

American Indian Humor

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“A lot of people think that Indians are just naturally patient, but that’s not true. Before the white ‘settlers’ arrived there were lots of impatient Indians. It’s only in the last two hundred years that Indians have been looking patient whenever there were any white men around” (Bowering 92).

The above motto was selected as an illustration of the challenge to the long existing stereotype of the stoic, stone-faced Indian. While it plays upon the mode of how literary Indians are expected to conform to mainstream expectations, both fictional and realistic, it also provides the reader with a glimpse into the comic potential in American Indian cultures. The present paper explores the long neglected humor inherent in American Indian cultures and its manifestations over the course of various historic periods and in various media. Possible explanations for the dearth of comedy will be cited in an effort to challenge the prevalent image of the stoic Indian. The structure essentially follows historic chronology, but I also cite contemporary examples to bridge the gap between the ancient and the modern. My intention is to provide, through discussion of poetry, prose, political manifestos, anecdotes, and various genres of visual art, a general overview of the various fields of life in which Indian humor has surfaced.

In his essay titled “Jewish humor” Allen Guttman states: “the greatest of all Jewish books, the *Old Testament* is scarcely typified by elements of comedy” (351). One finds a possible historical analogy in American Indian cultures. While the parallel between the austerity of the narrative of Jewish history as a narrative of exile and the narrative of Indian-white relations as a narrative of conflict, disruption, and

displacement may partly explain the early lack of comic perspective in Indian literature, other factors must be taken into consideration.

Ever since their earliest contacts with Indian peoples, Europeans have attributed them with the quality of stoicism. It seems a difficult task to point out the humor in a historic experience the first four hundred years of which were primarily a history of genocide, assimilation, and acculturation. Neither the bloodthirsty nor the noble savage images allow for the existence of humor in cultures which, within a few decades, underwent a transformation from the barbaric savage to become the historic foundation of the United States. In the attempt to found the “City upon the Hill” and the bloody clashes with various tribes, the Indian had very little chance to display his human qualities. On the other hand, beginning with the mythic Pocahontas story and the Boston Tea Party, the Indian earned his legacy as part of public history. Since December 16, 1773, when settlers disguised as Indians took direct action to counteract British colonial policy, playing Indian has been a “persistent tradition” (Deloria P. 9) in the course of American culture. The very masquerade in close proximity of those imitated was “the beginning of the nation’s struggle to assume an essential identity [...] White Americans began a still- unfinished, always-contested effort to find an ideal sense of national Self” (Deloria P. 9). A nation constructing itself on American soil could not afford to stress the comic potential inherent in its “founding fathers and mothers.” Pocahontas, “the first Lady of America, the mother of two nations, the mother of us all, the Great Earth Mother of America” (Larson n.pag.) was appointed the very serene role of mothering the future United States.

Early American Indian literature, as pointed out by Vizenor, is shaped by assimilationist principles. The white man’s resistance to the comic in early accounts of Indian life are accompanied by the works of authors who themselves are products of the early assimilationist, acculturating American intentions. This may explain why humor is not a characteristic mode of this age. Just as the themes of missionary impulse and religious Eden dominate contemporary American literature, Indian authors of the time also capitalize on the same topics. Two popular genres of the age are the sermon and historical accounts, both explicit manifestations of Western influence on Indian cultures. The first literary production by an Indian is the Mohegan Samson Occum’s “Sermon Preached at the Execution of Moses Paul, an Indian” (Larson n.pag.). By definition, the sermon is not likely to allow for a comic perspective, and

thematically this 1772 forceful plea for temperance, with its naturalistic details concerning the effects of liquor and its religious tone, does not display instances of humor. Nor does the other typical genre of the age. David Cusick's *Sketches of Ancient History of the Six Nations* is an example of Indian history writing. Based on the oral tradition, the Tuscarora writer includes Indian creation stories, oral accounts of the origins of the Haudenosaunee, mythic wars against fierce monsters, and realistic ones against hostile tribes (Larson n.pag.). Even though the Tuscarora were among the first to encounter the white man, *Sketches* carefully avoids the description of any conflict with the settlers, expressing implicitly the compulsion to conform to white expectations.

The humor of the literary productions of the age could not surface until oral literature earned its rightful respect in literary histories. From the European ethnocentric perspective, Indian people did not possess any literature upon contact, and the oral tradition came to be accepted only due to salvage ethnographic attempts to recollect artifacts of the pre-contact period. "The story [...] has always been but one generation removed from extinction" (Momaday 10), and not until Sequoya introduces the Cherokee syllabary can Indian people claim a "literature" of their own. In the course of history, with many Native languages standing at the verge of extinction, some of the humor inherent in Indian cultures may have been lost. Yet, due to ethnographic and anthropological attempts to record earlier literary productions, representatives of oral literature were preserved in the recorded trickster stories. Even though these explicitly display the comic potential in Indian cultures, at the time of collection many were cast away as obnoxious and indecent for pious mainstream readers.

As Radin says "laughter, humor and irony permeate everything Trickster does. The reaction of the audience in aboriginal societies to both him and his exploits is prevailingly one of laughter tempered by awe" (X). Trickster stories are proof of the fact that American Indian people, in their attempt to come to terms with the state of the universe, utilized humor as an effective tool towards that very goal. Trickster himself is a bridge between traditional and modern, sacred and profane, Indian and non-Indian realities. Traditionally, Trickster stories were intended to shed light on the operation of the universe and answer primordial questions pertaining to human existence. They were told not only to entertain but also to educate the audience on human matters. Titles such as "Trickster and the Laxative Bulb," "Trickster Falls in his own Excrement,"

“Trickster Burns Anus and Eats His Own Intestines” —examples selected from Radin’s collection of the Winnebago, now preferably called Hochunk, Trickster cycle—may not have been alluring to the reading public of the age. With the missionary impulse to establish the Kingdom of Christ on earth, such worldly and very often indecent stories could not have been included in the appraisal of the Indian literary tradition.

Despite the lack of Indian humor in literary productions originating in the first phase of white-Indian relations, the age itself is one of the most productive sources of jokes existing today. Taking the freedom of extending the timeline further back into the past, I would place the beginning of this primary contact period at Columbus’s arrival in 1492.

There are moments in history when it is very difficult to detect the humor in a given event, with the possibility that it may be offensive to one or the other participant in a conflict. By the same token, the reader may expect very little comic in the recollection of a genocide, and few moments in colonial history promise the fulfillment of the comic potential. Yet, Indians have found a humorous side of nearly every problem, and the experiences of life have generally been so well defined by jokes and stories that they have become a “thing in themselves” (Deloria V. 152). Rumor has it that “Combus didn’t know where he was going, didn’t know where he had been, and did it all on someone else’s money” (Deloria V. 150). The analogy with centuries of white—Indian relations is apparent in the account of the anecdote by Deloria.

Historic moments of the Indian problem—in itself an ironic designation of Indian and federal relations—have gained a special importance through the comic aspect. Beginning with conquest, history offered a wide range of subjects for comic interpretation. While in the political terrain and social interactions bitterness surfaces in the Indian refusal to celebrate Columbus day, believing it to be a commemoration of genocide, cartoons and bumper stickers utilizing the theme have thrived on the covert comic potential. In a cartoon, numerous variations of which have been reprinted in various media, two Indians stand on the American shore. “There goes the neighborhood” remarks one to the other on perceiving the Santa Maria approaching. Or one may “overhear” the following lines by a settler conversing with Indians at Plymouth Rock: “How’s this: you teach us to irrigate and plant corn, and we’ll decimate your tribe and name a baseball team after you” (*Indian*). Added to the verbal humor is the visual presentation of the Indian, wearing a war

bonnet, characteristic regalia of the Plains cultures, which only came into existence over two centuries after Columbus' arrival.

Even though none of the currently federally recognized tribes had direct contact with Columbus, jokes on discovery provide solid ground for pan-Indian affiliations. Humor in this case constitutes a force of group cohesion, heavily relying at the same time upon the critical distance achieved both by time and place. The same factors explain the lack of similar jokes pertaining to the Cherokee Trail of Tears, the Sand Creek massacre, or either of the Wounded Knee conflicts. Given their tragic outcomes and chronological proximity, none of them is viewed as a potential source of satire.

In her 20th century poem "Sure You Can Ask Me a Personal Question" Diane Burns also responds to the theme of "discovery" and the fate of Indian people entangled in it: "Yeah, it's awful what you guys did to us. It's very decent of you to apologize" (*Braided* 66) says the speaker in the implied dialogue. The irony, if not sarcasm of the futility and indecency of a personal apology for a genocide, cultural and biological, expresses both the Indian point of view and the mainstream insensitivity to the severity of the issue.

Columbus, as we have seen, is a bridge between pre-contact history and current Indian/ US affairs. In a cartoon a Native of the American continent (again, wearing Plains regalia and standing in front of a tipi) cries out to the settlers approaching American shores: "Not so fast! How do we know you are not terrorists with weapons of mass destruction?" (*Indian*). Such visual and verbal humor is an illustration of how the dividing line between humor by and on Indian people is rather slim. While the cartoon may be intended as a comic criticism of the treatment of Indians, its connotation suggests mockery of white-Indian relations. At the same time, with the very explicit overtone of 9/11 it suggests the acceptance, if not justification, of the fate of Indian people.

As mentioned above, the most tragic events of white-Indian relations did not serve as a source of humor. Yet, there are glorious moments in Indian history which were recorded in the form of jokes. *Custer Died for Your Sins* is a best seller among scholars of American Indian cultures. The fact that Vine Deloria, one of the most accomplished—and, for that matter, most radical historians of Indian affairs—chose a bumper sticker title to his book underlines the significance of humor in Indian cultures. The book's 1969 publication sprang from one of the most heated periods of contemporary Indian issues (the takeover of Alcatraz Island, the

preceding federal programs of termination and relocation, and the passage of the 1965 Civil Rights Act). Urban and reservation Indians were facing a time during which a radical change in the handling of Indian affairs was required. Deloria found it essential to include a separate chapter on Indian humor, and it is the prevalence of the aforementioned circumstances that explains his choice. The well-known historian explains Indian people's regret and "great disappointment that the humorous side of Indian life has not been mentioned by professed experts on Indian Affairs" (Deloria V. 148). Deloria's thesis statement also suggests that "irony and satire provide much keener insights into a group's collective psyche and values than do years of research" (148).

I strongly agree with Deloria's statement since ethnic jokes, whether springing within a given community or employing one as a subject, are always formed along ethnocentric principles. To counteract their harmful implications one is compelled to venture on a series of intellectual activities. Larry McNeal's photograph titled "Real Indian" displays a New Mexico trading post with the sign "The most interesting spot! Visit, watch, trade! Where Real Indians trade as featured in life" (McNeal). The sight evoked McNeal's cultural inquiry and interest, and prompted his realization that he was a "real Indian." Similarly, the student of Indian cultures must consciously recall stereotypes prevalent in Indian matters to explain the nature of existing jokes and punch lines. At the same time, the same stereotypes must be deconstructed in order to gain better insight into the nature of Indian humor. Such deconstructive processes also require a revision of one's own cultural preconceptions.

This process imposes an intellectual challenge on the reader. Ethnic jokes, whether originating within or outside of a given community, are an endless source of conflict diagnosis and resolution. The 1970s saw a time when Indians could proudly announce their "regained" social standing in the by then multicultural American society. The evolution of cultural theories and practices enabled Indian people to address the Indian problem with a comic tone. The title of Deloria's book is an expression of pride over the successful pan-Indian victory. *Custer Died for Your Sins* hits a mocking tone when recalling the 1876 defeat of the almost omnipotent U.S. cavalry. The religious allusion is evident, yet in view of the still burning issues of treaty rights conflicts I cannot help but wonder how long it takes before members of the PAR movement (Protection of American Rights) start placing bumper stickers on their pickups announcing *their* awaiting the second coming (of Custer).

Being the Natives of the American continent, Indian people had for a long time been in the privileged position of being the first inhabitants of the Americas. Well organized societies, although seldom acknowledged by the white man, employed teasing, mockery and jokes as a method of group discipline. Parallel to the tendency of Indians having to learn the American policy of “divide and conquer,” Indian cultures had to meet new challenges. With pluralism, multiculturalism, and eventually postethnicity, relations among the blocks of the ethno-racial pentagon underwent significant changes. So far isolated cultures had to respond to a number of new cultural phenomena. One of these was the Indian encounter with another nation not yet included in the Indian experience. On first seeing people of African descent, new linguistic designations were required. “Black White Man” is the English translation of the designation of African people. It implies that from the Indian perspective there was no radical difference between the two races: Black and white, their power relations yet unexplained, were ahead in the race of power differences. In an anecdotal conversation between an Indian and an African American, the two speakers are competing about the extent of each other’s status as a victim. The Black man remarks “you can’t do much, there are so few of you.” To which the Indian responds: “Yes, and there would not be very many of YOU if THEY decide to play cowboys and blacks (Deloria V. 163).

Similar antagonisms in a jocular form permeate the era of the Civil Rights Movement. On witnessing peaceful sit-ins, many conservative Indian groups denounced African American efforts for their attempts at integration. Yet, it did not take long before primarily Northern tribes began to stage fish-ins. The ultimate irony lies in the culture-specific implication of such actions. Sit-ins were a direct action-reaction to the 1896 Plessy vs. Fergusson decision and the Supreme Court’s acceptance of the practice of separate but equal in education, services, and traveling as constitutional. Fish-ins grew out of treaty rights whereby rights related to ceded lands were not terminated by any treaty. Although as of now there have been no attempts to launch “gather-ins,” militant Indian youth soon came up with “hunt-ins,” if their declaration of open season on Bureau of Indian Affairs officers can be interpreted as such.

The Civil Rights turmoil of the 1960s is one of the most productive sources of Indian humor in the political terrain. The Bureau of Indian Affairs, supposedly an agency responsible for medating between Indian needs and federal assistance, has been a target of numerous Indian jokes.

Called into life by mainstream political powers, the federal agency is an endless target of criticism. Yet, comic criticism can only be found in the post WWII era. As an administrative unit organized under the Department of War in 1824, it avoided criticism, and the periods of removal and forced assimilation are still infused with the tragic outcomes of these two phases of federal Indian policy. However, the 20th century witnessed changes in approaches to the Indian problem that earned the BIA (in my view rightfully) its position as a prime comic agent. As the Indian minority found its voice to express grievances, the BIA acquired a new status in Indian humor. Much in the tradition of group discipline, the BIA in the 20th century practically plays the role of the misbehaving individual. In case of earth quakes, Indians are told to run for the BIA office as nothing can shake it, or when Indians notice a blazing fire, they are supposed to call the BIA, which will surely know how to handle it because it puts a wet blanket over everything (Deloria V. 149).

Interestingly, instances of humor cited here act upon the intensity of a natural disaster, while the Bureau's most often criticized characteristic is its impotence to act quickly on local matters. Incompetence, corruption and bribery are the most frequently cited reasons. In the 1970s such accusations became so common that the American Indian Movement called for the overall abolishment of the Bureau. AIM's manifesto clearly stated criticisms, but it was carried forward by a pamphlet issued by We are Still Here, who announced the establishment of the Bureau of Caucasian Affairs. BCA is modelled on BIA structures and tasks, and also functions as a distorting mirror of the federal agency. BCA advertises its open positions as: "If you are competent enough, you will be able to be a BCA reservation superintendant. Applicants must have less than one year of education, must not speak English, must have an authoritarian personality, proof of dishonesty, and a certificate of incompetence" (We).

Dissatisfaction with the BIA is also expressed in contemporary Indian literature. Alexie's short story "The Trial of Thomas Builds-the-Fire" informs the reader of how the title hero, after long months of silence, "had begun to make small noises, form syllables that contained more emotion and meaning than entire sentences constructed by the BIA" (*Lone* 94). The outcome of such intelligent and informative diction propelled Esther, wife of tribal chairman David WalksAlong, to leave her husband, who referred to his spouse as "a savage in polyester pants" (Alexie, *Lone* 94). The telling name of the major executive officer of the Spokane is a reference to how elected officials may conform to the

expectations of mainstream society even at the price of sacrificing their own Indian affiliations. WalksAlong walked along with BIA policy too willingly and effectively to be considered worthy of his position.

The above mentioned We Are Still Here manifesto also mocks various agencies the operation of which is controlled by the BIA. Indian Health Service being the most problematic of all, BCA promises health care for Caucasians placed on reservations in hospitals which are geographically inaccessible to the people in need, and it offers the following service: “Each hospital will have a staff of two part-time doctors and a part-time chiropractor who have all passed first aid tests. [They] will be equipped with a scalpel, a jack knife, a saw, a modern tourniquet, and a large bottle of aspirin” (We).

Complementing political criticism, the same issue is discussed in Alexie’s *Reservation Blues*. Thomas Builds the Fire contemplates how “Indian Health only gave out dental floss and condoms, and Thomas spent his whole life trying to figure out the connection between the two” (6). Symbolism is apparent, and both items suggest that Indian Health Service had no serious problems to handle. Such a statement suggests that if the Indian had defied removal, genocide, relocation and termination, the federal government still would have had means at its disposal eventually to realize the long awaited solution of the Indian problem: the vanishing race by such practices will in no time disappear from mainstream society.

By extension, the operation of IHS is also characteristic of reservation conditions in general. The 19th century definition spread by word of mouth in Indian country claims that “the reservation is a place inhabited by Indians and surrounded by thieves.” The treaty making period ended in 1871, and ever since reservations have posed one of the most serious problems in Indian affairs. The Bureau of Caucasian Affairs manifesto states, “The Indians hereby give the whites four large reservations of ten acres each [...]. These reservations shall belong to the whites for as long as the sun shines or the grass grows (or until the Indians want it back)” (We). The manifesto mocks actual treaties with regard to the specifications included in them. It also employs historic experience whose tragedy is overcome by contemporary Indian life.

In addition to its geographical capacity, the reservation has become a symbolic sphere of Indian identity, and as such has earned its legacy in contemporary Indian literature, both as setting and as subject. Despite stereotypical imagery, the reservation is still the homeland for Indian existence even though “it’s hard to be optimistic on the reservation. When

a glass sits on the table people don't wonder if it's half filled or half empty. They just hope it's good beer" (Alexie, *Lone* 49). At the same time devastating conditions and existence are proof of the fact that "Indians can survive that big stuff. Mass murder, loss of language and land rights. It's the small things that hurt the most" (Alexie, *Lone* 49).

As of today it is only the Dine people (the Navajo, as they are more widely known) who occupy their original tribal homeland. The policy of removal attempted to uproot cultures in order to secure a potentially receptive people to assimilative Indian policies. A common stereotype of reservations today is that of an economically and culturally depleted place with extreme poverty, desperate sanitary conditions and skyrocketing unemployment rates. The literary reservation is inhabited by characters who are a product of Indian and non-Indian cultural interaction. David WalksAlong, the tribal chairman who conforms to federal expectations, has already been mentioned. Another exemplary character is the drunken Indian, Lester FallsApart, who is honored with the designation of being "the most accomplished drunk" (Alexie, *Reservation* 34) on the reservation. By turning the stereotype of the drunken Indian into an honorable position, both mainstream and Indian culture shift their foci. From the non-Indian perspective Lester FallsApart is the typical reservation drunkard, never getting anything right, a permanent target of jokes. His well-deserved last name is a reinforcement of the Indian stock character. As a traditional trickster figure he also lives up to his Indian name: the clumsy and lovable "reservation magician, reservation clown" (Alexie, *Reservation* 34). Yet, undermining his qualities attached to his ancestral heritage and white image, Lester holds the community together. Personally he may be falling apart, but tribally he is a cohesive force. By stumbling in on tribal council meetings, he casts the decisive vote to keep the community together and show more tolerance to the outside world.

Lester FallsApart signifies the transition of the reservation from a tragic lost ground to an endless source of humor. This transition is an essential part of a process through which survival is made easier. Past industrialization and urbanization reservations stand as an example for the future of Indian people. Clyde Warrior, outstanding activist of Indian Affairs, delivered the following speech at a 1970 intertribal conference: "Do you realize that when the United States was founded it was only 5 percent urban and 95 percent rural and now it is 70 percent urban and 30 percent rural? [...] It means we are pushing THEM into the cities. Soon we will have the country back again" (Deloria V. 167-68). Warrior's

statement, although not intended as a call for any pan-Indian revolution, demonstrates how the comic potential is realized even in the case of the most painful issues affecting the Indian minority.

Warrior used “them” to refer to mainstream America. It is very common in Indian affairs to equate the mainstream with Caucasian people, just as Indians tend to be viewed as a culturally, socially and politically unified block of the ethno-racial pentagon. Such a fallacy may be prompted by ignorance, comfort and clash of interest. In the instances of humor listed so far white people served as a target. In the tradition of group discipline the 1960s new generation of Indian youngsters, who defied traditional practices of negotiation and compromise, were criticized by more conservative elders. When the radical young men of Minnesota were looking for an expressive name for their political organization the idea of Concerned Indian Americans was also an option. Yet, the acronym could hardly have expressed the political standing of the members. Moccasin telegraph, the informal Indian “news agency,” quickly spread the anecdote throughout Indian country.

The eventual name, American Indian Movement, or AIM proved to be a much better solution. The acronym denotes the endeavor to reform prevailing Indian affairs and federal policies to solve the Indian problem. Yet, as soon as intra-Indian clashes between radicals and traditionalists surfaced, AIM gained a new interpretation. After disagreeing on issues of tactics, policies and personnel it was not long before AIM was reinterpreted as “assholes in moccasins,” by Indian groups, not mainstream society.

In the previous examples the English language is employed to transmit the Indian sense of humor. In the following, I will cite Native samples of the comic potential. Whenever two cultures encounter each other, a need arises whereby one would try to interpret notions of the other. Such need does not only spring from the wish for a better understanding, but the mere ability to communicate accounts for the following demonstrations of the capacity for humor inherent in Indian cultures. Linguistic borrowing and word formation are manifestations of this process, but few would recognize the comic potential in them unless acquainted with the given language. Indian people were very quick to communicate and interpret white culture. The literal translation of the Ojibwa “gichi ogimaa bakwebijigan” is “big boss says throw away your money” (Treuer n.pag.). This is a demonstration of the Ojibwa

interpretation of income tax, and how they invented a new vocabulary to describe the rapidly changing Indian universe.

The same creative spirit surfaces in the linguistic reaction to social changes. When, due to intermarriage, traditional kinship terminology and paternal ancestry could not suffice to determine one's clan affiliation, the Ojibwa offered a solution. Individuals of white descent were placed in the Pig clan. Less romantic and elegant than membership in the eagle, bear or turtle clan, many found the designation offensive. Yet, it was not the connotations of the word pig so much as the origin of the domesticated animal and its physical appearance that triggered its transformation into a "sacred" being.

Naming also plays a significant role in contemporary American Indian literature. As it has been one of the most sacred rituals in many of the Indian communities, the reader may be appalled by its loss of the mythic quality.

- Rosemary MorningDove gave birth to a boy today and [...] named him _____ which is unpronounceable in Indian and in English but it means: *He Who Crawls Silently Through the Grass with a Small Bow and One Bad Arrow Hunting for Enough Deer to Feed the Whole Tribe*. We just called him James. (Alexie, *Lone* 110)

The excerpt demonstrates how Indian literature mixes the mundane and the mythic, and how the two foreground each other's qualities by juxtaposition. As for humor, Alexie's narrator utilizes both cultures and their preconceptions of each other. By exaggeration, the Indian naming ritual acts upon the Indian stereotype and, at the same time, counteracts it with the very explicit hint at the historical practice. Once a ritual reserved for those with special gifts by the Great Spirit, naming acquired new potentials. The same applies to sacred sites as well. John Fire/ Lame Deer titles one of his chapters "Sitting on Top of Teddy Roosevelt's Head" (80). An iconic place in American culture, Mount Rushmore seems to be desecrated by Lame Deer. However, in view of the fact that the site was once a sacred ground for the Lakota, Lame Deer's title earns a new interpretation.

The Anishinabe poet Diane Burns closes her poem "Sure You Can Ask Me a Personal Question" with the following lines: "This ain't no stoic look. This is my face" (*Braided* 66). She reflects the tendency to consider Indian people stone-faced, lethargic, somewhat out of touch with

reality, and constantly peering into some unknown future. One needs more than mere linguistic competence to grasp Indian humor, whether targeting non-Indian entities or groups or Indians themselves. Yet, the exploration of “what makes a people laugh” will provide students of Indian affairs with a better potential for cross-cultural understanding.

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