grow and the rivers flow" to be used by non-Indian cattlemen for low-cost grazing, for highways, for dam sites by the Army Engineers.
>
> **Uncle Tomahawks**--Indian leaders satisfied with the *status quo*.
>
> **BIA Official**--an important guy wearing a beaded bolo tie.
>
> **OEO**--a state of confusion.
>
> **Indian Problem**--the white man's burden.
>
> **Integration**--marrying into another tribe.
>
> **Assimilation**--marrying a non-Indian.
>
> **10-year Program**--a BIA staff program for bettering reservation

conditions approved by tribal officials.

**"Culturally Deprived"**--the suburban white child.

**Social Worker**--an overtrained, underexposed professional who helps us solve all our problems.

**Agency Town**--three separate communities in one--BIA, US-PHS, Indian--living side by side with no intercommunication.

**Pilot Project**--an old project with a new name.

**Indian Politician**--a guy who, when confronted with a problem he finds he cannot straighten out, messed the situation up good!

**Middle-class Indian**--a person happily lost in the "mainstream of American life" who does not claim to be an Indian until his tribe wins a claims case, then enrolls all his children in the tribe and fights for a per capita payment.

The definitions reveal many of the frustrations which Indian people have towards the government, Indian politicians, and White wannabees, and are salted with an irony which is laughable yet also importantly highlights social criticisms.

"Top Ten Lists," parodies of comedian/talk show host David Letterman's nightly "Top Ten Reasons" list, abound in Indian Country. The "Top Ten Reasons It's Good To Be Indian" playfully records the benefits of being Indian in the present day:

10. You can point with your lips and give your fingers a rest.
9. You'll never be alone because everyone is related to you.
8. You'll never starve because there is always a feast of some kind

somewhere, at any given time.

7. We're the only ones who can save the rainforests with our dances.

6. You'll always know the first letter of the alphabet (AYYYY!)

5. If you know how to "stomp" you'll always have a "snag."

4. Because Indians are just...somehow.

3. You can always recognize the IHS dentures in "Dances With Wolves."

2. You'll never need lotion when you have a greasy frybread.

And the number one reason it's good to be Indian...

1. Because you just need one more number to yell out "BINGO!"

Some of the barbs have a serious message: making fun of stereotypes, popular culture, and Indian Hospitals. Jokes about pow-wow dancing, bingo, frybread, and the like, point out some of the activities which frequently accompany being Indian in today's America, uniting Indian communities in their shared experiences. Another top ten list records how things would be different if Santa were American Indian. The top three entries read:

3. His outfit would consist of a red flannel ribbon shirt, with matching leggings, moccasins and beaded black belt with matching beaded rimmed hat, all to match his oversized beaded gift bag. And underneath would be a beaded thong with a small delicate plume attached to the back.

2. Indian preference would require you to hire all Navajos to fit in those teeny tiny elf outfits.

1. According to Indian time, our gifts would arrive in February.

Some non-Indians likely will not appreciate the quips because they must be understood

from within the cultures to appreciate them. In turn, the jokes make fun of the elaborate beadwork that Santa will want on his costume (a dig at some of the complicated costuming which one sees at pow-wows), playfully suggest that Navajos are perfect for Santa's helpers (an inter-tribal jest which lampoons Navajos because they are often noted for their small statures), and mock Indian time for being so slow. Only people within Indian Country will fully appreciate and understand the gags.

Jim Northrup delivers our final jokes in *The Rez Road Follies*:

*Are you a full-blooded Indian?*

No, I'm a pint low, just came from the blood bank.

*Do you speak your language?*

Yup, yours too.

*Do you people still live in ponies and ride teepees?*

Nope, never did.

*If you're an Indian, why is your skin so light?*

Melanin Deficit Disorder.

The questions are asked by a non-Indian person and the punch-line is delivered by an Indian person. Significantly, the questions reveal the non-Indian character to be ignorantly believing in the stereotypes: that an Indian must have dark skin, live in teepees, commune with nature, and have full-blood in order to be a "real" Indian. In *Bone Game*, Louis Owens mocks this same mentality when Alex Yazzie makes fun of the Bureau of Indian Affairs for recognizing as "real" Indians those who eat "BIA recognized Indian food" (158). Northrup's clever and sarcastic quips in response to the questions undercut the

stereotypes. About these questions which turn into jokes, Northrup states:

> One way to find out something is to ask questions. Questions, like families, help make sense of the twists and turns of life. They highlight the humor we're blessed with. They are linguistic tricksters; sometimes the shape of the question shifts before you get the answer, then you see the subject in a new way...each month in my Fond du Lac Follies column, or whenever I think we need to meditate on an answer, I'll ask and answer a question...(2)

The jokes provoke thought and dismantle preconceived notions, all through humor.

The joking in this chapter covers a wide gamut of subject matter and serves a variety of purposes, from good-natured fun to a more serious ribbing. All of the humor is directed to an Indian audience, even those which poke fun at Whites, and most require an understanding of tribal cultures and peoples in order to recognize the humor at work. Whether it is making fun of other tribes, or one another, the government, or being Indian in today's world, the jokes celebrate Indianness, showing the hardships, frustrations, joys, and humor in living. Most importantly, the humor shows that Indian people, like all people, possess a love of wit.

## Chapter Seven

## Survival Humor: Conclusion

Will Hill, a Muskogee and Cherokee storyteller from Wetumka, Oklahoma, tells an amusing family story in which his mother brags about the successes of her sons. Hill's oldest brother attended UC Berkeley and currently works as a psychologist. His youngest brother attended Oklahoma State University and now works in the oil industry. Hill's mother, he states, when asked by others about Will, "Oh, he still tells stories."[58] This is self-deprecating humor at its finest. To some, the seemingly ironic comment might seem to downplay the importance of Hill's career, but when Hill delivers the joke to a live audience there is a strong feeling of pride in the listeners because Hill opts to continue his tribal traditions of storytelling. "Stories," Hill states, "[are] used as teaching tools to teach young people about the world and the way it works." The stories can be funny or sad, but they must always teach a lesson.

Many of Hill's stories tell traditional stories, such as describing Trickster losing her tail to a pack of wolves because of her penchant for vanity and deception, or of explaining why crawfish must forever walk backwards---because one crawfish cheated in a foot race with her rival, the Rabbit, in the "way, way back then" age.[59] The stories all convey a moral, whether it is teaching that a person's inner beauty is what counts and not their

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[58]Hill's quotes are from a storytelling performance which he gave at Northeastern State University in Tahlequah, Oklahoma on April 13, 2000. Hill's performance was part of the Center for Tribal Studies' 28th Annual Symposium on the American Indian.

[59]Hill uses this opening to introduce each of the traditional stories which he tells, and then after stating, "That's the way it was, that's the way it will be, and at the end of each story they all said...," he asks his listeners to all loudly state "Ho!" a Muskogee exclamation.

external appearance, or that it is good to forgive and forget and let people change, or that it is good to be helpful to others. When we listen to traditional stories, Hill reminds that "[we are] hearing the voices of our ancestors." Listening to a traditional story binds us with the past, yet also shows that culture is not static, evident by how contemporaneous the traditional stories are in the twenty-first century. Moreover, Hill teaches, the stories "[help to] keep them [the ancestors] alive with a little bit of laughter." Many traditional stories are augmented by humor, which most often serves an important and even sacred role in tribal traditions.

About humor, Hill states that his grandfather, also a storyteller, advised, "Always try, my grandson, to be funny." Hill teaches his own listeners to "Always try to find something good to laugh about in the morning [so that you will have something to] make you laugh and smile in the terrible times." Hill's theoretical paradigm points to the important role of humor in contemporary Native America: humor as a tool of survival. Kenneth Lincoln argues that humor as a survival mechanism is a "particularly Indian [feature] in America," though other peoples certainly have and do employ humor similarly. Lincoln states, "We laugh at ourselves to 'play' with common ties. We survive a shared struggle and come together to laugh about it, to joke about what-was and where-we-have-come, even if the humor hurts" (63). In Sherman Alexie's *Indian Killer*, a young Makah man is the victim of a hate crime perpetrated by three White men. During police questioning, he is asked:

> "And what did they call you?"
>
> "They called me an Indian pig. Oh, and they called me a prairie nigger.

Pretty colorful, enit?"

"I suppose."

"That one pissed me off, though. I ain't no prairie Indian. I'm from a salmon tribe, man. If they were going to insult me, they should've called me salmon nigger."

"I'm surprised you can laugh about this."

"It's what Indians do." (188)

*"It's what Indians do."* Importantly, the statement reminds that humor can be a powerful tool to deflect pain. In this case, the Makah man uses humor to help cope with the injustice of being the target of a racially provoked crime. By joking about the pejoratives with which his attackers brutalized him, he highlights their ignorance---assuming he is a Plains Indian when his heritage, in fact, lies in the North---and takes pride in being a Makah---"I'm from a salmon tribe, man." Humor helps him to cope with the unimaginable: being attacked simply because of race. This is a healing humor, a humor which helps him to come to terms with the pain of being singled out and mistreated because he is Indian.

Louise Erdrich refers to this healing humor as "survival humor" and suggests that "It may be the one universal thing about Native Americans from tribe to tribe." She explains that survival humor means living

> with what you have to live with. You have to have a world view, you can just laugh at some of the--there's a dark side to humor. And you have to be able to poke fun at people who are dominating our life and your

> family...if we took ourselves too seriously in any way, I feel that we would be overwhelmed...And almost the most serious things have to be jokes, I think. It's the way we deal with the most difficult events in our lives. (Lincoln 209)

In *The Sacred Hoop*, Paula Gunn Allen calls this "mak[ing] tolerable what is otherwise unthinkable; [humor] allows a sort of breathing space in which an entire race can take stock of itself and its future" (159). Allen expands upon this theory in *Winged Words*, stating

> So there's this tradition of humor of an awful lot of funniness, and then there's this history of death. And when the two combine, you get a power in the work; that is, it moves into another dimension. It makes it transformational. It creates a metamorphosis in the reader, if the reader can understand what's being said and what's not being said...It makes for wit, for incredible wit, but under the wit there is a bite. It's not defensive so much as it's bitter. It also makes for utterly brilliant, tragic writing as well. Because it's so close to the bone...And so when you laugh you know perfectly well that you're laughing at death. (Coltelli 22)

Erdrich's and Allen's theoretical understanding of humor points to why much of the humor in contemporary Native America is salted with irony, whether directed to non-Indian people, or to Indian country. Irony allows the writer/artist/musician/cartoonist/jokester to address subjects which are important to Indian people, yet which may invoke so much pain and frustration that it is more appropriate to touch upon them when they are

couched in ironic terms. Acknowledging the concerns, in turn, is cathartic; discussing troublesome topics through humor helps to assuage the hurt, binding native peoples together through their shared experiences, and making the hurt bearable.

Freud observes that jokes have power, whether they are told just for fun or to criticize. "In the case of aggressive purposes," he argues, "...[jokes] turn the hearer, who was indifferent to begin with, into a co-hater or co-despiser, and creates for the enemy a host of opponents where at first there was only one" (133). Freud contends that when we tell critical jokes we do so to unite our listeners. In cases where the listeners are already supporters of our views, the jokes solidify their support. With neutral listeners, the jokes rally their backing, encouraging them to join in the fight against the target of the joke. These tendentious jokes are "especially favoured in order to make aggressiveness or criticism possible against persons in exalted positions who claim to exercise authority. The joke then represents a rebellion against that authority, a liberation from its pressure" (105). Hence, joking about the Bureau of Indian Affairs, or the American political system, or racists who perpetrate hate crimes, are ways of releasing the pain, anger and frustration which accompanies such subjects.

Importantly, Freud adds that aggressive joking targets what normally is not openly criticized:

> ...the object of the joke's attack may equally well be institutions, people in their capacity as vehicles of institutions, dogmas of morality or religion, views of life which enjoy so much respect that objections to them can only be made under the mask of a joke and indeed of a joke concealed by its

facade. (108-109)

R. David Edmunds suggests that aggressive joking of this type serves dual roles: "It may indicate feelings of superiority, or it can serve as a defense mechanism against oppression. If humor is used against oppression, it often is a powerful weapon, and may, in itself, become an agent for social change" (Tyler 145). Jokes abolish our inhibitions, according to Freud, "making sources of pleasure fertile which have been rendered inaccessible by those inhibitions" (130). Jokes allow us to discuss what we might not normally feel comfortable discussing, whether we are invoking subjects which are too painful to discuss in serious conversation, or because we feel uncomfortable openly criticizing the targets of our socially critical jokes.

About humor in Indian country, Kenneth Lincoln suggests

> Indi'n humor is a way of recalling and going beyond tragedy, of working through the hurt of personal history, of healing old wounds and hearing the truth of what's happening among Native Americans. It is the most vocal and effective voice among Indians today, if not yesterday. (116)

Lincoln's theory emphasizes the power which humor possesses, as both an agent for discussing the "truth of what's happening among Native Americans" and as a way of "healing old wounds," whether personal or tribal. Humor acts as a cathartic vehicle and as an instrument of social change.

Nevertheless, it is important to remember that hostile jokes---jokes which Freud says "mak[e] our enemy small, inferior, despicable, or comic, [and which allow us to] achieve in a roundabout way the enjoyment of overcoming him" (103)---demonstrate only

one side of humor in Indian country. Although a joke about the BIA serves as a political criticism, it is also a tool for uniting Native Americans in their shared experiences. Moreover, good-natured ribbing between tribes or at one's own tribe are important methods for celebrating Indianness, of symbolically showing, *"We're all Indians."*

In traditional times humor served a varied role within tribes. Practical joking was common, but within some tribes a member could only joke with certain members of their family, as determined by either a matrilineal or patrilineal pattern. Thus, while a man might be allowed to tease his sister-in-law, he might be restricted from teasing his sister. Robert Easton argues that "these patterns often become so well defined that an Indian of the same tribe can tell the relationship of two other tribesmen, even though he does not know them, by the manner in which they joke with one another" (Tyler 41). To joke with someone outside of this accepted relationship would be akin to breaking an important social rule, with the attendant danger of disrupting the community's fragile spiritual balance. In some tribal communities today, these fine distinctions in practical joking relationships are still widely followed.

More importantly, humor also served a sacred role in tribes by acting as a spiritual agent which helped to maintain the balance. Trickster tales are the most widespread form of this type of humor, and continue to be told today to both adults and children. The tales are entertaining and, many times, are even laugh-out-loud funny, but they also demonstrate appropriate codes of conduct, a necessary ingredient for maintaining a healthy spiritual life, both individually and communally. Among many tribes there were---and are---special members whom are afforded sacred status because of their ceremonial

uses of humor. This was shown earlier in the discussion of the sacred clowns among the Southwest's Koshares, and the false face masked dancers of the Northwest Coast peoples. We now add to this the sacred *heyoshkas* of the Siouan peoples. Among the Hunkpapa Sioux, there were traditionally two types of clowns: the "happiness" clowns and "sadness" clowns. These clowns aided in stabilizing the emotional well-being of individual tribal members by performing dances within sacred ceremonies; the sadness clown tries to take away a member's sadness, and the happiness clown behaves humorously to create a feeling of joy. Joe Seboy, a member of the Hunkpapa Sioux, explains the distinctions:

> The happiness clown tries to amuse the people. He entertains. He makes you roar with laughter. He goes into all kinds of crazy antics. He imitates people. If there is a fat lady in the tribe, he'll come to a dance padded way out and dressed like her. He'll imitate the way she dances, and he'll dance like crazy until his bloomers fall down. But the sadness clown, he just wears a breechclout and paints his body. He tries to take away your sadness. If you're sitting there sad or lonely he'll come and sit by you. As he looks at you, you can see him pull the sadness out of you and take it on himself. (Tyler 41)

In some tribes, clown status like this is either hereditary or conferred. Among the Hunkpapa Sioux, clown status was recognized when a member determined that he possessed clown power:

> A boy who is meant to be a clown will know it within himself. That power will be born within his nature and he will start to do these things. But he

> must be very careful because a clown has nature's powers. He's a sacred man. A sadness clown is more sacred than a happiness clown. He's more powerful than a medicine man. He can produce rain or sunshine or anything by wishing it. (Tyler 41)

Significantly, humor is seen as possessing the power to heal. For the heyoshkas this power helps to maintain an emotional well-being in the community which, in turn, aids in engendering a spiritual balance. Trickster stories demonstrate a similar power because they show tribal communities what behavior is socially acceptable and what behavior is inappropriate, all to help uphold specific ethical mores. In some tribes, ceremonial dances like those of the pueblo Koshares help to bolster a fragile spiritual balance by explicitly showing individual members, or the tribe as a whole, what behavior has been done that is damaging the spiritual well-being of the tribal community, in the hopes that this behavior will be corrected. In all of these instances, humor plays a significant role as a tool for promoting moral guidelines.

Today, humor in Native American works is informed by this cultural tradition; interestingly, much of the humor is directed to non-Indian people yet still contains a social corrective. In many cases, the corrective educates the public about the topic under consideration and also conveys a position about the issue, thus encouraging the audience to adopt this attitude as well. This aspect of joking reflects Freud's theory of humor: using the power of humor to unite listeners in a common cause. More importantly, it reflects the traditional belief that humor is an effective agent of social correction. Like the traditional Pueblo dancers who explicitly show tribal members that they have behaved

inappropriately in order to correct this breach in conduct, today's Native humorists help guide non-Indian people in recognizing their failings as well, even if that failing is being unaware of the subject at hand, or being apathetic about it. From a larger spiritual perspective---recognizing that everything and everyone in the universe is connected and that we must be responsible for our actions and thoughts in order to maintain a healthy spiritual balance---this didactic use of humor assumes a sacred role akin to the use of humor by the Pueblo dancer.

Even so, we must recognize that the message, or social corrective, will not always be digested by the audience in every case. In these instances, the humor can "serve as a defense mechanism against oppression," as R. David Edmunds asserts (Tyler 145). Thus, joking becomes a way for Indian people to embrace their shared experiences in America, and is a way of coping with the pain that accompanies dark subjects. In Kenneth Lincoln's words, it is a way of "healing old wounds" (116). Acknowledging serious concerns in a humorous voice helps to work through these matters in a less threatening medium and also serves a cathartic function. Hence, joking about blood quantum, a serious issue for tribal communities today, may put the subject into a new perspective; or, making light of termination and relocation may make the results of these destructive governmental policies less painful. Survival humor, Erdrich importantly reminds, means "pok[ing] fun at people who are dominating [your] life and your family [because] if we took ourselves too seriously in any way...we would be overwhelmed" (Lincoln 209).

Despite this, there is also much humor in contemporary Native America simply because Indian people enjoy being funny, a feature which is often overlooked by non-

Indians. A prime example is James Welch's *Winter in the Blood*, a novel recognized to be a classic black comedy in contemporary Native American literature. Even so, in classes I repeatedly find myself explaining to students that this is a very humorous novel because many of them believe the stereotype that humor and Native Americans are a contradictory pairing. The final scene of the text is a comedic masterpiece as Lame Bull first tries to force his mother-in-law's coffin to fit into a grave which is too small, a scene which is reminiscent of Alex Yazzie burying the rigor mortis-stricken Custer in *Bone Game*, and then offers a eulogy which is entirely inappropriate given the serious environs. Lame Bull's 32 year old adopted son narrates the scene:

> The hole was too short, but we didn't discover this until we had the coffin halfway down. One end went down easily enough, but the other stuck against the wall. Teresa wanted us to take it out because she was sure that it was the head that was lower than the feet. Lame Bull lowered himself into the grave and jumped up and down on the high end. It went down a bit more, enough to look respectable. Teresa didn't say anything so he leaped out of the hole...

As if it is not bad enough that Lame Bull disrespectfully jumps on his mother-in-law's coffin to make it fit into her grave---James Welch's humorous nod to all of the husbands who vicariously wish they, too, could do this---he then decides that it is also his role to deliver her eulogy. Notice the unconventional nature of his memorial as his stepson's mind wanders to other subjects:

> "I suppose me being the head of the family, it's up to me to say a few

words about our beloved relative and friend" [Lame Bull remarks].

Teresa moaned.

Lame Bull clasped his hands in front of him. "Well," he said. "Here lies a simple woman...who devoted herself to...rocking...and not a bad word about anybody..."

I shifted my weight to my bad leg. It was like standing on [a] tree stump.

"Not the best mother in the world..."

Teresa moaned louder.

"...but a good mother, notwithstanding..."

I would have to go to the agency and see the doctor. I knew that he would try to send me down to Great Falls to have it operated on. But I couldn't do it. I'd tell him that. I would end up in bed for a year. By that time the girl who had stolen my gun and electric razor would have forgotten me.

Teresa fell to her knees.

"...who could take it and dish it out..."

Next time I'd do it right. Buy her a couple of cremes de menthe, maybe offer to marry her on the spot.

"...who never gave anybody any crap..."

The red horse down in the corral whinnied. (175-176)

The scene is a comedy-of-errors: Lame Bull's tribute is to state that his wife's mother was "Not the best mother in the world" and to remember her for her love of her rocking chair. Juxtapose this with Teresa's real grief as she "f[alls] to her knees" and the

narrator's aimless musings about his leg, the girlfriend he wants to win back with cremes de menthe, and the horse whinnying, and we have a classic scene of black comedy.

Interestingly, in Sherman Alexie's *Indian Killer* the character of John Smith distinguishes the primary difference between him and the few Indian people he interacts with as being his lack of humor:

> The Indian women would laugh. They were always laughing. John wanted to laugh. He knew his laughter would make him feel more like a real Indian. He listened closely to the laughter, tried to memorize it. A booming belly laugh from a fat Lummi Indian. A low chuckle from Jim the Colville. A poke-to-the-rib-cage giggle from Lillian, a Makah. All kinds of laughter. All kinds of Indians. John would practice at home, stretch his mouth into those strange shapes called smiles, and laugh loudly enough to make his neighbors nervous. (275)

Smith believes that acquiring a sense of humor will "make him feel more like a real Indian" because humor is what he identifies as the hallmark of the Indian people whom he knows. To Smith, humor distinguishes the "real" Indians from the "fake" Indians because he considers humor and laughter to be the defining features of tribal peoples. Since he does not laugh, he singles himself out as a fake Indian; if only he could learn to laugh like the Indians he observes, however, he believes he would feel more Indian, at least in his mind. Smith's observation recognizes that humor is an integral part of daily life.

A rich tapestry of various types of humor is woven together in the works of contemporary Native people. Much of the humor is didactic and conveys messages of

social import to non-Indian people; still other humor is pure fun, whether in the form of inter-tribal joking, black comedy, or making fun of non-Indians; and some of the humor is survival humor, humor which helps Indian people to cope with hardships and tragedy. Many times the humor collapses borders; thus, a finely crafted joke may make fun of non-Indian people while also delivering a critical social message; or a one-liner may be told for laughs but can also be thought-provoking.

The joking is delivered through diverse mediums: literature, art, cartoons, music, traditional storytelling, poetry, and one-liner jokes. Importantly, the humor of today links us with the past, reminding us it is an essential teaching tool and that it possesses the power to implement change. Moreover, because humor is often elevated to a sacred level within tribal cultures, it thereby serves a heightened role in the works of many Native Americans. Recognizing that in a spiritual framework humor has the power to educate, to heal, and to correct social behavior, many contemporary Indian artists and writers use it as a tool with these very features in mind---to educate, to heal, and to correct social behavior---for both Indian and non-Indian audiences. This serves as an important reminder that culture is never static but, rather, as always, remains a vital part of native life today.

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Figure 1

*Koyala*, a Hopi clown

Cliff Bahnimptewa, Hopi



**Figure 2**

***Piptuka*, a Hopi clown**

**Cliff Bahnimptewa, Hopi**



Figure 3

*The depiction of a Black man.*

Artist Unknown, Cherokee Booger Mask



**Figure 4**

***The depiction of a White man.***

**Artist Unknown, Cherokee Booger Mask**



Figure 5

*The depiction of a Chinese man.*

Artist Unknown, Cherokee Booger Mask



Figure 6

*A hornet's nest fashioned in the image of a White man.*

Artist Unknown, Cherokee Booger Mask



Figure 7

Booger Mask. The depiction of a sex maniac.

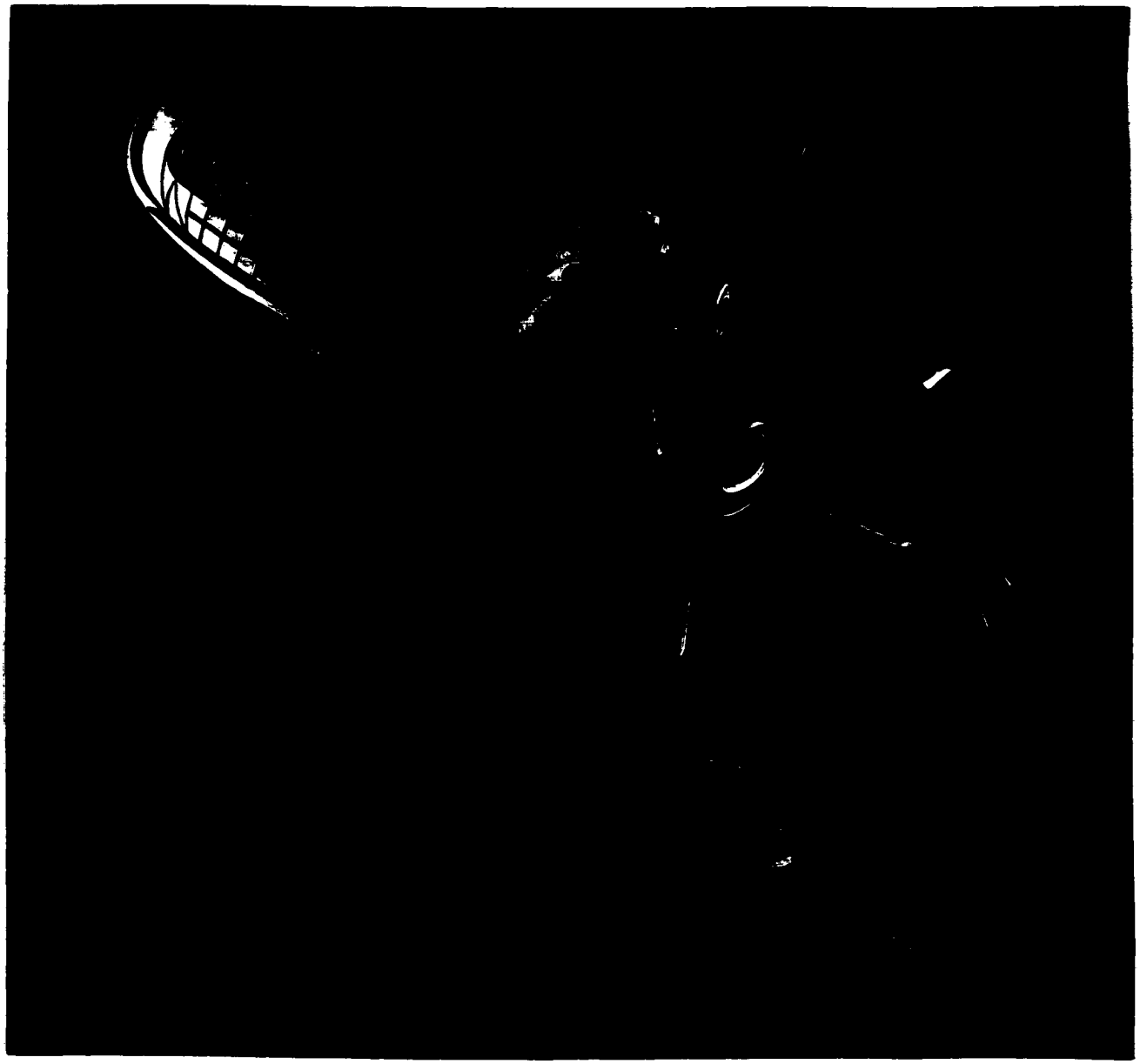


**Figure 8**

***Mask Representing Transformation Salmon.***

**Wayne Alfred, Kwakwaka'wakw (1992)**

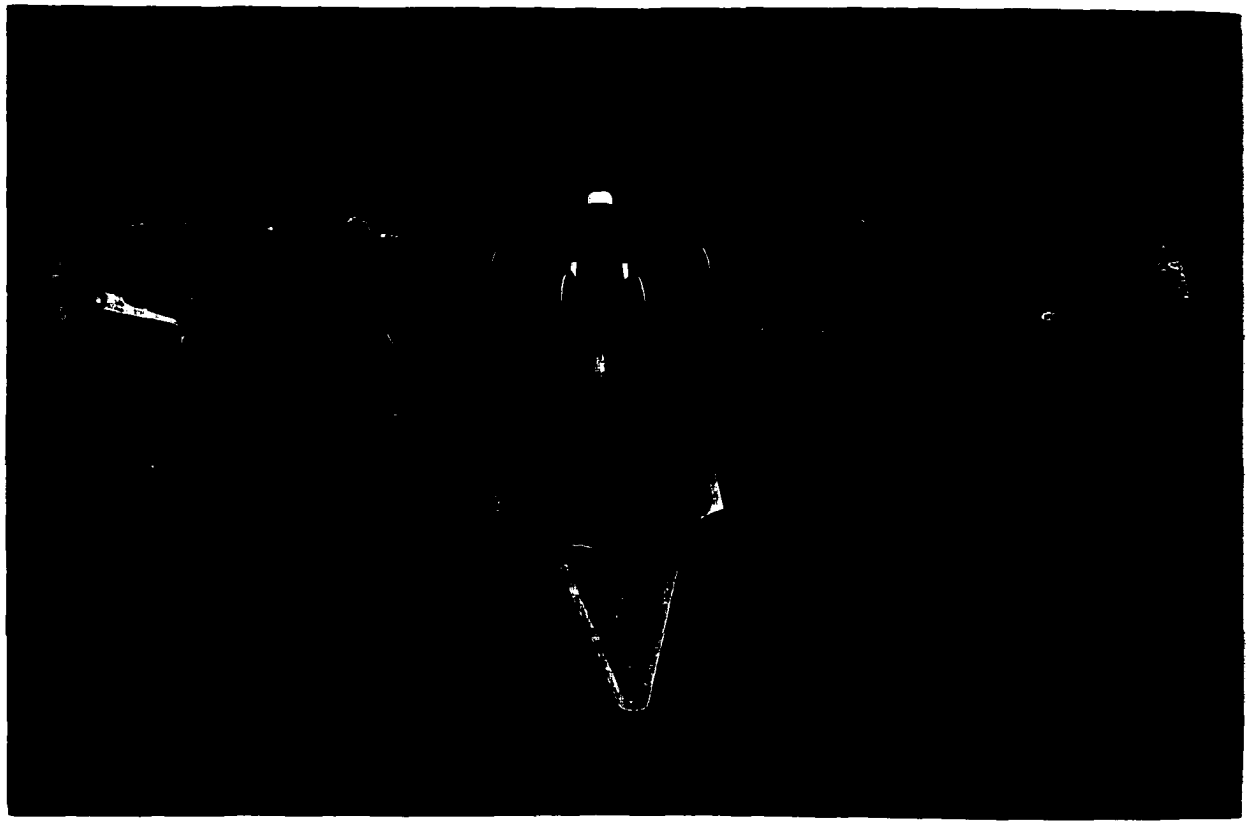


**Figure 9**

***Triple Transformation Mask.***

**Stan Wamiss, Kwakwaka'wakw (1997)**



Figure 10

*Mask Representing Eagle Woman.*

Walter Harris, Gitxsan (1969)



Figure 11

*Mask Representing Conceited White Woman.*

Artist Unknown, Nisga'a (1870)

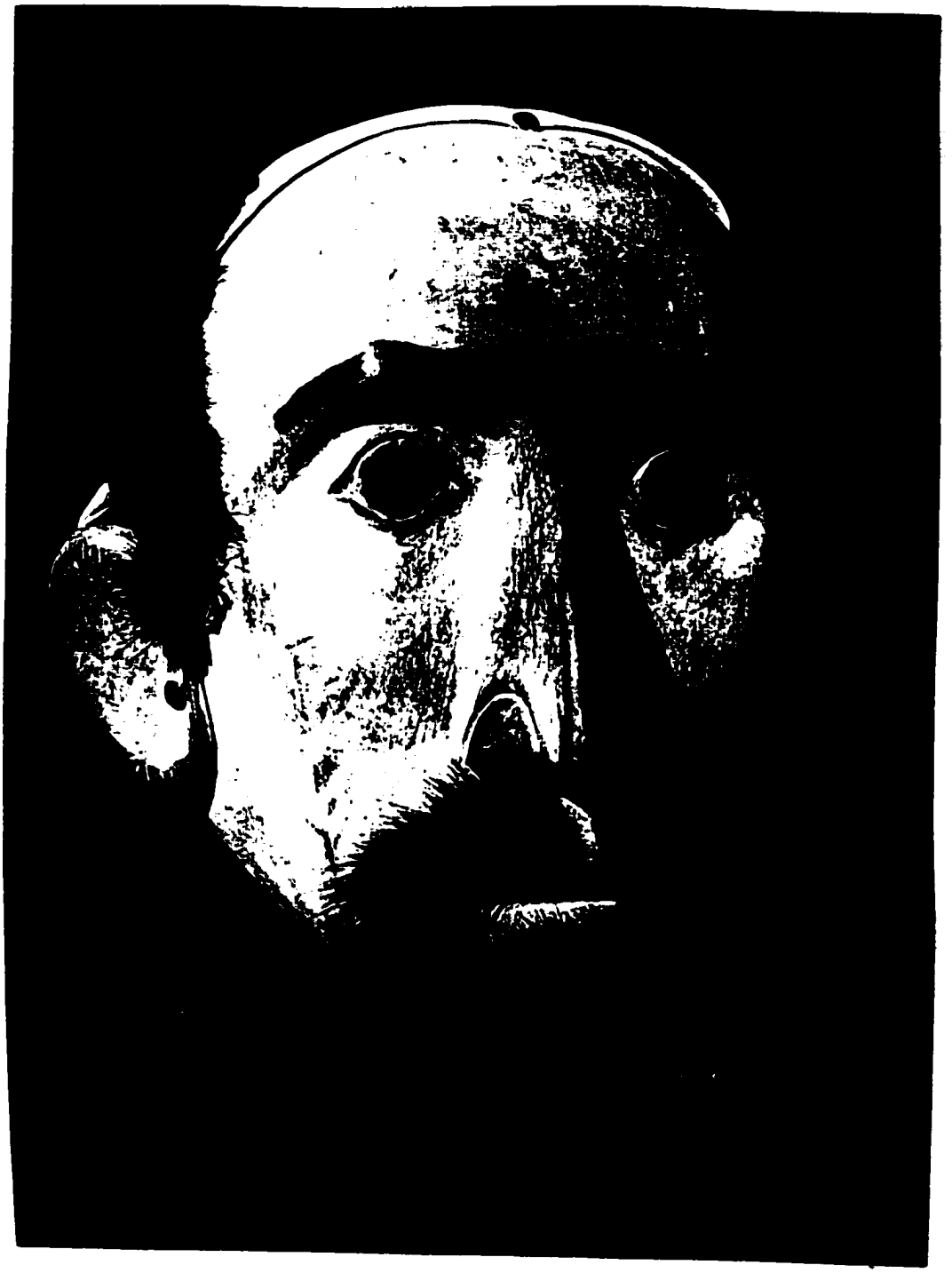


**Figure 12**

***Mask Representing White Man.***

**Artist Unknown, Nisga'a (1880)**

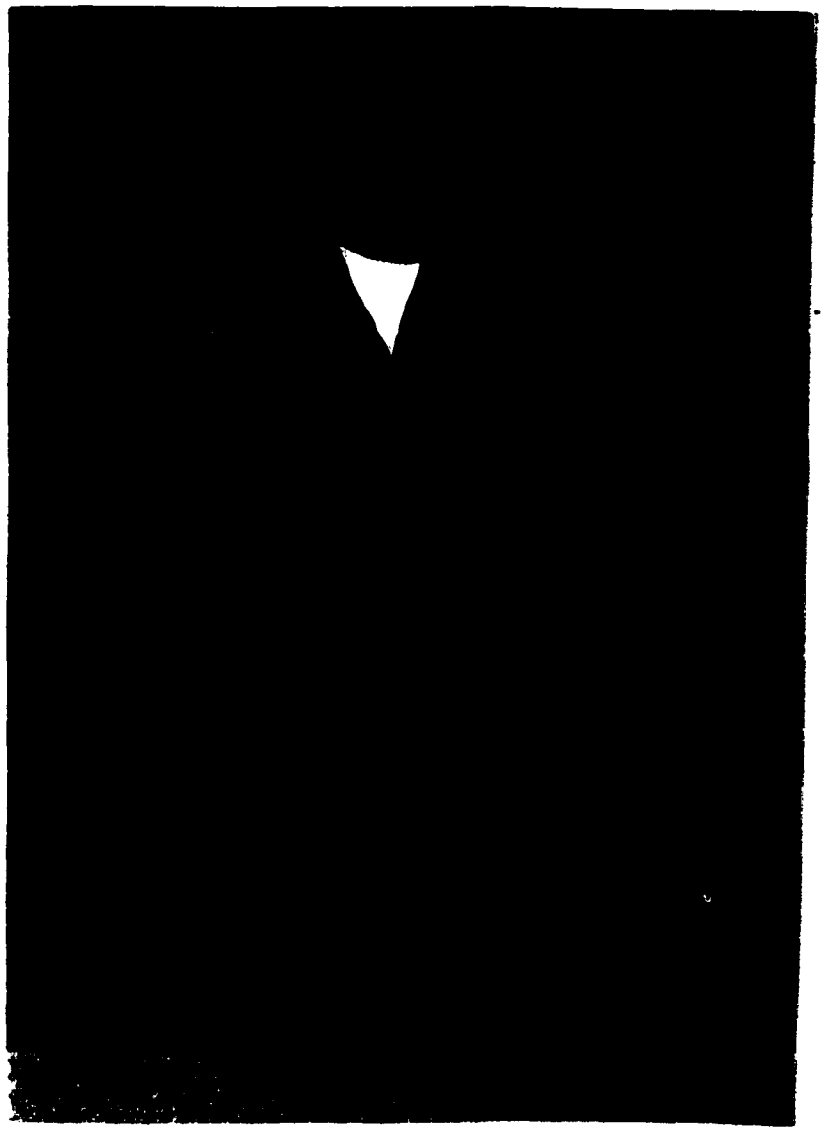


Figure 13

*When Coyote Leaves The Reservation.*

Harry Fonseca, Maidu/Portuguese/Hawaiian (1980)



Figure 14

*Coyote in Front of Studio.*

Harry Fonseca, Maidu/Portuguese/Hawaiian



Figure 15

*Rose and the Res Sisters.*

Harry Fonseca, Maidu/Portuguese/Hawaiian (1982)



**Figure 16**

*Swan Lake.*

**Harry Fonseca, Maidu/Portuguese/Hawaiian (1984)**



**Figure 17**

***Koshares With Cotton Candy.***

**Harry Fonseca, Maidu/Portuguese/Hawaiian (1982)**



Figure 18

*Koshares With Watermelons.*

Harry Fonseca, Maidu/Portuguese/Hawaiian (1983)



Figure 19

*A Pueblo Woman's Clothesline.*

Nora Naranjo-Morse, Santa Clara Pueblo

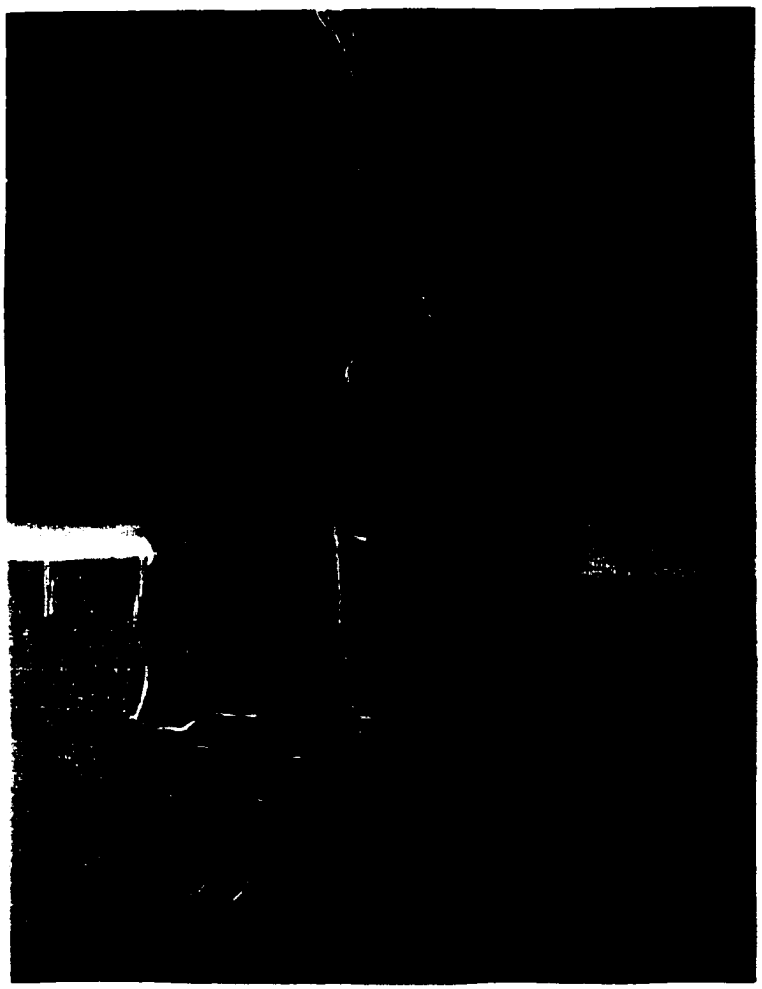


**Figure 20**

***Laughing Indian.***

**Fritz Scholder, Luiseno (1973)**




Figure 21

*Smile for Racism.*

Edgar Heap of Birds, Cherokee




**Figure 23**

***Deport Illegal Immigrants.***

**Cartoon.**



**Figure 24**

***Land of Enchantment.***

**Woodrow Crumbo, Creek/Potawatomi (1946)**



Figure 25

*Apache Pull Toy.*

Bob Haozous, Apache/Navajo/English/Spanish (1989)

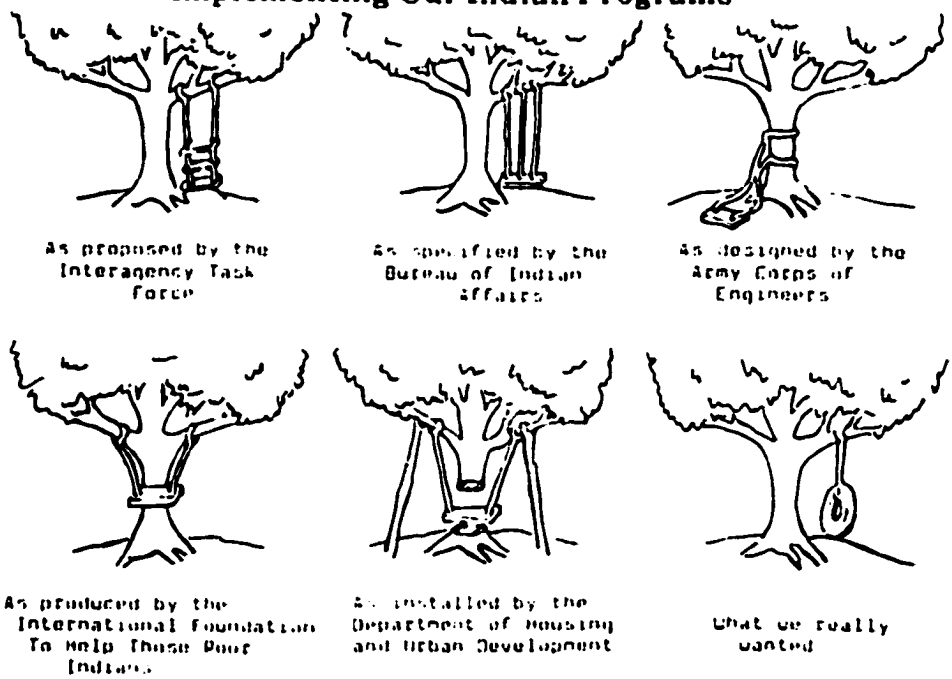



**Figure 26**

***Implementing Our Indian Programs.***

**Cartoon (1974)**

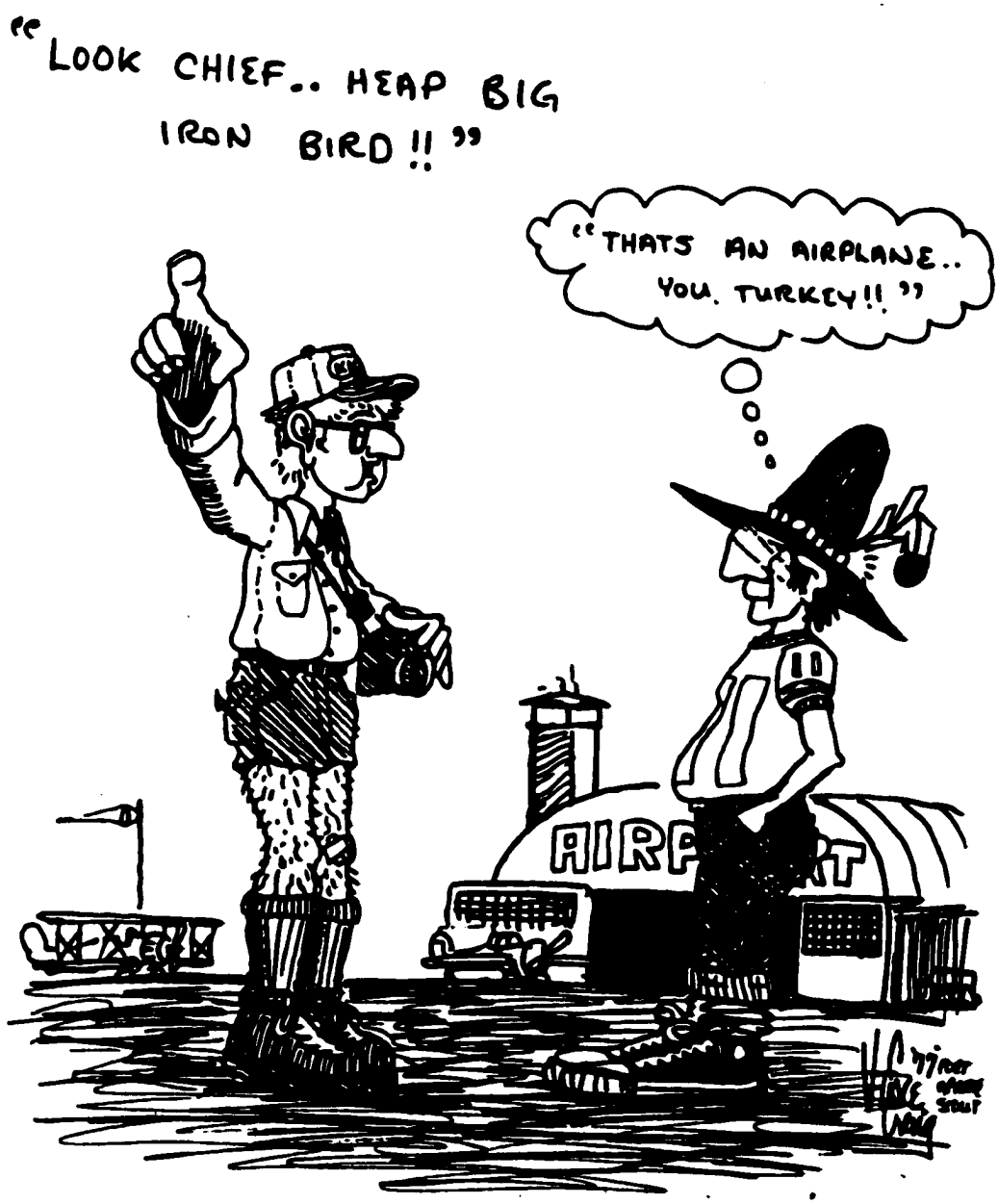



Figure 27

*Airplane Hangar.*

Vincent Craig, Navajo (1977)