

RESISTANCE AND EXISTENCE: NORTH AMERICAN
INDIGENOUS HUMOUR OF THE 21ST CENTURY

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Historically dated and stereotypical images of Native Americans stand in stark opposition to the notion of contemporary emergent indigenous identities. By contrast, Native North Americans are asserting their existence in modern day America in myriad ways such as through humorous images, literary descriptors, ceremony, and music that assert not only their presence but the complexity of who they are. To see examples of dominant—albeit problematic—images of indigenous Americans, one needs to go no further than typing “Native American” into an Internet search engine and comparing those results to a search for “White American.” While Native identity is represented by centuries-old images, White identity is marked by modern identifiers of American-ness such as jeans and t-shirts.

My interest in researching Native humour stems from frustration with iconic images of stoic Natives juxtaposed with the reality of urban Indian identity, and my professional experience working with Native American Student Services (NASS) at a state university. NASS employees are continually confronted with staggering numbers of Native student dropouts, partly due to the seemingly insurmountable personal barriers our students face. In response, our staff adopted a comedic approach to combating the stress associated with this daily reality. We joked about getting capes and masks, and demanding funding from the office of the president to support our program because we are “Super Injuns” complete with our trusty donkey mascot: the NASS ass. We laughed about generating revenue through the sale of a geriatric professor “nudey” calendar. When $\frac{3}{4}$ of us

learned of the most recent Native student suicide on campus and another staff member walked in late and asked “why so down?”, we all responded with a different reason, each equally absurd and culturally comedic:

- “We just got news that the buffalo are back and we don’t get cell reception on the plains.”
- “We drew straws to determine who gets laid off and all of us got the short straw.”
- “Josh’s girlfriend lied about her clan, so she’s his girlfriend and his grandmother.”

We recognised that our students, regardless of their level of traditionalism, were trying to navigate two worlds, where the dominant world doesn’t understand why a death in the residence hall is so personally devastating if the victim isn’t your best friend or roommate. Professors would expect our students to perform “normally” in class since the deceased student was not a member of their nuclear family, with the larger spiritual implications often dismissed as superstition. We understood the wake that would follow and the need for us to pick up the pieces with limited resources, but rather than externalising it for what it was, we swallowed hard and replaced the stagnant air with laughter -survival humour.

House fires, suicides, death, disease, genocide, poverty, and hunger are not funny. Natives struggling to maintain their dignity and their identity in a dominant culture that is intent on the acquisition of ancestral lands and natural resources is also no laughing matter. Loss and pain, dependence and helplessness, sovereignty and paternalism do not offer much in the way of comic relief. So, why are these areas targeted in Native humour and contemporary conversation? I would respond by saying that humour is part of our identity. And while not

all Native humour finds its birth in the response to suffering, some of it does.

As is evident in our NASS staff meetings, the ability to laugh at yourself enables you to avoid continued victimisation and to sustain yourself through survival humour. Laughing becomes a way of coping with pain—it is created from the ashes of defeat (Chavkin 1999, 168).

After five hundred years of dispossession—germ and conventional warfare, bounty hunting, guns, ploughs, telegraph poles, trains, barbed wire enclosures, land swindles, and outright stealing—Native people still persist on some 53 million acres of reservation land left over from the great dirt grab... Clearly humor both targets and takes some fatal sting out of history" (1999, 345).

Contemporary Native artists, writers, and musicians use humour to forge new versions of Native identity that resist stereotypes, and offer a means of expressing solidarity in the face of contemporary legacies of colonialism. Fossilised images that became synonymous with dominant ideologies of “Nativity” are being reclaimed by Native North Americans and infused with ironical humour through various mediums such as literary arts, performing arts, and studio arts. Vine Deloria and Gerald Vizenor approach the comical emergent identity of contemporary Native North Americans as a traditional legacy internalised and reshaped with new meaning—deconstructing stoicism and imagined stagnation.

Without the emergence of published contemporary indigenous humour, Native Americans who don't fit the stereotype would become disposable: omitted from a modern existence. Indigenous humour focused on the ridiculousness of dominant generalisations of Native identity facilitates the public emergence of contemporary indigenous identity. Dozens of contemporary Native artists utilise humour to

deconstruct these stereotypes by reversing the lens and poking fun at those who believe them rather than mocking the populations that the stereotypes are intended to represent. In this regard, humour becomes a weapon to strategically challenge the old notions of Natives by making it absurd and ironic.

Humour is a significant facet of tradition and a survival strategy of Native Americans that challenges the dominant construction of Native stoicism. This chapter explores the use of ironic humour as a coping mechanism enabling continued existence while navigating outside of the culture of power. Its intent is to promote the decolonisation of Native identity by deconstructing controlling archaic images, and to provide a glimpse into the complexity of contemporary Native North America through indigenous humour in literature, performance, and studio arts.

Literary Arts

Alexander Posey is known as one of the foremost authors of Indian humour. He wrote letters to an “insider” Creek audience, avoiding mainstream exposure (1993). The messages were largely political in nature, addressing issues of federal and tribal policy, sovereignty, citizenship, and voice. Craig Womack describes his approach as “the next link in developing a new brand of Indian humor” (1999, 172). Posey purchased the *Indian Journal* in 1902 and developed a reputation as a political satirist. His satirical utilisation of dialectic humour provides an authentic voice to characters that are relatable to the Native audience, and that encourages them to reverse the lens and apply the lazy, useless stereotype to white counterparts, all while not veering from historical accuracy.

Sherman Alexie, like Posey, relies on broad stereotypes of Native Americans as the focus of his satire. The dated, but commonly used

stereotype of the buffalo-hunting, horseback riding, breech-cloth-wearing, feather-headdress and war paint adorned, teepee-dwelling noble savage is constructed largely as a result of inaccurate popular history, and exemplified in Alexie's *Great American Indian Novel*. When teaching about American history, elementary schools often incorporate the themes and images associated with plains Indians, suggesting that all Native American cultures (of which there are over 500) parallel this romanticised notion of America's indigenous peoples (Fleming 2007, 53). The cycle continues through pervasive and stereotypical images in the media and character roles, which create a vast gap in real versus imagined Native America—one of many examples of how "...they [desire] Indianness, not Indians" (Deloria 1969, 90). In this regard, Indian people are irrelevant to "Indianness" in White middle-class America. Alexie deals with such complex and depressive notions with an edge of humour.

Sherman Alexie's humour, made caustic by social consciousness, transcends racial and tribal boundaries in *The Toughest Indian in the World* (2000). Alexie allows the non-Native reader to be drawn into reservation reality forcing them to replace the media perpetuated John Wayne Indians of yesteryear with contemporary salmon-fishing warriors. His audience is able to laugh at the characters' experiences as they strive to survive, yet Alexie achieves this without denying or downplaying the deprivation and injustice in Indian country. This author cleverly utilises Native/non-Native relationships with shifting degrees of power and no clear resolution, thus enabling access to a diverse audience while addressing the complexity of race relations - without alienation—through humour.

This bipolar approach to pain and perseverance is evident throughout the collective narratives of characters in Alexie's storytelling. The juxtaposition of humour and hurt in his characters' trials and

tribulations challenges the non-Native audience to consider Natives as complete persons, rather than the iconic noble savage commodified and indoctrinated into mainstream society. Navajo (Dine') comedians James and Ernie have taken "Alexieesque" survival humour on stage with increasing popularity among Natives and mainstream fans.

Vine Deloria Jr emphasizes the significance of humour cross culturally. He is most commonly cited for stating that to know a culture is to understand its humour. Deloria explicates the prevalence of thematic contemporary humour as a reaction to the continuation of cultural genocide. The title of his progressive text, *Custer Died for your Sins* (1969), introduces the complexities of historical legacy on contemporary identity. The reader is begged to judge the book by its cover, or, more accurately, its title, and question the legitimacy of our national heroes, Custer and Columbus, to question our institutions and policies, the Bureau of Indian Affairs, Indian Health Services, and Federal Indian Policy, as well as to question our acceptance thereof.

Deloria (1969) discusses humour as an indigenous tradition where one can acknowledge the shortcomings of another through teasing, or where one can acknowledge their own mistakes through humorous self-deprecation. Such strategies are not socially punitive or belittling; they empower the individual/society to address the need for change and encourage them to revisit the issue armed with humour. The significance of humour as a tradition is evident in the commonplace existence of a tribal "trickster" figure among many Native North American nations. The trickster makes mistakes that are lamentable but laughable, teaching us important morals and lessons that are accessible to in-group audiences across generations. The "trickster" has transcended centuries and emerged from utilitarian tales of pre-Columbian Americas to twenty first century quandaries, while maintaining relevance through the ages.

Studio Arts

Much like Deloria's utilisation of traditional trickster humour in contemporary America, author Allan J. Ryan (1999) explains that "several artists were beginning to playfully exploit the perception of Native peoples as living museum pieces" (Ryan 1999, 14) through the use of studio arts. The irony of the emergent humour is intended to deconstruct romantic idealisations that deny 21st century existence and exclude Native North Americans from "normalcy," "representing cultural stereotypes in humorous and ironic fashion to renew not only their ideological underpinnings, but also the way in which historical misconceptions have hindered cross-cultural understanding and interactions." (Ryan 1999, 104).

Ryan (1999, 14) describes Bill Powless' *Beach Blanket Brave* (1984, acrylic on canvas board, 51 x 41 cm) painting as "pure play and ironic juxtaposition." Powless challenges antiquated historic stereotypes by playing with modern consumerism; one has to look twice to verify that the brave is branded by Speedo, brandishing a newspaper and an inner tube in lieu of a shield and weapon, and clad in a cotton towel replacing more common romanticised images of buckskin and loin cloths. Powless increases indigenous identifiers paradoxically with braids and feathers, but requires the viewer to challenge Native stereotypes both geographically; an ocean-side plains style hair dress—and chronologically, since Speedo made its debut post-buffalo-hunt. In a self-portrait, Powless defies stoic imagery with a playful grin, jester's hat, and a fake flamingo titled "Self-Portrait as April Fool" (1995, graphite on paper, 29 x 22 cm).

In Powless' "*Home of the Brave*" (1986, acrylic on masonite, 61 x 76 cm), feathers and beads are similarly used as identifying markers, though not reflective of the artist's tribal affiliation. The visible irony of garb may be lost on an out-group audience, but the title of the

piece, the flamingo, and the Pepsi can, are iconically unavoidable. They mark the existence of contemporary indigenous identity, while questioning an emergent biculturalism—therefore juxtaposing the existence of a modern self with a marketable romanticised self. Powless addresses this binary with self-deprecating humour. First Nations artist Carl Beam reinforces the idea of indigenous existence in a modern world in his version of a “beach blanket brave”, *Self-Portrait in My Christian Dior Bathing-Suit* (1980, watercolor on paper, 106 x 69 cm). Continuing with the theme of stereotype deconstruction and twenty first century existence, artist Ron Noganosh used oil, cardboard, and Plexiglas to create a nude self-portrait comically titled *I Couldn't Afford a Christian Dior Bathing-Suit* (1990, oil, cardboard, Plexiglas, 142 x 86 cm). The irony and banter of these images make a powerful statement about the absurdity of archaic identity and presumed stoicism addressed in Ryan's *The Trickster Shift* (1999).

Native North Americans such as Shelley Niro and Noganosh, depict indigenous Americans in Euro-American codification through mixed-medium art. Obvious titles of inclusive Americanism accompany these art works. Niro's *500 Year Itch* (1992, hand-colored gelatin silver print, 36 x 28 cm) is an ironic self-portrait with the artist depicted in the famous white dress of American Actress Marilyn Monroe, while *Love me Tender* (1992, hand-colored gelatin silver print, 36 x 28 cm) captures Niro emulating iconic American singer Elvis Presley's attire, complete with guitar. Niro has a series of pictures featuring her mother draped over jalopies, encouraging laughter from the obvious juxtaposition of poverty and opulence (1992).

The Senecas Have Landed (polymer acrylic on canvas) by Carson Waterman, 1982, requests that man take one small step by including indigenous populations in our collective global psyche through the humorous painted imagery of a Native Neil Armstrong. Perhaps the

artist also intended to question the nature of the current “alien” status as John Kahionhes Fadden did in *Wouldn't it Be Funny?* (1983, acrylic on canvas, 64 x 53 cm). These contemporary Native artists feature indigenous subjects clad in Pierre Cardin, nude, abstract, modeling atop cars, all with similar themes of existence in modern North America, and coping through survival humour. While Euro-Americans perpetuate stereotypic nostalgia, contemporary Native artists recreate themselves through humour because the Native-ness that is imagined in dominant society reflects the “vanishing Indian” myth.

Each of the previously discussed art pieces seem to challenge non-Indian audiences to eschew dominant stereotypical views of the Native and to embrace more complex understandings of their modern existence. Perhaps they also allow Native audiences, through use of satire, irony, and humour, a space to laugh and ultimately cope with life in modern America.

Performing Arts

Gerald Vizenor traded his metaphoric bow and arrows for ink and paper, making literary contributions that address the complexities of emergent indigenous identities by utilising a comedic approach he describes as “mythic verism”; verism is a belief that literary art is a reflection of truth and therefore cannot exclude the crude and unsightly components of society. “Mythic verism” acknowledges that “the truth is in the telling” (*Harold of Orange*, 1984), thus the trickster is an active player in recreating reality. Vizenor satirises mainstream society by focusing on a modern-day trickster that is traditional in form but exists beyond the romanticised snapshot of historically fixed “authentic” Indians. In the film *Harold of Orange*, Vizenor’s screenplay unfolds the power dynamic of indigenous sovereignty,

federal paternalism, and liberal romanticisation through social underdog humour.

Vizenor contests oppressive hegemonic ideologies and repressive apparatuses by satirising mainstream society. His cast, ironically referred to as the “Warriors of Orange”, is empowered by reclaiming the stereotype that has denied their existence in a modern world. They embody a humorous emergent Indian identity by using a warped time paradox. Much like Powless’ *Beach Blanket Brave* (1984), the ‘warriors’ of the orange grove savagely fight off figurative parasitic insects while maintaining a noble awareness of organic agriculture. Both Vizenor and Powless demystify Native America through the inclusion of Indians indulging in leisure, and “normal” twenty first century pastimes.

Neckties are strategically worn by the “Warriors” to reinforce their belonging in a modern corporate world, accompanied by verbal banter that addresses the ridiculousness of selling ones indigenous identity to a mainstream audience—“the white man turned white by wearing neck ties. It cut off all of the oxygen to his brain” (*Harold of Orange*, 1984). Not only does Vizenor address hierarchical racial stratification evident in racial/ethnic relationships in the United States, he forces the audience to question the contemporary “professional” attire of mainstream society, thus challenging the lens through which dominant society views ‘acceptable’ behavior. Vizenor’s “Warriors” are battling against mainstream society for existence in contemporary capitalist America, armed only with their opponent’s underestimations: the pervasive belief that Native Americans are a primitive, non-diverse, stoic people.

The ‘Warriors’ in *Harold of Orange* must appeal to a majority group of economically privileged potential donors so they meet them on their corporate battlegrounds—the board room—dressed in corporate

battle attire: the necktie. The irony in Vizenor's screenplay evolves as the racial majority board members get on an old school bus driven by the 'Warriors' to play a softball game; "Anglos" versus "Indians" labeled by their red and white team shirts. The board is resistant at first, but the "Warriors" reinforce Anglo superiority by responding with mock childlike athletic ability, fumbling the ball humorously while an observant eye can catch a glimpse of children playing "cowboys and Indians" in the background. The pep talk given by the lead 'Warrior', Harold Sincere, addresses heavy themes of cultural genocide and historic justification interwoven with humorous anecdotes.

"Playing Ball" is viewed as an "American" pastime that, ironically, is never associated with Native Americans, especially since indigenous American identity and behaviors are 'stuck' in the distant past. The 'Warriors' rectify the display of modernism, playing ball, with the reinforcement of external expectations of perceived Indian-ness—a naming ceremony. Vizenor allows the White actors in the film to "play Indian" through their characters' roles, both literally as a team named the "Indians"—and figuratively, through the authentication of their identity in a "traditional" naming ceremony. Vizenor emphasizes the irony in these scenes by incorporating the grotesque underestimations of Native populations at the time of European encroachment. He asks the viewer to critically consider the national patriotic amnesia that US educational institutions have conditioned them to believe through the use of humorous film dialogue that debunks the Bearing Straight migration theory, defames Columbus as never having discovered anything, and confronts the common belief that all Native Americans are experts on all things commonly perceived to be Native American. Prior to the conclusion of the short film, Vizenor's 'Warriors' go through a laundry list of stereotypes that a particularly squeamish and ignorant board member wants to address

without overstepping political correctness. The punch line: Indian alcoholism and how they overcame it.

In *Harold of Orange*, Vizenor reinforces Deloria's claim that there is a common understanding of the emergent humour in Columbus commentary, forced relocation, and attempts at religious assimilation, making it laughable for an in-group audience. Vizenor uses the stereotype to his characters' advantage, highlighting the dominance and omnipresence of ignorance in regards to contemporary indigenous identity. The "Warriors" claim that if the board donates adequate funds to their entrepreneurial coffee plantation it will lead to a "sober revolution on reservations around the world." The irony is maintained throughout—given that dominant culture is so blinded by their belief in antiquated Native stereotypes, and so resistant to acknowledge less static emergent identities and significant outliers of encompassing generalizations—that they are being played the fool by funding such mythical business ventures. Vizenor metaphorically kills outdated notions of indigenous identity with numerous witty fictionalised deaths of Harold Sincere's grandmother throughout the film.

As an "insider" armed with irony and humour, Vizenor brilliantly portrays the numerous problematic stereotypes that plague Native Americans. Films targeting contemporary Native Americans cast in normative roles have received little attention in academic circles, as have Forty-nines, a Native American musical tradition. Forty-nines are described as a "social dance for young men and women performed in concentric circles around a group of male singers around a drum or a resonator... always performed in the nighttime, is usually total darkness, and is usually accompanied by heavy drinking by the participants sometimes followed by drunken brawls...Local authorities attempt to prevent forty-nines whenever possible." (Feder

1964, 290). This out-group anthropological observation of Forty-nines questions the morality, in relation to western values, of the contemporary tradition describing Forty-nine children being born of “doubtful” parents and speculating on the “loose morality” of the dance and culture (Curtis 1930, 137). Perhaps these externally composed speculations explain why I was only able to locate one publication dedicated to documenting Forty-nines, albeit ethnocentrically, through microfilm and written description. The literature dates back to 1930, though many Indigenous North Americans engage in Forty-nines today.

Forty-nines participants partake in the comical components of free-style singing by incorporating contemporary mainstream themes like cartoon characters, nursery rhymes, lullabies, and even John Wayne. The singing generally is “off the cuff” with the exception of some favorites that have become popular at powwow circuit after-parties. The Black Lodge Singers drum group commercialised the songs in a series of albums titled *Powwow Songs* (1995). *John Wayne’s Teeth* (Smith 1998), made popular by the film *Smoke Signals* (Alexie 1999), questions the legitimacy of John Wayne’s teeth with the presupposition that you shouldn’t trust someone who you’ve never seen smile... “John Wayne’s teeth, he-ya, John Wayne’s teeth, he-ya, are they fake, or are they real? Are they wooden or maybe steel?” (Smith 1998). The jesting at this popular icon of the Wild West not only brings into question whether you should trust a cowboy, but suggests one should reverse the historicised perspective of the cowboy as hero, the Indian as villain.

Though the origin of Forty-nines is unknown, a number of ideas about their origins exist: they emerged when the Native Americans were excluded from drinking establishments during the 1849 Gold Rush; they have their roots in a traditional Pueblo dance that was

“perverted” by Oklahoma Indians after forced removal; or, they are a nod to the 49th Infantry and the indigenous soldiers who served in US Indian Wars (Feder 1964).

The “doubtful morality” that anthropologists attributed to the post-powwow gatherings judge open sexuality, humorously referred to as “snagging”, based on a puritanical ethic that generally was not prevalent among indigenous populations predating western encroachment. Forty-nines defy the patriarchy, nuclear family structure, and sexual conservatism that was forced upon Native Americans through systemic federal assimilation programs. It is a contemporary venue than invites indigenous populations to enjoy selfhood through comical musical interlude. Though, as anthropologists noted back in 1930, local authorities still attempt to prevent Forty-nines whenever possible. Ultimately, Forty-nines are an emergent example of the re-appropriation of old ideas of what is indigenous as they combine traditional hand drumming and vocals with modern lyrics. The virtual exclusion of Forty-nines as legitimate ethnomusicology exemplifies that historical stereotyping and commodification of Native culture has not dissipated.

Conclusion

Natives are depicted throughout Hollywood as silent and stoic, primitive and unintelligent, or inextricable from Mother Earth (Alexie 1993). Meeks (2006) cites the inclusion of popular stereotypes in TV shows, movies, books, and even messages in greeting cards. She describes these depictions and the associated script as an attempt to eradicate Native Americans from the national landscape, citing historic and economic marginalisation as further support (Meeks 2006, 121). Primary source documents describing colonial Native oratory greatly contradict these stereotypes.

The prohibition of change and the perpetuation of commodified “imagined Indians” deny Native Americans rights to peoplehood and the civil rights associated therein. Natives are ignored or recreated for historical convenience in textbooks. Individual identities, and culturally diverse tribal communities are replaced with popular acceptance of John Wayne’s Hollywood Indians. Natives are “honored” through the idiocy of mimicry clad in mascot. Native characters speak in foreign, childish, broken English.

Natives Americans are a people whose past has been recreated to justify European encroachment, and whose present is determined by media adherence and popular belief of this falsified history. The momentum of societal ignorance of contemporary Native American issues enables injustice to continue in Indian Country. There will be no recognition or reconciliation until negative stereotypes are eradicated and truths are publicised: a feat that Native authors and artists are challenging through the use of humour as a medium for contemporary emergent indigenous identity.

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