

**LAUGHING TO SURVIVE:
HUMOUR IN CONTEMPORARY CANADIAN NATIVE LITERATURE**

by

Kristina Rose Fagan

**A thesis submitted in conformity with the requirements
for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy
Graduate Department of English
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Abstract

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While many critics see Native humour as directly reflecting Native traditions or idealize it as uniformly subversive, in fact Native writers often use humour to negotiate touchy social tensions and contradictions. The humour in the writing has both ordering and disordering effects, allowing the writers to walk a fine line between affirming and challenging contentious values, categories and identities. Drawing on Canadian Native literature from the seventies to the present, this study examines Native humour as a social practice, arising out of specific cultural and historical circumstances, that allows Native people to deal with change while maintaining a sense of continuity and community.

Much humour in Native literature revolves around issues of authenticity, identity, and community. The humour allows Native people to maintain a sense of identity while challenging confining definitions of “Nativity.” For instance, satires of “the whiteman” allow writers to both engage with and resist the dominant society. Humorous depictions of racial and cultural hybridity both undercut and support notions of authentic identity. And depictions of Native people laughing together are affirmations of but also critical examinations of the process of community building.

Native humour often arises from and reflects on Native traditions. For instance, traditional Native ethics discourage the direct telling of traumatic events. Thus in dealing with the subject of childhood sexual abuse, several Native writers have used humour as a

way of both telling and not telling. Native writers use a similar double-positioning to affirm Native languages even when writing primarily in English. By humourously switching between various languages and styles, they bring language and its power politics to the foreground.

The order and disordering of Native humour can be seen as grounded in a Native philosophy that seeks to reconcile order and chaos. However, while it is important to affirm Native ways of knowing, it is dangerous to over-generalize about such ways or to assume that they are directly reflected in the literature. The solution to this dilemma may lie in more narrowly focussed studies of Native humour as used by individual writers and tribal or other groups of Native people.

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I sometimes wonder about the irony of the universe, but, as my Grandmother would say, who am I to decide what's ironic? That's for God and English teachers to decide.

– Drew Hayden Taylor, “Strawberries”

Introduction **Laughing to Survive?**

Until the past decade or so, most non-Native North Americans, including researchers, considered humour and Native people to be incompatible. On the contrary. Native people were seen as stoic – “the granite-faced, grunting redskin” (Deloria, *Custer* 146) – and tragic, characterized by their political oppression and social problems. Fortunately, this depressing and limiting view has begun to fade, with Native people’s sense of humour appearing more and more often in the public eye. As Native people have seized greater control of their public depiction, popular works such as the play *Dry Lips Oughta Move to Kapuskasing* by Tomson Highway, the movie *Smoke Signals* by Sherman Alexie, and the radio show *The Dead Dog Cafe Comedy Hour* by Thomas King have introduced to the non-Native majority the idea that Native people really do laugh. Lesser known but emerging writers, such as Marie Annharte Baker, Brian Maracle, Monique Mojica, Eden Robinson, Ruby Slipperjack, Drew Hayden Taylor, Richard Van Camp, and Richard Wagamese have also helped bring Native humour to the Canadian public. Ojibway writer Drew Hayden Taylor provides a telling example of the shift in public perceptions of Native humour. In 1993, he recounts, his farcical play *Bootlegger Blues* played to largely white audiences in Port Dover, Ontario:

The first fifteen minutes were excruciating. You could hear the cast trying to engage the audience. All you could hear from the audience was their breathing. The truth was, most of the audience were afraid to laugh at Native people. After so many years of being told of our miseries and tribulations, the concept of funny or entertaining aboriginal people was problematic. (“Native Mirth” 40)

However, by 1999 when Hayden returned to Port Dover with his play *AlterNatives*, the audience mood had changed drastically: they now laughed easily. This growing

acceptance and even embracing of Native people's humour has also entered the academy. In university Canadian literature courses, the representative Native works are usually by the comic writers Tomson Highway or Thomas King. Studies of the Native trickster have become a research fad. And book length studies have emerged on the topic of Native humour, with Kenneth Lincoln's 1992 *Indi'n Humor* and Allan Ryan's 1999 *Trickster Shift* documenting a widespread comic sensibility in American Native literature and Canadian Native art respectively.

In this dissertation, I participate in the growing academic fascination with Native humour. However, I am aware that this fascination has often manifested itself in a view of Native humour as uniformly positive, healing, and subversive, an assumption as limited as that of the tragic and disappearing Indian. During a recent conference, several Native writers and scholars expressed concern about this idealized view of humour, worrying that the laughing Native is becoming another stereotype, allowing the public to avoid listening to sad or angry Native voices.¹ Cree writer and actor Anne Marie Sewell was one participant who raised this problem:

The public always wants something from Native people. Sometimes they want me to bleed for them and tell them about the 'issues.' And lately, I feel like everyone wants me to put on my trickster face, my survivor face. I feel like I'm supposed to be funny. I'm Native, so I must be funny.

In referring to her "survivor face," Sewell alludes to the many assertions by Native writers that laughter has enabled Native people to survive the European invasion:

Because Native communities have gone through probably the worst situations in North America that any peoples have gone through they had to have the ability to laugh. If they didn't they wouldn't be existing today. So humour has been a means of survival, the only means . . . (Gary Farmer [Mohawk actor and editor] qtd. in Ryan, *Trickster* 72)

I think it's our humour that has helped us to survive. When the situation is the most grim, that's when you see Indian people making jokes about it, just for the survival. (Charlie Hill [Oneida comedian] 11)

When a people can laugh at themselves and laugh at others and hold all aspects of life together without letting anyone drive them to extremes, then it would seem to me that the people can survive. (Vine Deloria [Lakota writer], *Custer* 169)

[T]ragic wisdom endures and is the source of trickster humor in the literature of survivance Laughter over that comic touch in tribal stories would not steal the breath of destitute children. Rather, children would be healed with humor. (Gerald Vizenor [Chippewa writer and filmmaker], *Manifest* 68)

It may be the one universal thing about Native Americans from tribe to tribe is the survival humour. (Louise Erdrich [Chippewa novelist] qtd. in Lincoln 209)

These inspiring claims from such influential Native thinkers about the survival power of Native humour were what initially drew me to the topic, a starting point invoked in my title. They are compelling statements, connecting humour to such topics as trauma, health, community, deprecation of self and others, moderation, and pan-tribalism. However, many critics working on Native humour have seized on the mention of "survival," leading to some facile and problematic critical responses. Here are a few representative critical comments that pick up on the survival humour theme:

Native writers also have a predilection for satire and irony, and for humour (an important force in their survival) . . . (Petrone 183)

Above all, however, the kind of humour found in [Maria] Campbell is a means of resistance and subversion, a way to recover the open spaces within necessary for cultural survival and future literary creation. (Jannetta 67)

Humour not only mediates tragedies with a sense of continuance and survival, but helps to reverse statistics that bracket Indians as the poorest of the poor, the most invisible of American minorities. (Lincoln 55)

Although it has usually been overlooked, traditional orature contains strong elements of humour. Since 1492, especially, it has also become a powerful tool of survival. (Weaver 88)

The presence of the trickster in [Joy] Harjo's poem confirms "a human and cultural will to survive" and the need to articulate a different version of the contemporary world. (Andrews 213)

Despite the popularity of this claim, few critics explore exactly how humour and survival may work together. And, left unexamined, the word "survival" has some problematic connotations, leading easily into uncritical, ethnographic, or idealizing approaches, approaches often brought to Native literature in general and Native humour in particular. First, describing humour as a means of survival has a distinctly anthropological tone, placing humour in the same category as gathering berries or building a shelter. This ethnographic approach, which I will discuss later in this chapter, views humour as a "tradition" that reflects a collective "Native culture." Second, the "survival" explanation can lead to an idealization of the humour, which I will also explore later. If humour is a key to survival, and human survival is an unquestioned good, then the humour too becomes an unquestioned good. This line of thought has made many critics unwilling to explore humour's less than innocent functions. And, finally, the word "survival" – appearing so fundamental and necessary – can stop critical thinking in its tracks² and foster a sense of nostalgia and naturalism – a sense that already haunts depictions of Native people. The word can also contribute to the idea that Native people are on the verge of not surviving – another popular and limiting depiction. With this critique, I do not mean to deny that Native people have had to struggle to survive on this continent, often despite all odds. However, the constant invocation of Native "survival" implies an unrealistic minimalism and simplicity in Native people's lives. It suggests that Native people need only to survive, not to be fulfilled, happy, or powerful.

Saul Terry, President of the B.C. Union of Indian Chiefs, puts the matter concisely:

“We’re tired of surviving. We want to live” (qtd. in Ryan, *Trickster* 182).

Despite its problematic connotations, however, “survival” does have critical potential, involving multiple possibilities: resistance, collaboration, complicity, tolerance, endurance, concealment, withdrawal, etc.³ One can survive communally or individually, physically, culturally or psychologically. Survival means, as Joseph Bruchac has emphasized, more than just staying alive:

There are many ways to survive. We can do so at the expense of others, at the expense of the natural world and those who are physically weaker. We can do so in an incomplete fashion, surviving physically, but carrying with us a sense of incompleteness, a feeling of being hollow Or we can survive as fully human in the American Indian sense. We can be aware of the earth below and the sky above, aware of the beauty all around us and the necessity of walking in balance as we travel. (x)

J.E Chamberlin makes a similar effort to open up the meaning of “survival” in relation to Native people, arguing that when talking about survival, we must maintain a feeling of

the importance of some things above and beyond their utility, an abiding faith in the value of more than merely getting by. Behind all this is a belief that survival is about being raised up rather than ground down and that power – a condition of survival, if survival is to mean anything at all – is an agent of the imagination as much as it is a function of reality. (Chamberlin, “From Hand” 131)

Humour also works in the realm of imagination and power and, like survival, operates in multiple and sometimes contradictory ways. For instance, both survival and humour can involve strengthening social bonds and emphasizing the positive. But on the other hand, both can also involve scapegoating others and transgressing norms. Throughout this dissertation, I work against the over-simplification and idealization of both terms and seek instead to recognize such multivalency. I have therefore wondered about the appropriateness of the title of this study – “Laughing to Survive.” But I decided to retain

it because it so concisely expresses both the potential and the pitfalls involved in thinking about Native humour.

In this introduction, I sketch out the existing critical thinking on Native humour, but I do not survey all of the critical literature on the subject (which includes anthropological, linguistic, folkloric, art historical and literary works). Instead, I briefly review the critical works that deal specifically with humour in Canadian Native literature. I then lay out, in broad strokes, some of the trends within criticism on Native humour, providing examples from the two book-length studies on the subject, before outlining my own approach.

No book currently exists on humour in Canadian Native Literature. However, many critical articles touch on the subject; for instance, nearly every essay on Tomson Highway or Thomas King refers in passing to these writers' humour. In addition, many articles examine the trickster as a source of humour and subversion in Canadian Native literature (I deal with this in Chapter Six).⁴ A few critics focus directly on the issue of Native humour, arguing that it challenges dominant norms. Dee Horne ("To Know"), Margaret Atwood and Robert Nunn argue that Native writers use satire to subvert white society, while A.E. Jannetta and Kate Vangen view Native humour as countering stereotypes and tragic views of Native people. These critics see the humour primarily in terms of its relationship to colonization, a view that Agnes Grant challenges in an essay on Canadian Native drama. Grant points out that, while much of the humour does deal with misfortune, not all of it is "dark" and not all of it deals with race or the colonizers. She also acknowledges that Native humour arises out of cultural norms and that different audiences respond to it differently ("Native Drama" 112-113). Though brief, Grant's

comments suggest a more complex view of humour in Canadian Native literature than is usually seen.⁵

Though neither deals with Canadian Native literature, there are two recent book-length works on Native humour: Kenneth Lincoln's *Indi'n Humor: Bicultural Play in Native America* and Allan Ryan's *The Trickster Shift: Humour and Irony in Contemporary Native Art*. Lincoln's *Indi'n Humor* examines the role of humour in contemporary Native Americans' music, art, and especially literature, claiming that it allows them to cope with racism and political oppression. Allan Ryan's *The Trickster Shift* surveys humorous works by ten contemporary Canadian Native artists. Ryan interviewed these artists as well as other artists, writers, and curators and quotes them at length, providing a fascinating look at the intentions behind the humour. He argues that Native humour is driven by a "trickster spirit" and subverts white institutions and expectations. Both *Indi'n Humor* and *The Trickster Shift* primarily survey rather than analyze their material, valuably bringing together many humorous works by Native artists and writers, thought-provoking quotations about Native humour, and a wonderful assortment of jokes and humorous anecdotes.

Lincoln and Ryan's works seek to establish and legitimize the study of Native humour. As such, they are in keeping with much of the existing criticism on Native literature. Over the past two decades, a great deal of effort has been put into legitimizing Native literature within the university, showing that the literature exists, that it is good, that it is part of a tradition, and that it is worth studying. However, this effort has meant that there has been little self-conscious discussion and questioning of the values, assumptions, and practices within the field.⁶ This lack of critical self-awareness becomes

even more pronounced when critics are dealing with the topic of humour in Native literature, perhaps because there is a relative lack of theory on literary humour to help critics find and articulate a position. Much theorizing on the topic defines “comedy” as a genre, an approach of limited use in interpreting specific episodes of humour. And most literary criticism that examines humour itself either defines it in terms of formal features (such as incongruity) or associates it with mythical forms, vital energies and deeper truths. These theoretical tendencies obscure how humour works as a social practice within specific historical, political and cultural circumstances. It is not my intention here to provide a survey or critique of humour studies. To do so would misplace the emphasis of this study, since I do not embrace or intervene in any particular theory of humour. I simply wish to point out that, in researching this study, I found most literary humour theory to be out of touch with the turn towards sociopolitical and historicist approaches within the discipline of English. Thus, many literary critics seem to find themselves at a theoretical loss when dealing with humour. The impulse to legitimate Native literature (and, in Ryan’s case, Native art) and the lack of useful theory on humour, combined with humour’s appeal, lead many, like Lincoln and Ryan, to respond to Native humour in a mode more celebratory and documentary than critical. In fact, Lincoln and Ryan explicitly claim that they are avoiding making an argument. Their descriptions of their projects are strikingly similar:

My approach is associative, interdisciplinary, and phenomenological It is less about criticism than about culture, more in search of imaginative spark than speculative certainty. (Lincoln 8)

At once open-ended, unfolding, evolving, incomplete, the discourse is imagined in numerous verbal and visual narratives and a multiplicity of authoritative voices. Charged with a playful spirit and . . . a ‘messy vitality’, it finds expression in

multi-layered communication and simultaneous conversation, in surprise, connection, and 'narrative chance.' (Ryan, *Trickster* xiii)

Despite this appearance of open-endedness, however, both writers do make certain assumptions throughout their texts. In fact, while these assumptions are rarely explicitly stated, they pervade the study of Native humour, and indeed of Native literature in general. We can call these assumptions "Native Literature as Resistance" and "Native Literature as Reflection."

Reading "Native Literature as Resistance" means seeing it primarily as a subversion of colonialism and white society. In keeping with current critical fashion, Native writing is repeatedly described as "postcolonial," "postmodern," "counterhegemonic," and "transgressive." While it is of course true that much Native literature is preoccupied with "the whiteman," to view the literature only in terms of white society is clearly limiting. Thomas King, whose writing has often been read in terms of such theories of resistance, recognizes such readings as reductive: "you make it sound as though the Native people spend their entire existence fighting against non-Native whatever. That just isn't true" (Interview with Lutz 111).

Native humour has been repeatedly read in terms of this assumption of resistance and described as a challenge to white society. This practice allows critics to focus on the dominant culture and avoid the unfamiliar. *The Trickster Shift*, for instance, is structured around the elements of white society to which the artists respond. After an introductory chapter on the trickster, the chapters centre on stereotypes of "the Indian," powerful artistic institutions and systems of representation, Canadian political structures and policies, and global issues. The artists are described as turning each of these structures

on their head with their “subversive play whose ultimate goal is a radical shift in viewer perspective” (1995, 11).

Such readings also arise out of and feed into the popular idealism surrounding Native peoples. Rey Chow argues that contemporary criticism tends to idealize all non-Western peoples, defining “idealism” as the tendency “to relate to alterity through mythification; to imagine the ‘other,’ no matter how prosaic or impoverished, as essentially different, good, kind, enveloped in a halo, and beyond the contradictions that constitute our own historical place” (xx). Indeed, much criticism of Native literature positions Native people as the political “good guys” who stand for all that is non-centred and non-oppressive. For instance, neither Ryan nor Lincoln deals in any detail with the conservative, divisive, exclusionary, or contradictory elements in Native humour. One reviewer describes *Indi 'n Humor* by saying:

[T]his book is only an assertion. *Indi 'n Humor* is doomed by its relentless flitting approach merely to celebrate its subject rather than explore it From start to finish, there is no doubt that the subject itself is a fascinating one. But the author only convinces us of his sincere enthusiasm. (Van Keuren 835)

This tendency to idealize has created a standard response to Native humour and literature. In fact, Allison Donnell worries that it has stalled much “postcolonial” criticism: “Does not the imperative to celebrate, alongside the ‘political untouchability’ and the terrorism of cultural sensitivity, generate a spectre of the ‘model,’ acceptable postcolonial response, which both chokes critics and arrests the possibilities for making meaning?” (101).

This choked idealism is a something that I try to challenge throughout this thesis. I look beyond the familiar characterizations of Native humour as a site of subversive satire (Chapter One), postmodern hybridity (Chapter Two), communal unity (Chapter Three), witnessing to trauma (Chapter Four), and open communication (Chapter Five). I

examine the ways in which the humour can be hurtful as well as healing, conservative as well as subversive, and divisive as well as unifying. While the first chapter examines satires of the whiteman, the rest look beyond that focus on white society to consider other issues, such as the use of Native languages and the building of Native communities.

The second major assumption in the criticism of Native literature is that the literature directly mirrors Native life and culture. This reading of “Native Literature as Reflection” tends to neglect the active ways in which Native writers reflect on and interpret Native life as well as those aspects of the texts that are not seen as “Native.” Critical emphasis has been repeatedly placed on the aspects that are recognizably “Native” – certain themes, traditions, and social issues – leading some Native writers to complain that their work is interpreted either as a transparent chronicle of “Native oppression, dispossession, and suffering” or as “Native folklore” (Campbell qtd. in Jannetta 63; LaRoque xviii). This assumption is, as Roy Miki points out, widely applied to so-called “ethnic writers” who are “not approached in terms of aesthetic form . . . but for the transparency of the referential, confirming the assumption that the signs “Joy Kogawa” and “Sky Lee” are products of “groupness” (173). Meanwhile, the works of “non-ethnic” writers are not often seen as sources on whiteness.

This assumption that Native literature is a reflection of Native reality becomes especially problematic when applied to humour, since humour plays with, exaggerates, and negotiates reality. The response to Drew Hayden Taylor’s play *AlterNatives* is telling example of the problems with such a reading (personal communication). A number of white audience members, including a newspaper reviewer for the *Georgia Strait* and a reader from the National Arts Council had perceived the play as “white-

bashing.” One performance even had to be cancelled due to a bomb-threat from an offended viewer. These viewers did not like the play because – taking every word that came out of the Native characters mouths as its “message” – they considered the work to be unjust and one-sided. But why, Taylor later wondered, can’t these Native characters say wrong-headed things – after all, they’re just characters. As flawed as the white characters and satirized as harshly, the Native characters are presented as insensitive and disruptive: they do not have a direct line to “the truth.” The unhappy viewers, stuck in the idea of Native literature as a mirror, were unable to see the exaggeration, parody and humour surrounding the Native characters. Similar controversies have erupted around Tomson Highway’s *Dry Lips Oughta Move to Kapuskasing* and Monica Marx and the Red Roots Collective’s *Those Damn Squaws*. In all these cases, the debate emerged from the reading of humor and irony as the literal meaning of the works.

In scholarly readings of Native literature, this kind of literalism is less common. Instead, critics tend to see Native humour as reflecting Native traditions such as “tricksters” and “sacred clowns.” In fact, studies of “the trickster” have held a virtual monopoly on thinking about Native humour. In Chapter Six, I examine this critical trend, arguing that it tends to rely on a misguided notion of seamless tradition, neglecting specific historical and cultural reasons why Native writers draw on trickster figures. Both Lincoln’s and Ryan’s studies assume such a smooth path from the traditional trickster and sacred clown to contemporary Native writers’ use of humour. Ryan relies on an over-generalized trickster theory for an explanation of the humour in numerous individual works (see Chapter Six). Similarly, Lincoln makes repeated but unexamined assertions of the importance of Coyote figures and Heyokas (Lakota clowns) to the

humour in Native literature. One reviewer of Lincoln's book wonders whether all Native humour can be placed within such a coherent tradition: "Can one be a humorist without being an Indian humorist? It is well known that many writers and artists began exploring their own Indian identities only after being trained in their respective fields. Indian humour was in fact a late discovery – a last laugh, so to speak" (Powers 709).

This question of whether all humour by Native writers is necessarily "Native humour" is a difficult one that goes to the very heart of the academic field of Native literature. The term "Native literature" implies a constant link between the "Native" and the "literature," a link that is not, of course, really constant or simple. "Nativeness" is difficult to define and easy to deconstruct. However despite its limitations, the "Native Literature" category can be both useful and descriptive. It is useful in that it provides solidarity and visibility to Native writers, and can be seen as part of a larger movement that seeks to strengthen Native nations, sometimes through a pan-Native commonality of purpose. The term also has descriptive potential. While, as I suggested earlier, the term may obscure many aspects of the literature, it reveals others. It is not appropriate to reject the category before scholars have even begun to understand the distinctive qualities of this body of literature. Most criticism of Native literature has been so focussed on issues of resistance and subversion that little attention has been paid to what might be unique in Native literature.

In working on this thesis, I have struggled with the unwieldy categories of "Native humour," "Native literature," and "Native" itself. But, while these terms can easily lead to generalizations, I have found them to be essential in analyzing the humour.

For one, Native writers treat the category of “Native” as both very important and very problematic. As I show throughout, while the category is invoked in much of their humour, the writers also persistently construct, challenge, and negotiate what it means to be Native. But at the same time that “Nativity” is being examined, it is also a strong force behind the humour. The First Nations share certain cross-tribal characteristics – including particular attitudes towards social relations, change, trauma, and language use – characteristics that create and shape much of their humour. It is important not to get so caught up in the analysis of “Native identity” as a critical problem that we lose sight of the complex content of the term. As Agnes Grant points out in a discussion of Tomson Highway, we cannot understand Native humour without trying to understand what it means to be Native:

Analyzing the humour in Native drama becomes very difficult in Western literary terms yet the humour is one reason why Highway’s plays are so uniquely Manitoban Indian. He has captured the very essence of the culture. Non-Natives need to see these plays in the company of Native audiences in order to understand and appreciate the humour Western culture has long paid lip service to the ‘different’ Native worldview but little attempt has been made to understand what this might be. (“Native Drama” 113-114)

Understanding this Native worldview means looking outside of the realm of Western theory. Most criticism of Native literature treats the literature as a “object of knowledge” to be examined using Western ways of thinking. Even while asserting the importance of Native traditions, most critics do not look beyond easily-pinpointed figures, objects, narratives, or ceremonies, into Native ways of seeing and thinking about the world. For instance, both Lincoln and Ryan, while asserting the “Nativity” of Native humour, draw heavily on Western theory in order to analyze it. Lincoln uses an eclectic collection of Western theorists and especially favours Freud’s theories of wit,

Arthur Koestler's psychological theories of humorous bi-association, and Frye's theory of comic structure. Ryan similarly cites numerous Western theories in his dissertation, especially Linda Hutcheon's theories of irony, parody and postmodernism.⁷ These are all useful theories, but arguably they can only see in Native humour what they would in any humour. If, in contrast, we look to Native theories and concerns, we will see aspects of the humour that have been little acknowledged within the Western academy. But, while looking to Native knowledge, we must be careful of over-generalizing. In the last chapter, I confront this pull between affirming and questioning the "Nativity" of the humour but remain uncomfortable with either position. There is a fine line between recognizing Native people's distinctiveness and ghettoizing or labeling them and I attempt, with difficulty, to walk this line.

Overall, the problem with most critical works on Native humour is that they view the humour as moving in one direction: from past tradition towards present subversion. Thus, while Lincoln and Ryan view themselves as eschewing a limiting orderliness in their studies, their assumptions in fact put Native humour into an appealing and orderly scheme that cannot accommodate all its faces. Folklorist Barre Toelken, in his essay "Life and Death in Navajo Coyote Tales," explains that this ordering approach was his initial reaction to Native humour as well. Toelken spent many years studying Navajo Coyote stories and, over several publications, argued that the humorous stories were positive forces that helped establish the Navajo social order and had healing powers. He knew that the Navajo had a strong sense of moral order and he believed that the stories reflected that. Finally, his Navajo friends informed him that he was only partly right. Coyote stories, they told him, also have a much darker side, one that has been little

acknowledged outside of Navajo communities: “Since words and narratives have the power to heal, they may also be used to injure and kill” (396). Witches can use the power of Coyote tales to harm and to create disorder that is “contrary to community values” (400). They use the stories “separately, divisively, analytically, in order to attack certain parts of the victim’s body, or family, or livestock. One becomes a witch in order to gain personal fortune and power by causing weakness and death in others” (396).⁸ Toelken’s experience is educational. His original reading of the Coyote tales was both idealized and ethnographic (assuming an equivalence between story and culture). By recognizing that the tales could create both order and disorder, he achieved a more realistic and balanced understanding of the stories and their tellers.

A thread that runs throughout this study is that I view humour in Native literature as moving towards both order and disorder: it at once crosses and guards borders, deconstructs and enforces categories, and incites and represses resistance. Rarely “innocent,” it revolves around social tensions and negotiates social contradictions. There is seldom one object of a joke; our responses are multiple and divided and we enjoy the feeling that a troubling incongruity has been momentarily juggled. So what does all this have to do with survival? Through its conjunction of order and disorder, humour offers a way of dealing with change, chaos and complexity, while maintaining a sense of continuity and identity. Issues of sovereignty, authenticity, community, and hybridity, issues that critics of Native literature keep trying to pin down, are held in skilful balance in Native humour. Thus, humour offers a way of remaining Native, while refusing to be rigidly defined.

This view of humour as the reconciliation of order and disorder is based not on any preconceived theory of humour but on close readings of specific humorous episodes. I do, however, identify parallels between my readings and various sociological, linguistic, psychological, folkloric, anthropological and literary theories of humour. In his study of comic theory, *The Comic Labyrinth*, Richard Keller Simon points out that comic theory is found on the margins of many disciplines and argues that each explanation holds a part of the truth. We should see the contradictions between these theories, he says, not as a problem but as a commentary on the contradictory nature of the subject itself. Furthermore, throughout this study, my identification of a moment as “funny” is based, not on any formal criteria, but on my own response. This criterion is unsystematic, but it is based on my belief that humour is a social event, rather than a fixed characteristic of a text. Undoubtedly, some readers will not laugh at the same things I do – which might lead them to examine their assumptions, much as my readings have led me to examine mine.

This thesis can be roughly divided into two parts. The first three investigate how Native writers use humour to explore notions of Native identity and community. I begin with an examination of satirical depictions of the “whiteman,” arguably the most widely recognized form of Native humour. I attempt to complicate readings that view such humour as purely subversive, by showing that it also acknowledges the ways in which Native people are involved and implicated in white society.

The second chapter focuses more closely on the blurry boundaries between Native and white societies, examining what I call “hybrid humour.” In this chapter, I challenge readings that celebrate hybridity as postmodern and playful as well as those that see it as

a problem to Native unity. By depicting racially or culturally mixed Native characters who try to imitate Native or white identities, Native writers suggest the extent to which identities are “put on,” undermining notions of authenticity. However, in ridiculing these imitations and depicting them as unsuccessful, the writers present them as transgressions of the norm and thus as inferior, affirming a stable and unified identity and community.

Chapter Three examines how Native writers depict humour being used within Native communities. Humour is often used as a way of affirming Native community; depicting Native people laughing together shows their social harmony and their shared norms, attitudes and assumptions. However, while “community” (like survival) has largely become an unquestioned ideal in criticism of Native literature, I show that writers also use humour to challenge this warm vision, depicting how humour can be a way of tolerating community problems, of controlling others, or of expressing morally complex situations.

The last three chapters can also be seen as a set. In these chapters I examine Native humour through forms of Native knowledge. In Chapter Four, I discuss three Native writers’ use of humour to approach the subject of sexual abuse. In exploring this subject, I initially turned to trauma theory. However, because I found Western trauma theory not very useful in explaining this humour, I develop an alternative theory on how trauma and humour can work together, one that is based in distinctively Native ethics and ways of thinking. In many Native cultures, it is considered unethical to speak directly or accusingly about bad experiences. But because humour gives people the ability to say things and not say them at the same time, it allows writers to tell stories of trauma

without transgressing traditional Native ethics. Once again, then, humour allows a double positioning, a complex negotiation of a touchy and divisive subject.

In Chapter Five, I turn to the topic of Native languages. Indigenous languages are deeply valued within Native communities, but very little critical attention has been paid to questions of language use in Native Canadian literature. In working on this topic, I was aware of the repeated claim by Native people that first languages are more inherently funny than English. For instance, Cree actor and writer Billy Merasty has said that Cree is “funnier, it’s got a different sense of humour ” (40). In fact, in a conversation about my dissertation, Tomson Highway flatly informed me that, if I want to understand Native humour, I have to learn a Native language (personal communication). While I have been studying Ojibway (the most common first language in Toronto, where I currently live). I am still very much a beginner and therefore unable to address the validity of this claim. As I suggest in the conclusion to this study, I believe that critics of Native literature need to begin to seriously study Native languages, in part in order to be able to better address such issues of style and sensibility in Native literature.

Recognizing that I am unable to discuss the humour of Native languages, I instead focus my chapter on the anxiety and confusion that occur when two or more languages meet. I examine Native writers’ use of humorous “code-switching,” switching back between two or more languages or styles. They use this technique in order to manipulate the interaction of sense and nonsense (or order and disorder) in their writing, thereby refuting the transparency of language and reminding us of its very political powers.

Finally, in Chapter Six, I take a wider view of my argument in the previous five chapters. Having established a pattern of order and disorder in the humour, I ask whether

this pattern is distinctly Native. Does the humour reflect a comic way of thinking and seeing the world, a Native “comic spirit”? In a highly speculative discussion, I explore the potential and the pitfalls of theorizing such a comic worldview.

In each of these chapters, I deal with several contemporary Native writers. I have included writers of various ages, various tribal and regional affiliations, various genres, and various writing styles. While I am not able to deal with any writer at length, I hope that, in proposing some pan-tribal patterns, I might open the way for discussions of how individual writers do or do not fit within these patterns. My decision to deal exclusively with Native writers living in Canada is an attempt to put limits, in a somewhat arbitrary way, on a very large body of material. To many, the border between Canada and the United States is an artificial imposition on First Nations. Nevertheless, the distinction between Canadian and American Native writers is not entirely meaningless. My sense is that there are communities of Native writers and critics of Native literature in both countries that, while they may overlap, remain somewhat separate and distinctive. But that is a matter for another study.

It is conventional, in studies of Native literature, for a critic to state his or her identity – race, gender, class, etc. – usually at the end of the introduction. I feel somewhat uncomfortable with this convention. I remember, after I told one colleague about my dissertation, she demanded that I “locate my positionality” in relation to my work. I grumpily responded by asking why I had to do this when few expect it of people working on Shakespeare. Of course, I do recognize that this demand arises out of a history of scholars speaking authoritatively on Native people about whom they have little knowledge, out of a legitimate desire to bring more Native voices into Native Studies,

and out of a need to expose power relations in a field so fraught with them. On the other hand, in this call for positioning there lurks a desire to decide who can authentically speak. I knew that, had I identified myself as Native to my demanding colleague, then that, to her, would have made my choice of this topic and what I said about it acceptable. Underneath such an acceptance, there lie non-critical assumptions of cultural transparency and idealism, the very assumptions I have already addressed in this chapter. Like the writers about whom I write, I prefer not to be pinned down. What is my “positionality”? My grandmother is a storyteller who has an astounding memory and can recount our family’s history for the past eight generations. According to her, my ancestors are English, Inuit, Irish, Mik’maq, and Scottish. I am a Newfoundlander whose parents were both born before 1949, so I am also a first-generation Canadian. I am an enrolled member of the Labrador Métis Nation, a nation still not recognized by the federal government. I am a Ph.D. candidate, living in Toronto, and about to move to Saskatchewan. My grandfather is a trapper, but I could not light a fire in the woods if my life depended on it. My story is a complicated one, but I believe that every story is just as complicated, and that is the belief that I most strongly bring to this study.

¹ Roundtable discussion of Native literature organized by CACLALS at the Congress of Social Sciences and Humanities, Edmonton, May 2000.

² For instance, in his study of Holocaust survivors, Terence Des Pres argues that the reality of survival strips away everything but the imperative of “life itself” (192) and that he therefore can serve only as a gatherer of survivor testimony rather than an interpreter (vi).

³ These multiple meanings are perhaps most visible in writings about the Holocaust, where there has been extensive debate about the means and meaning of survival. For instance, *Arts Music and Education as Strategies for Survival: Theresienstadt 1941-1945*

explores artistic culture in a Nazi-created and controlled Jewish ghetto. Within this collection of essays and artwork, the notion of art's survival power is subjected to careful inquiry. Sybil Milton, for instance, examines two major misconceptions about the art of Theresienstadt: first, that the production of so much beautiful art means that suffering in the ghetto must have been minimal; and, second, that art was a form of vaguely defined "spiritual resistance" (20). In fact, as the collection emphasizes, most of the artists *did not* survive (Dutlinger 1). With that in mind, the collection investigates how exactly the production of art could be a tool of survival. Art could be, for instance, work compelled by the Nazis (Milton 24), a commodity to trade for rations (Milton 23), or, more abstractly, a form of therapy or interpretation (Dutlinger 1-4). While there are parallels that can be drawn between Jewish and Native North American experiences (in one fascinating similarity, both produced "ledger art" (Dutlinger 4-5)), what I want to draw attention to is this collection's historical specificity and its refusal to reduce "survival" to a critical platitude.

⁴ For a few of many examples of the "trickster" approach to humour in Canadian Native literature, see Linton, Judith Leggatt, Matchie and Larson, Morgan, Rabillard, and Carlton Smith.

⁵ For those interested in further exploring issues of reception, more systematic analyses of the reception of Canadian Native literature exist. Admirable examples are Jennifer Covert's University of British Columbia Master's thesis, *A Balancing Act: The Canonization of Tomson Highway*, and the chapter on the popular and critical reception of Highway from Stephanie McKenzie's University of Toronto doctoral thesis, *Canada's Day of Atonement*, both of which analyze dozens of reviews and articles. While neither deals extensively with Highway's humour, they do address many of the issues that I raise in this chapter – essentialism, idealization, ghettoization. In a similar vein, Margery Fee analyzes Canadian anthologies and the ways in which they represent and categorize Native literature in "Aboriginal Writing in Canada and the Anthology as Commodity."

⁶ An example of this emphasis can be seen in the introduction to Terry Goldie and Daniel David Moses' 1992 *An Anthology of Canadian Native Literature in English*. Terry Goldie claimed that his main concern was showing people that the literature exists, "to get the material out, get people to read it" (xiii). He further claimed that the editors were not concerned, at that point, with finding "the best" of Native writing. In fact, he said, no one was yet concerned with that, since there had been no canonization of Native literature: "No community, whether it's the Native writers themselves or Native communities or the literary community, or whatever, has made the decision about what should go in" (xiii).

⁷ Ryan removed all references to theory in the published version of his dissertation, which is packaged to appeal to a non-academic audience. However, the extensive references to theory in his dissertation clearly still inform his approach in the book.

⁸ Toelken was dealing with stories used in powerful rituals and, after being told that, by using “analytical” powers in reading the tales, he was risking the lives of himself and his family, he pulled away from any further work on the tales. Since I am not dealing with sacred literature, but with contemporary and willingly published works, I do not feel in such danger.

Chapter One

Tourists and Other Aliens: Satires of the Whiteman

“What did the Indians say when the flying saucer landed?”

“Oh no! Not this again.”

Laughing at “the whiteman” is a time-honoured Native tradition. This tradition of joking, satire, stereotype, and parody has two seemingly contradictory social functions. The humour uses and reinforces divisions between whites and Natives. But, at the same time, by challenging the dominant social order, it also disrupts and disorders the white/Native binary. As an example of this double function, consider the “flying saucer” joke above. This joke, which concisely expresses the chasm of difference between Natives and Non-Natives, has long been popular among Native North Americans. But the joke does more than describe the space between the cultures; it also interferes in that space. First of all, if you are not Native, this joke is literally “alienating.” If you are Native, it reinforces the sense that white people are “from another planet.” Either way, the joke increases the reader’s sense of cultural difference and distance. But, simultaneously, this joke may help the reader to better understand the shock of cultural contact. By giving us a new angle, it helps us to imagine the impact of having a whole new people arrive in your world, or of arriving in that “New World.” As such, even as it builds cultural boundaries, the joke also has the potential to subvert those boundaries and create new understandings. While these observations are not new to the study of humour, most readings of such humour in Native literature have emphasized the subversive nature of such humour, underestimating its more ambiguous and conservative effects.

The apparently contradictory effects of these satires of the whiteman reflect a broader dilemma in Native-white relations. The dilemma is, in short: How should Native

people deal with white people? By building up cultural boundaries or by breaking them down? Native communities are engaged in ongoing discussions about how to best live in a white-dominated society. Some people claim that it is better to understand white society, play by its rules and change it from within. Traditionalists, on the other hand, claim that to engage in white society is dangerous and puts Native culture at risk. Of course, neither of these positions is absolute, since all Native people both maintain and cross various cultural borders. One way in which Canadian Native writers negotiate this dilemma is through humorous portrayals of “the whiteman.” These portrayals allow them to both engage with white society and show their distance from it. We can see this double function at work in Ahkainah cartoonist Everett Soop’s defence of his decision to run for a position on a band council (an arm of the federal government):

So, I thought, ‘why not go into council?’ That would be equal to a Ph.D. in cartooning. Besides that, I had been calling them jackasses for 15 years. I wanted to know what it’s like to be a jackass. (qtd. in Melting Tallow 8)

Even as Soop proposes to become a councillor, he separates himself from that position, claiming that it will merely offer him an especially humorous and critical perspective. But, he adds, perhaps that perspective will also help him understand how the council works. His ambiguous self-positioning is like that of many Native writers who look to white society for material. However, many traditionalists would argue that, by entering into the world of the oppressors, Soop indeed becomes a “jackass,” trapped in the very structures he wants to critique. For this very reason, one Apache elder explains, children used to be warned against imitating white people, even to parody them: “Don’t be like white people. Don’t even joke. It’s no good. Leave it alone!” (Basso 30). This tension between engaging with and resisting white society lies at the heart of satires of the

whiteman.

This chapter takes what Keith Basso, in his influential study, *Portraits of the Whiteman: Linguistic Play and Cultural Symbols among the Western Apache*, calls the “social perspective” on Native portrayals of whites. This perspective, Basso explains, tries to “identify the pragmatic functions served by imitations [of the whiteman] in the management of interpersonal relations” (16). In other words, I am interested, not only in what these comic expressions *mean*, but what they actually *do* in the social sphere. Because of this social focus, my analysis is informed by a sociological approach to humour, which traces the patterns of identification and membership dynamics in a comic exchange. I also draw on a number of anthropological studies of humour in Native communities, which focus on the more culturally specific “functions” of humour. As well, my perspective is influenced by James English’s study of humour in contemporary British literature, *Comic Transactions*, which emphasizes that any comic moment moves in multiple social directions, and is inextricable from socio-historical, cultural and interpersonal considerations (6). English writes that “while humor seeks to shore up identifications and solidarities, it does so by working on those very contradictions of ‘society’ that ensure that all such identifications and solidarities will be provisional, negotiable, unsettled” (10). As I have mentioned, satires of the whiteman negotiate just such a contradiction, both ordering and disordering the categories of “Native” and “white.” These functions could be roughly labelled “conservative” and “subversive” respectively. The problem with these labels is that, depending on your politics, they take on a moral dimension. In current literary criticism, for instance, subversive equals good. In reality, however, certain categories need to be built up and others broken down. As

English warns, comedy is not illuminated by being deemed either liberating or dominating (17). Rather, the “politics” of satires of the whiteman involve negotiation and repositioning within necessary but unstable categories.

Before moving to a more detailed consideration of the ordering and disordering functions of this humour, I want to provide one more introductory example of how Native writers can use humour to both create racial categories and challenge them. *The Book of Jessica* is a powerful example because it is itself a record of a social interaction. A collaboration between Maria Campbell, a Métis writer, and Linda Griffiths, a white actor, the book describes (and, in a sense, actually contains) the painful and conflicted process of writing and producing the play, *Jessica*. The book juxtaposes the two women’s voices, which respond to each other longingly, angrily, and guiltily. Campbell agreed to have the play, based on her life-story, co-created, directed and acted by white theatre professionals (primarily Paul Thompson and Linda Griffiths). This collaboration blurred personal boundaries, as well as those between Métis and white, with Griffiths and Campbell imaginatively becoming one on the stage. However, throughout the creation process, Campbell felt that Griffiths was selfishly “stealing” her words and experiences. As a defence, she began to build boundaries between herself and Griffiths. Within the book, she does this is by humorously defining herself against the actor. Especially near the beginning, Campbell comments on Griffiths’ narrative with bitter wit. Her commentary repeatedly puts Griffiths into roles that are typically white. For instance, she compares the dramatic and self-pitying Griffith to a bleeding Virgin Mary statue from *The National Enquirer* (15). She also compares her to “a white professor introducing me at a convention of anthropologists” (18) and to “those people who write culty little [New

Age] books” (30). Campbell further undercuts Griffiths’ depiction by associating it with white stereotypes of “Indians.” At Griffiths’ “whooley-whooley” talk about Native Spirits, she snipes, “Spiritual power my ass. . . Wait till they find out I don’t have any power” (17). And when Griffiths refers to her as “quiet and dignified,” Campbell responds, “it sounds so romantic, a teacher should be dignified and quiet. I wonder how many people know it’s just better sometimes to be quiet for fear you’ll appear the fool” (19). Through this satirical humour, Campbell personally and culturally insulates herself, establishing herself as unlike Griffiths.

But it is also clear in *The Book of Jessica* that both women found something funny about the way that the boundaries between them blurred. The narrative refers repeatedly to the women laughing together (14, 23, 44, 46, 112). In one scene, for instance, Griffiths disguises herself as a Native woman in order to do research at a Friendship Centre. Griffiths recalls that, as Campbell was touching up her brown makeup, “We were laughing like schoolgirls, as she blended in the streaks on my face” (46). Clearly, this disordering and crossing of their usual roles amuses them. Campbell calls Griffiths her “Siamese twin” (13) and her daughter (22). In fact, Campbell’s joking insults begin to feel like part of an ongoing family fight. Campbell writes the last words of the account, ending with a laughing assertion of both sameness and difference:

I don’t know if I’ll ever stop being angry with you, but I want to adopt you [laughing], so that I can get after you the same way I get after my own daughters . . . What am I saying? I must be out of my mind. (112)

These words capture the tension that runs throughout the book and throughout Campbell’s humour. Are her jokes a way of “getting after” Griffiths because she cares about her? Is this the kind of joking insult that happens among people who are close? But isn’t this

final joke also a kind of distancing, a reminder that these women are not kin, cannot ever connect without conflict? I believe that the answer to all of these questions is yes. *The Book of Jessica* shows the intimate and uncomfortable relationship between white and Native peoples. For Native people, humour offers a way of coping with that relationship, of teaching about it, and of creating both closeness and a protective distance.

Despite these multiple functions, however, studies of Native literature have tended to focus exclusively on the disordering or “subversive” effects of such humour. For instance, Blanca Chester and Valerie Dudoward, in an article on *The Book of Jessica*, wrote that Native humour “dances around its object, rarely tackling it directly and rarely hurting or wounding its target. Its laughter is therapeutic . . . it crosses boundaries that seem insurmountable” (“Journeys” 171). In fact, the book emphasizes that humour can be wounding, that it is tied up with anger and pain. Griffiths feels excluded by Native humour (41) and Campbell explains how she is “appalled” by some of Griffiths’ jokes (31).

Clearly the boundary crossing emphasized by Chester and Dudoward is only one side of the story. However, I will begin by considering this side, examining how satirical representations of the whiteman can challenge and undermine established norms and categories. (In the second part of the chapter, I will examine the apparently contradictory impulse to order and categorize in such humour.) These established categories, which are central to the humour, are, specifically, “Native” and “white.” In satirizing white society, Native writers “infiltrate” the category of “white,” bringing with them comic ironic and critical perspectives. Through imitation or representation, they move into the “opposite” category, thus “inverting” the norms. Inversion, a common comic strategy, “involves a

sudden comic switching of expected *roles*” (Babcock 17). This switching, in itself, undermines the rigidity and order of racial categories. As Hieb writes in a study of Pueblo ritual clowns, comic reversals “have the effect of negating the meaningfulness of one pattern or structure by offering another and contradictory pattern or structure” (165). This inversion occurs in ways that move beyond content. Joking is an act of power and Native people laughing at white society thus transgresses the usual power dynamics. Furthermore, in a reversal of the standard direction of the appraising gaze, Native people turn the eye of judgment back on the whiteman.

This focus on the disordering and liberating effects of humour has been popular in literary studies, backed by a number of well-known humour theorists. One of the most popular proponents of this liberating theory of comedy has been M.M. Bakhtin. In his influential study of Rabelais, Bakhtin examines the medieval practice of carnival, which involved ritual imitation and mockery of figures of authority. He concludes that such humour is essentially liberating: “Laughter does not build stakes” (95). This theory has influenced criticism of Native literature; more than one critic has referred to Tomson Highway’s work as “carnavalesque” and “Rabelaisian.” And several critics have applied a similar “subversive” theory of comedy to Native satires of the whiteman. For instance, Margaret Atwood, in an early article on King, calls his humour a “subversive weapon” (244). Dee Horne, also using King as her central example, argues that, in representing “settler discourse” in order to critique it, Native writers are engaging in “creative hybridity” (“To Know” 255-256). And Robert Nunn, similarly drawing on post-colonial theories of hybridity, writes that Drew Hayden Taylor comically mimics forms of settler culture in order to interrogate and resist them.

Native humour has the power to challenge norms and assumptions by presenting an alternative point of view on familiar things. Thus, Native satires of white society can teach us about both Native and Non-Native people. As we saw in the “flying saucer” joke, “whiteman humour” often emphasizes how Native and non-Native points of view can radically differ. Ojibway writer Basil Johnston explains that, in his comic sketches about Native-white relations, the humorous events are caused by “misunderstanding, or imperfect communication of information; still others are the consequence of the application and clash of different cultural approaches” (*Moose* 187). Whatever our cultural background, beginning to understand these different approaches can open new pathways of understanding. For one, these humorous portraits of white society reveal a great deal about how Native people define themselves and their moral values. In short, they can tell us what many Native people do not approve of, what they consider that they *are not*. Alfonzo Ortiz, in a study of the Pueblo, further explains what these humorous depictions can teach us:

Of burlesquing and caricature generally, it can be said that they best permit insights into Pueblo modes of conception since they reveal what the Pueblos find serious or absurd, baffling or wrong, fearful or comical about life and about people. When these center around the lives of other people they can be particularly instructive. (147)

Ortiz was dismayed at the lack of attention that these Native images of others had received (147). And Roy Harvey Pearce, who in 1953 published a study of how non-Native Americans imagine “the Indian,” recently commented that today there is a greater need for the opposite, “a study of the Indian image of the white as it has become a means of his developing an image of himself” (255). This chapter is such a study.

Satires of the whites can also, of course, send a strong message about and to the

settler-invaders. In Ojibway playwright Chuck Robertson's *Born Again Savage*, one Native character encourages another to head up a department of "Caucasian Studies" at the university. Robertson reminds us that Native people are experts on their invaders, having studied them for five hundred years. For example, Minnie Aodla Freeman's memoir, *Life Among the Qallunaat*, which recounts her move from her Inuit community to Ottawa, is an extended meditation (even an ethnography) on the peculiarity of white Canadian society. But while scholars have written extensively on the ways that the dominant culture views Native people¹, far less attention has been paid to what Native people think of those who invaded and settled their land.

Inverting our usual categories and offering alternative perspectives, Native images of whites have the potential to change our assumptions. Because a structure becomes much more visible to us once it is violated, even the simplest reversal can create a comic revelation. For example, included in the exhibition *New Voices/New Visions* were some striking photographs by Tom King. They were not striking in composition or form; in fact, they were standard vacation snapshots. Entitled "Indians on Vacation," they simply showed King's children standing in front of various famous American monuments. But by simply reversing the usual tourism situation where whites look at Native culture, King's photos call immediate attention to the white perspective and tourist gaze of most of the photos in the accompanying exhibit of historical portraits of Native Americans. Many of those other photos were dramatic and romanticized images of Native people, making King's photographs remarkable in their ordinariness. "Yes," King seems to be suggesting, "tourists look at us, but we look at tourists too." His act is comparable to that of some Pueblo ritual clowns, who take a tourist's camera and turn it back at them (Sweet

71).

King uses a similar reversal technique in “A Coyote Columbus Story.” The story subverts the standard version of America’s “discovery” by focussing on Coyote’s perspective. By making Coyote the centre, King counters the primacy given to the European point of view in narratives of “discovery.” In fact, he makes Columbus one of Coyote’s creations, thought up by her in a moment of boredom. Columbus arrives demanding the treasures of the Orient, being rude and generally “acting like he has no relations.” When he can’t find what he is looking for, he decides to take some of Coyote’s Indian friends back to sell. To Coyote this seems ridiculous; she “still thinks that Columbus is playing a trick. She thinks it is a joke” (125). Instead of Columbus judging the Indians, he is the one who is judged – as destructive, selfish and foolish man rather than heroic. At the story’s end, King reveals the absurdity of the idea of America’s “discovery.” Coyote asks, “But if Christopher Columbus didn’t find America and he didn’t find Indians, who found those things?” And the narrator responds, “Those things were never lost” (126). King deftly exposes the ethnocentrism in the notion of the “discovery” of America. In this case, Columbus is the one who is discovered, discovered to be far less than a hero.

Native writers also use humour to undercut the authority that the federal government has claimed over Native people. As Richard Wagamese comments, “Reason no one minds the welfare so much, or the government’s empty promises, is on accounta they always find some funny way of looking at it” (87). For example, Ojibway comedian Gerry Barrett imagines himself in the role of Prime Minister, exerting control over those who have tried to control Native lives. He envisions himself answering the phone in his

office:

Hello, Prime Minister Gerry Oh, hi Jean Chretien. . . . Nope, you've got to stay on that reserve Because I say so Any advice? Don't drink the water Hello, Prime Minister Gerry. . . . Yeah, I know there are buffaloes charging down Yonge Street. I put them there No, you can't shoot them Because I say so.

Similarly, Basil Johnson uses comic reversal in "A Sign of the Times," a description of a government conference held on Native housing. The conference is held on the Moose Meat Reserve and various non-native experts are brought in to "consult" with the community. However, during the conference, a local woman, Big Flossie, begins to ask these "experts" questions. She discovers that the expert on family planning and nutrition has no children, whereas she has raised nine. The expert on Native languages does not actually speak any first language. And one expert intends to study the scatology of the area (i.e. animal droppings), prompting laughter and exclamations of disbelief and disgust from the Native audience. Big Flossie booms, "Sounds like a lot of sh-- to me!" (*Moose* 177). The experts are depicted as foolish and ignorant of Native people's lives, revealing the Native people as the true authorities.

The kind of humour employed by King and Johnston is part of a longtime Native tradition. But, as Alfonzo Ortiz comments, this humorous tradition was, for a long time, "almost completely unrecognized by ethnographers" (147). Researchers have often missed or chosen to ignore the long tradition that Native people have of lampooning the whiteman. This is probably because, as Madronna Holden has suggested, this kind of humour did not fit into the categorical mindset of ethnographers, who were preoccupied by the idea of "authentic" or "pure" cultures. To support her theory about the neglect of this tradition, Holden examined the notebooks of nineteenth and early twentieth century

fieldworkers who studied (and were studied by) the Salish. She discovered an elaborate tradition of oral jokes, songs and tales which associate traditional Salish figures with “the whiteman.” However, virtually none of these works had been published.

Franz Boas seems to have turned a similarly blind eye to this humorous tradition. Despite having transcribed several humorous skits in his play-by-play account of an 1897 Kwakwaka’wakw potlatch, Boas chose to reinforce the stereotype of the “stonefaced Indian.” During the potlatch, Boas recorded, some of the participants ritualistically imitated Europeans, acting foolishly and allowing themselves to be mocked. But, even having viewed several such skits, Boas still concluded that the Kwakwaka’wakw were characterized by “a rivalrousness of deadly serious and violent intensity” (qtd. in Codere 347) and that the “leading motive of their lives is the limitless pursuit of gaining social prestige” (qtd. in Codere 335). While participating in these skits may well have brought prestige, Boas’ description must surely be at least qualified by the willingness of the performers to put themselves in positions where they are laughed at. Considering that such an influential scholar was unwilling to examine these satires of “the whiteman” in Native societies, it is not surprising that this focus on the “authentic” and the “deadly serious” have pervaded anthropology.²

The tendency for most ethnographers and other academics to view “other” cultures as primarily serious and even tragic has continued. However, since 1972, when Ortiz wrote about the lack of attention paid to Native humour, there has been a critical shift in both anthropology and literary studies. As a result, there has been an increasing interest, in academic circles, both in humour and in the results of cross-cultural contact. In anthropology, there has also been a turn toward self-critical reflexivity in ethnographic

writing (Marcus 9) and an increased interest in how white people are perceived by colonized groups. Postmodernism has also exerted an influence on anthropology and led anthropologists to question the “normalizing and exoticizing construction of culture and otherness constitutive of traditional anthropology” (Geuijen et al xv-xvi). James Clifford and others have proposed a new anthropological vision that focuses on the conjunction of cultures as a process of emergence rather than decline. Clifford’s vision has been called comic, because it moves towards a happy ending (Krupat 109). This conjunction of self-reflexivity, a comic or postmodern vision, and an interest in colonialism have led to several anthropological studies of the comic perception of “the whiteman” among Native American populations.³

Like anthropology, literary studies have also shown an increasing interest in (and approval of) cross-cultural interactions. Postcolonial approaches have placed a stronger emphasis on Native perspectives in these interactions. Meanwhile, postmodernist theory has put a greater emphasis on ideas of play, performance, ambiguity, and chaos. Literary scholars typically focus on the disordering or “subversive” effects of humour, holding any transgression of norms (not only through humour) to be intrinsically radical and progressive (White 52). All this has led to a slowly growing acknowledgment, within literary studies, of the ways in which Native people around the world have responded to the presence of the “whiteman,” parodically, satirically, and critically.

Thus far, this chapter has focussed on the “disordering” functions of Native satires of white society. I have argued that, by playfully inverting categories and roles, such satires resist rigid social structures. However, there has been a long-standing scholarly debate as to whether such comic inversions *actually* have any effect against

established ways of thinking. Arguing against theories of comedy as liberation, some scholars have claimed that such comedy is “just a joke” and is merely a way of letting off steam and experiencing a temporary and illusory sense of empowerment. In response, a number of anthropologists have argued that, on the contrary, such disordering is a way of experimenting with new social roles and does often occur in the context of actual rebellions (Babcock 23). For instance, Alfonzo Ortiz argues that this “letting off steam” theory, while having elements of truth, is reductive (152). Using examples of Pueblo ritual clowns, who playfully invert and rebel against the social order, Ortiz does agree that their permitted and controlled deviance helps maintain the Pueblos’ strong sense of social order. However, he also reminds us that the clowns’ ritual rebellions take place at times of the year when the Pueblo would traditionally have been fighting with and trading with foreign tribes (152). Thus, he says, comic rebellion is not only a shoring up of Pueblos’ social order, but also a reflection on and adjustment to the real disorder that arose through their relations with nature and with distant tribes (152). Ortiz’s subtle interpretation of comic inversion, which considers both its ordering and disordering effects, concurs with my argument about the multiple literary uses of inversion. Furthermore, his argument suggests that such inversions become especially important when faced with the social turmoil of meeting another culture. It is not surprising, then, that comic satires and inversions are a popular way for Native writers to represent white society.

While the disordering effects of humour should not be dismissed as simply cathartic, we must also consider its ordering effects. An alternative theory of comedy holds that, rather than being subversive, humour in fact shores up the status quo. The

ordering or “conservative” theory holds that, by making fun of white society, Native people are negotiating an uncomfortable and dangerous situation of cultural contact, conservatively reading and strengthening boundaries between the cultures (White 60). For many Native people, such boundary building is essential to preserving their culture and sense of self. As Gregory Dowd explains in his study of eighteenth-century Native resistance movements, Native conservatives did not then (and, I would add, still do not)

retreat wildly into a pristine tradition that never was, hopelessly attempting to escape a world changed by colonial powers. Rather, they identified with other native inhabitants of the continent, they self-consciously proclaimed that selected traditions and new (sometimes even imported) modes of behaviour held keys to earthly and spiritual salvation, and they rejected the increasing colonial influence in native government, culture, and economy in favour of native independence. (xxii)

By laughing at white society, Native person can establish both what they think the “whiteman” is, and also what they themselves are not (Basso 5). Along with self-construction, the joke also tells and warns others about white society, maintaining group cohesion and control. Humour can “put people in their place,” defining Native and non-native as opposites.

Of course, such a dichotomy does not represent reality for most Native people. They not only respond to the dominant culture, but they also often belong to it and use it. But this cultural crossover can be confusing and so one function of humour is to exert a conservative and reassuring order. John Trudell, a former leader of the American Indian Movement, was once asked by an interviewer if he minded the way white people lump all Indians together. “Well, not so bad,” Trudell answered, “we lump all whites together” (qtd. in Lincoln 90). And Ojibway stand-up comedian, Gerry Barrett jokes, “At three years old, I was abducted by aliens. Oops, I mean I was adopted by white people.” Such

comments make the white person the “alien,” turning the appraising and ordering eye onto him or her. As James English writes, such community-building humour serves to “reinforce and exaggerate the lines of difference which function as the community’s proper boundaries and mark off the alien spaces of its constitutive outside” (28). This humour does not necessarily imply that the Native humorists believe in such binary divisions; rather, it is a defensive strategy that emphasizes “that ethnicity is a category of power, not biology” (Filewod 365). For example, at one point in his show, Barrett asked the Native people in the room to identify themselves. When the majority of the audience raised their hands, Barrett shouted, “Okay, all the white folk up against the wall!” Barrett’s humour literally divided the room, showing the white members of the audience what it feels like to be visibly separated and enclosed. The joke was an act of power and a lesson about power relations.

Drew Hayden Taylor’s writing contains many provocative examples of how humour can set up boundaries between Native and non-native societies. Interestingly, Taylor is himself half-white, and so his devastating satires of white society may be part of his shoring up of his Ojibway identity. In his essay, “Pretty Like a White Boy,” he makes some comparisons between white and Native cultures:

There’s a lot to be said for both cultures. For example, on the one hand you have the Native respect for Elders On the White hand, there’s Italian food Also, Native people have this wonderful respect and love for the land And again, on the White hand, there’s breast implants. Darn clever them White people. That’s something Indians would never have invented We just take what the Creator decides to give us, but no, not the White man. Just imagine it, some serious looking White (and let’s face it people, we know it was a man who invented them) doctor sitting around in his laboratory muttering to himself, “Big tits, big tits, hmm, how do I make big tits?” If it was an Indian, it would be, “White women sure got big tits,” and leave it at that. (12-13)

What is your reaction to this passage? Is it funny? Do you consider it sexist or racist?

Do you feel included or excluded by the humour? Taylor's writing often generates a strong response (Spielmann 111). Indeed, such racial categorization can be disturbing and dangerous. While studying Native humour on a Flathead reservation, Theresa O'Neill worried about the inflexible cultural categories in the humorous stories that the Flatheads told about the whiteman. This inflexibility did not reflect the reality of the reservation where there is a great deal of racial and cultural mixing and less than 2% of the population are fullbloods (118). O'Neill writes, "The rigid categories of Indian and white that emerge in storytelling about encounters with whites belies the 'untidiness' of Indian and white as lived realities on the Flathead reservation" (119). So, she wonders, could such conservative storytelling fragment and constrain the Native listeners, leaving them feeling that their cultural mixing is wrong (119)? While her question is an interesting one, as with the "subversive theory," it would be reductive to focus exclusively on the distancing and categorizing effects of such satire. Natives and whites are involved in the humour in complex and unstable ways. When laughing at the whiteman, the humour not only establishes difference from whites, it also acknowledges closeness to them. It shows that the joker knows white society well and is attempting to deal with the relationship. Lee Maracle describes this close and contentious relationship between Native people and white people:

Invariably, when people of colour get together they discuss white people. They are the butt of our jokes, the fountain of our bitterness and pain, and the infinite well-spring of every dilemma life ever presented to us. The humour eases the pain, but always whites figure front and centre of our joint communication. ("Yin Chin" 291)

To return to the example of Drew Hayden Taylor, his work repeatedly depicts white characters (or Native characters raised in white society), often involved in close and

complex relationships with the Native characters. While he tends to focus on the humorous differences between these characters, the humour also reflects the emotional and unsettled negotiations in these relationships.

Taylor's recent play *The Baby Blues* uses humour to express the ambiguity of Native-white relations. The play is set at a large powwow, a site where Native intentions and non-native expectations often differ widely. Powwows are a modern, innovative, and constantly changing combination of dance, music, and costume where various tribal and non-tribal traditions are creatively combined, modified, and secularized (Blundell 50). And yet tourists often perceive them as ancient rituals, a surviving piece of the past (Blundell 51-2). In *The Baby Blues*, Summer, a young white woman visiting a powwow site, subscribes to these misconceptions and believes all the New Age stereotypes of Native people: homogeneously spiritual, traditional, and close to nature. She wears a wide array of Native jewellery and is breathily talkative, gullible, and eager to please:

I'm here at an actual, real-life powwow! Oh, how, beautiful, simply so beautiful. Just smell that wood smoke, the bacon frying - what a pity I don't eat meat. Oh, listen to the children of nature playing, being one with the lake. Oh, it is bliss, sheer bliss. The harmony I feel in this place. Here I am, surrounded by trees, flowers, grass, squirrels, and Native People. Tree to tree, First Nations. Aboriginal people in their natural environment. Indigena everywhere! (4)

Throughout the play, Summer's lack of awareness is made obvious by the amused reactions of the Native characters.

Taylor's depiction of Summer is part of a wider tradition. Native people have often depicted tourists as ignorant, greedy, pushy, acquisitive and inappropriate. They are satirized both ritualistically and spontaneously, both behind their back and in their faces. Pueblo clowns, for instance, sometimes mime the spectators who come to watch the rituals. During one dance, a Pueblo Man walked into the plaza wearing a wig, a mink

coat, and a clutch purse. He began to fuss over two baby-dolls strapped in cradle-boards, imitating the effusive and patronizing behaviour of some tourists (Sweet 70). Such performances can embarrass the white spectators present, letting them know what behaviour is appropriate. However, jokes about the whiteman are usually not done in the presence of whites (Basso 31) and, even when they are, may not be understood or considered funny.

In *The Baby Blues*, Summer never realizes that she is the butt of endless jokes and, as such, is an easy target for the Native men who see her primarily as a sex object. One dancer gets her naked with talk of a “Morning purification . . . [in] Mother’s Earth’s lake” (7) while another tries to seduce her with his storytelling, although the only story he can think of is “The Three Little Pigs” (32). At the play’s end, she is romantically involved with the much older owner of the powwow snack bar, who promises to teach her all about her aboriginal heritage (she is one sixty-fourth). Among the men, making fun of and taking advantage of Summer’s misconceptions and ignorance is clearly seen as funny. Summer is exploiting the men in order to fulfil her fantasy of finding wisdom, fulfilment and mystery through another culture. However, the men are also exploiting her and their actions are not presented nearly so critically. The Native women in the play are presented as strong and worthy of respect, while Summer is merely an object of the men’s humour and their sexual desires.

But does this kind of humorous objectification actually have any oppressive effects? It is easy to laugh at Summer’s over-the-top behaviour. But is it “just a joke”? Based on one real-life example, I would suggest that experiencing such humour may have demonstrable social effects. One evening, a colleague of mine went to see *The Baby*

Blues and much enjoyed laughing at Summer's misadventures. After the play, she noticed that a well-known Native author was also in the audience and she approached him where he stood with several of his friends to tell him how much she enjoyed his work. He thanked her and they stood chatting. My colleague noticed that he and she were both wearing black leather jackets and complimented the author on his good taste. "Thanks," he said, "It's made of caribou assholes."

Taken aback, my colleague just laughed.

"Sure," the author continued, "That's what we use up North. Caribou assholes."

My colleague, sensing that she was being made the butt of a joke and trying to be a good sport, continued to smile.

Suddenly, the writer turned to his friends, laughing, "See, she's just like that whitegirl in the play. She thinks we use caribou assholes."

Embarrassed and angry, my colleague walked away. She later told me about this incident, incensed that she had not had a better comeback. "I've lived in small towns," she said, "I knew he was joking. I'm nothing like that girl in the play."

While a single example does not prove anything, this incident raises a number of issues around stereotyping and humour. The writer's comment, "You're just like that whitegirl in the play," strongly suggests that the play itself affected how he behaved toward my colleague. The desire to reinforce the boundaries between himself and a young white woman may have been particularly strong after having seen the play, which asked the entire audience to laugh at, and thus to define themselves against, Summer. The play pleurably reinforced the boundaries between whites and Natives and I would guess that the writer was making it clear on which side of that boundary he belonged,

especially since my colleague was pointing out a similarity (in clothing). And this desire for self-definition would have become even more strong as part of an audience and a group of friends. One study has suggested that people are more likely to laugh at hostile humour when in a group and even more so when in a group of friends (Murphy and Pollio 110).

My colleague, who was just trying to be friendly, was unjustly made the object of a stereotype and of scornful laughter. But her response also tells us something about the ways that white audiences respond to this kind of Native humour. It is funny when directed at someone else but not when directed at them. My colleague refused to identify with Summer, despite the fact that she probably had more in common with her than with the Native characters of the play. Her response (“I’ve lived in small towns”) indicates her desire to be part of the joking group (the Native community), not stuck on the outside. The incident highlights the potentially divisive nature of such humour. By laughing at Summer, we enter into Taylor’s racial categories. This humour resists some forms of injustice, but creates others.

Of course, we must remember that Summer is not the only character playing a stereotype in *The Baby Blues*. And she is not the only character who may be oppressed by the Native characters’ satirical humour. The men in the play are also constrained by their ambiguous joking relationships with Summer. They desire Summer even as they ridicule her. Their jokes are a way of creating a relationship with her, while at the same time distancing themselves from her. And by acting out her stereotyped expectations, they are actually reinforcing those expectations. Such ambiguity characterizes many Native communities’ relationships with tourists. Because tourism provides a livelihood to

many Native people, some Natives feel the need to “play Indian,” perpetuating stereotypes. Michael Doxtater describes the ways that some Native people cater to tourist desires:

When Indian cultural revival began 30 years ago, it didn't matter if you were Salish or Seneca, everyone wore Plains Indian headdresses Totem poles, a West Coast tradition, guarded the entrance to every Indian Craft store on Mother Earth. We've relearned our culture just to keep ahead of the craft making competition. And business is booming. (“Indianness”)

“Playing Indian,” even ironically, can implicate you in the oppressive culture you intend to critique. At the play's end, one of the men is involved with Summer, even as he continues to ridicule her. What kind of a relationship is this? Does it benefit either party? Can it ever evolve into something more equitable? The humour's ambiguous results within the play raise wider issues about the dangers of ironically imitating white expectations.

In the remainder of this chapter, I will further examine the particular form of humour used by the men in *The Baby Blues*, that is, the parody of white stereotypes of “the Indian.” This kind of humour confronts the “Imaginary Indian” head on by representing stereotypical images in a way that holds them up for ridicule. Like the Three Old Indians in Thomas King's *Green Grass, Running Water* who enter a John Wayne Western in order to “fix” it from within, these artists enter into the world of stereotypes, using them in order to destroy them. In an interview, Drew Hayden Taylor explains why he uses such images in his work:

I would never write anything, say I'm going to do a – a drunken Indian character, for the sake of ridiculing my people or whatever. If I use a drunken Indian character or a reference to that, it would be for the purpose of dispelling that stereotype. So it's sort of like an oxymoron situation. I embrace the character to dispel it. In a perfect world, hopefully there would be no stereotypes. I use them in my work because they're there. You know, that's my only defence. (qtd. in

Brown)

Taylor's remark that he uses stereotypes "because they're there" is a valid argument. Artists must inevitably use the words and ideas that surround them. Those words and ideas allow them to express themselves, but also put constraints on that expression. Parody, in particular, may carry special constraints and consequent hazards. When Native writers ironically imitate white people and white attitudes, they may not be perceived as being ironic but simply as confirming powerful stereotypes.

For example, in one community, the whites radically misinterpreted the Natives' ironic speech, intensifying local racial divisions. Niels Braroe studied the interaction of the Cree from the "Short Grass" Reserve and the whites in a nearby village. He found that the Cree often performed in stereotyped roles in order to get what they wanted from the white settlers. One Cree informant said that, when charged with a crime, "[t]he way to get off easy is to act like a dumb Indian in front of the magistrate" (qtd in Braroe 169). In such interactions, the Cree viewed themselves as "artful and successful exploiters of whitemen" (168). Meanwhile, they often concealed their religion, culture, and even their real (Cree) names from white people, thus hiding a significant part of their identity (Braroe 130). Presenting a stereotyped mask allowed the Short Grass Cree to maintain their identity outside the judgmental view of the settlers. In *Halfbreed*, Maria Campbell describes how a Métis man used this ironic strategy in a local school registration meeting, saying that "he was going to act retarded because the whites thought we were anyway" (45). The man pretended to be stupid, not even knowing his son's name. Campbell writes, "Our people looked straight forward trying not to laugh and the whites were tittering" (45). However, we may wonder whether the two groups were laughing for the

same reasons. While the Native group recognized the man's actions as a criticism of the white people, he may have also served to confirm, in the minds of the white townspeople, negative ideas about "halfbreeds". Barroe's interviews with the whites living near the Shortgrass Reserve showed that they viewed the Native people as cultureless, foolish, and irresponsible. While the parody of stereotypes was useful to the Short Grass Cree, it was also harmful, allowing oppressive attitudes to continue and to grow.

We can also see the danger in using stereotypes in the controversy over the play, *Those Damn Squaws*, by Monica Marx and the Red Roots Community Theatre. The play contains eleven often-humorous sketches based on stories told to the theatre group by Aboriginal women. Some of the sketches played on and critiqued stereotypes: "Dial now. 1-800-I want to be an Indian. You too could be spiritually fulfilled, just as I was. . . . Can I just get your Visa number?" (qtd. in Brown). However, controversy erupted over the play's ironic title ("Play's Title"). Native rights activist Nelson Sanderson worried that there are those who do not have the knowledge or attitudes necessary to "get" the critical purpose of such humour: "With reviving this word [squaw] and making it a buzzword around the community again will certainly get the rednecks out there using this term" (qtd. in Brown). Haida writer Marcia Crosby expands on this concern in her discussion of a George Bowering novel that parodies Indian stereotypes:

Bowering's historiographic metafiction is not real. But a reality he does not consider is the relative scarcity of primary references of First Nations history made available in the education system, references that would enable the reader to recognize the components of his representation as parody. The entrenching of the fictive stereotypical Indian, which is still perceived as real by many people because of the enormous body of texts and images which support that notion, negates the positive aspects of the form of writing Bowering chooses to use. One can only parody something that is shared, otherwise it's an 'in' joke. The work is only postmodern if the reader is engaged, since it is a receiver system, the code must be learned, otherwise the work or intention of the theory is invisible. (90-

91)

Stereotypes are clearly risky material for humorists. In order to avoid this potential for miscommunication, Monique Mojica's play, *Princess Pocahontas and the Blue Spots*, balances irony with "straight talk." Mojica juxtaposes the damaging stereotypes of the "Indian princess" and the "dirty squaw" with the sad and angry voices of Native women. The play begins with a hilarious play on stereotyping as

"Contemporary Woman #2" sings:

Princess, Princess, Amazon Queen
 Show me your royal blood,
 Is it blue? Is it green?
 Dried and brown five centuries old,
 Singed and baked and covered in mold?

 Princess, Princess, calendar girl,
 Redskin, temptress, Indian pearl.
 Waiting by the water
 for a whiteskin to save.
 She's a savage now remember -
 Can't behave! (20-1)

The "Indian Princess" is caricatured by the character, Princess Buttered-On-Both-Sides, who, in the talent segment of the Miss North American Indian Beauty Pageant, throws herself off a cliff for the love of "Captain John Whiteman" (19) and sings him a 'doo-wop' song: "You smell a little funny, / But don't you worry, honey / Come live with me in my tee-pee" (27). This character's bizarre behaviour is a combination of various feminine stereotypes, playing them up to the point where they are exposed as obviously ridiculous.

However, Mojica does not use this ironic stance exclusively. She juxtaposes these stereotypical images with the voices of realistic Native women who, like Pocahontas, helped, married and had children with white settlers. These women's stories

are not funny; they are heart-wrenching accounts of being rejected both by their white husbands and by their own people. These voices are the flipside of the stereotypes of the princess and squaw. They provide a more thorough picture of Native women and also allow Mojica to avoid the risk of simply reconfirming stereotypes. Depending on the audience's knowledge and perspective, there may be a limit to how far a writer can go while still using images that come from oppressive sources. If Mojica had only satirized white stereotypes, she would have continued the harmful tradition of portraying Native women only in terms of white society.

Other Native writers and artists have described the difficulties of working with stereotypes. In Eden Robinson's short story, "Queen of the North," the protagonist, Adelaine, is working a booth at a powwow when she is confronted by a white tourist willing to pay a hundred dollars for a plateful of bannock and a look at her long black hair. As I noted earlier, there is a long Native tradition of parodying tourist's stereotypical expectations, and Adelaine considers this approach:

"What are you making?"

At the beginning when we were still feeling spunky, Pepsi and I had fun with that question. We said, Oh, this is fishhead bread. Or fried beer foam. But bull shitting took energy.

"Fry bread," I said. (206)

Perhaps the "bull shitting" of parody does take too much energy, requiring a constant state of self-disguise, of saying other than what you mean, and always running the risk of being misunderstood. Artist Carl Beam, who often uses stereotypes in his work, expresses a feeling similar to Adelaine's:

I can't be endlessly ironic because the irony goes two ways. There's a psychic price – it also implodes. Knowing the world is so shallow and stupid is emotionally draining. (qtd. in Ryan, *Trickster* 244).

Both Robinson and Beam are acutely “aware of irony’s vicious spiral, the sapping of confidence which it brings, the inability to act, except in roles, which it promotes” (Culler 186). They articulate the limitations of satirizing and parodying “the whiteman.” This kind of humour does have the power to challenge elements of white society. But it also may push artists into falsely rigid roles and bind them to oppressive forms.

I have constructed this chapter in terms of a debate, discussing whether satires of the whiteman function subversively *or* conservatively. However, within Native literature, these positions coexist not so much as a debate but as an internal dialogue. Satires of the whiteman are not always, as critics have often suggested, tools of liberation. As this discussion has shown, this humour often simultaneously erects and breaks down boundaries. And both these functions, though they may seem incompatible, are necessary. Looking at the larger picture of Native-white relations, we can see that the need for Native people to deconstruct those categories that oppress and to reinforce those that are helpful. And, according to Ojibway writer, Lenore Keeshig-Tobias, the humorous and ironic play with white conventions is merely a first step. Keeshig-Tobias’ story “How to Catch a White Man (Oops) I Mean Trickster” is a parable that explicitly teaches readers how to parody white expectations. But, once that is done, she writes, you can “free all the voices from the whiteman’s sack” and start over, teaching the children “the history of this land Tell them not to do as the Trickster (I mean white man) has done. And tell them to listen to the trees and grass” (108). This ending suggests then that the satirical subversion of oppressive forces is merely an initial tool, one that will make space for the recuperation of Native languages and cultures.

¹ See, for example, Bordewich, Stedman, Francis, Berkhofer, Lyman, Chamberlin (*Harrowing*), and Goldie.

² There were exceptions to this trend. Julian Lips was ahead of his time when, in the thirties, he compiled a study of (mostly visual) images of the whiteman produced by colonized peoples. One image from *The Native Hits Back* is a Chippewa painting in which a whiteman strides up to Native figure, one hand on his top hat and the other on his sword. The Native man, in turn, has in one hand the pipe of peace and in the other his battle-axe. The whiteman is about half the size of the Native (78).

³ See Basso, Blundell, Sweet, Evans-Pritchard, and Taussig.

Chapter Two Mixing It Up: Hybrid Humour

“How Native is Native if you’re Native?” (“How Native” 104). With this question, Ojibway writer Drew Hayden Taylor sums up one of the most difficult issues in contemporary Native literature. It is a question with no easy answer. While Native identity is defined in part as “not white,” most Native people are of mixed Native and non-Native ancestry and participate in Native and non-Native communities and systems of meaning. So how “Native” are they? The same question can be asked about, not only individuals, but whole Native communities, leading to questions about whether certain forms of literature or of government are “really Native.” Contemporary Native literature frequently examines this issue of Native identity and how it can be troubled by connections to white society. But when literary critics have acknowledged this theme of mixed or uncertain Native identity, they have most often approached it in terms of tragedy: describing Native people as “caught between two worlds.” For example, Paula Gunn Allen describes mixed-blood writers, or “breeds,” with a litany of dysfunction:

[T]he contemporary Indian writer’s preoccupation with alienation in its classic dimensions of isolation, powerlessness, meaninglessness, normlessness, lowered self-esteem, and self-estrangement, accompanied by anxiety, hopelessness, and victimization, may be so pervasive because the writers are one way or another predominantly breeds themselves. (*Sacred* 129)

This tragic “two worlds” model was influenced by well-known Native American novels from the sixties and seventies, including N. Scott Momaday’s *House Made of Dawn* and Leslie Marmon Silko’s *Ceremony*. However, it has become a stereotype, one which Spokane/Coeur D’Alene writer Sherman Alexie parodies in his poem: “How to Write the Great American Indian Novel”:

The hero must be a half-breed, half white and half Indian, preferably from a horse culture. He should often weep alone. This is mandatory. (94)

In fact, Native writers laugh as much as they weep at the blurry boundaries between “Native” and “white.” While many characters in contemporary Native literature are confused about their identities, their confusion is often depicted as comic rather than tragic. Such comic depictions can be found in, for instance, Thomas King’s *Green Grass, Running Water* and *Medicine River*, Richard Wagamese’s *Keeper ‘n Me*, Brian Maracle’s *Back on the Rez*, Ian Ross’s *fareWel*, Margo Kane’s *Moonlodge*, and Drew Hayden Taylor’s *Only Drunks and Children Tell the Truth*. All these works follow a common pattern in which a character has a mixed or uncertain Native background and, making exaggerated attempts to “act white” or to “act Indian,” is ridiculously unsuccessful. The humour, which revolves around the blurry boundaries between “white” and “Native,” could be called “hybrid humour.”

Hybrid humour is central to Thomas King’s *The Dead Dog Café Comedy Hour*, a radio serial in which three characters host a fictional radio show of the same name. In this show, about the misadventures of “Tom King,” a mixed-blood, highly-educated Native man with limited “real-life” knowledge of Native culture, King turns the often painful and embarrassing process of finding one’s cultural identity into an on-going joke. “Tom,” bumblingly trying to figure out how to be a “real” Indian, is constantly ridiculed, teased, and instructed by his two co-hosts, Jasper Friendly Bear and Gracie Heavy Hand. They make him play the white characters, tell him that he has the voice and the butt of a white guy, give him all the messy or difficult jobs, speak Cree (which he doesn’t understand) in his presence, trick him out of his money, and are constantly amazed by his lack of knowledge. Aside from a lot of whining, Tom puts up with all this and is

endlessly gullible.

In one episode, Tom is made to play a role in a sketch written by Jasper and entitled “Indians Anonymous” – “the Indian self-help program where we try to stop Indians who have become white from reverting back to being Indians again”:

Hi, my name is Tom and I’m an Indian. (*From Jasper and Gracie: “Hi, Tom!”*) I’ve been an Indian for 53 years. (*“Too bad. What a shame.”*) But for the last 6 years, I’ve been white. (*“Hurrah! Way to go! Good for You!”*) But the other night, when I was lying in bed, I began to think about trading in my Volvo for a pick-up truck and then going out to the reserve and driving around with a bunch of my relations in the back. (*“Uh oh! Sounds dangerous! Fight it, Tom!”*) So I jumped out of bed and called “Indians Anonymous,” the Indian self-help program, and they kept me from falling off the wagon and reverting back to being an Indian again. (*“Hurrah!”*) Thank goodness for “Indians Anonymous”!

“Tom” hates playing this role, considering the “Indians Anonymous” sketch to be offensive and not funny, feeling that he himself is the victim of the joke. Meanwhile, Jasper, Gracie, and presumably the audience all laugh at Tom’s embarrassment.

But how is “Indians Anonymous” funny? Our interpretation depends on our definition of a “normal” racial and cultural identity, which means that its humour can be interpreted in two seemingly contradictory ways. In order to make this distinction clear, I will imagine two radio listeners who represent opposing and extreme positions: a deconstructionist approach to race and a more traditional biological determinist approach. From the perspective of my imaginary deconstructionist listener, the identity labels of white and Indian are socially constructed and insufficient. To her, “Indians Anonymous” reveals that these labels are something that we can put on or take off. Furthermore, the sketch shows that neither one of these ridiculous stereotypes is satisfactory for Tom. In this interpretation, Tom is normal and the system of racial labelling is ridiculous.

My biological determinist listener might laugh at the same sketch but for very

different reasons. To her, racial identities are natural and unchangeable and she laughs at the very idea that you can change your racial and cultural identity, and at people who (like Tom) try to do so. For her, people who are confused about their identity, who try to switch back and forth, are the butt of the joke. The notions of “white” and “Native” are normal and Tom is abnormal. While she and the deconstructionist may, from the outside, appear to be laughing at the same thing, their perceptions of the joke are in fact completely opposite.

Most of us would fall somewhere between my two imaginary interpreters. And “Indians Anonymous,” like most hybrid humour, contains within it mixed messages about race and identity. This mix is further complicated by the three levels of “Tom” in the sketch, all of whom have different attitudes and levels of self-awareness. The “Tom” in *Indians Anonymous* is self-consciously commenting on the various cultural pressures in his life. The character Tom who performs the sketch is uncomfortable with the way that the sketch exposes his uncertain identity. And the writer, Thomas King, is presumably using the sketch to reflect on and relieve tensions around his own mixed identity. The complexity and self-consciousness in this brief sketch reflect questions of identity and authenticity within Native communities, questions that are far more complex than either of my imaginary listeners’ positions can acknowledge. Even if we were to look to the author for guidance, we would have problems. Trying to ascertain Thomas King’s beliefs about Native identity is no easy task. For instance, in the introduction to the collection of Native fiction *All My Relations*, King begins by asserting that “being Native is a matter of race rather than something more transitory such as nationality” (x). However, a page later, having considered the problems with that assertion, he repeals his

earlier claim, writing that we must “resist the temptation of trying to define a Native” (xi). King’s uncertain and hedging argument is not surprising since, as a mixed blood writer who only came to embrace his Native identity over time, he himself occupies an ambiguous position. Most people of mixed race are aware of the insufficiency and constructedness of notions of pure or authentic identity. But, on the other hand, because of their ambiguous status, they may want to be clearly identified as part of the Native community. Hybrid humour can reflect this double awareness, both reflecting and relieving tensions around the contentious and difficult issue of Native identity. Hybrid humour is, in fact, particularly popular among writers of mixed background. The humour is used to deal with the uncertainties and indeterminacies of “being Native,” of which mixed-blood writers are particularly aware. This is not to say that racial and cultural hybridity are equivalent. A full-blood may not identify with the Native community at all, while a mixed-blood may feel that their identity is fully Native. In fact, all identities, regardless of a person’s race, are hybrids of various factors and forces. However, perhaps because people tend to conflate racial and cultural identities, people of mixed-race are often particularly preoccupied with identity issues.

In order to understand the complex and multiple directions of hybrid humour, let us consider common theories of humour. While the two extreme interpretations I presented above had little nuance, they do point to the general directions from which we can approach the question. Both interpretations revolve around questions of what or who fits or does not fit, what is real and what unreal, what is normal and what ridiculous, invoking ideas – incongruity, illusion, transgression, and superiority of the viewer – frequently considered in humour theory. To see how these ideas play out in “hybrid

humour,” I will first examine the theoretical implications of the humour in some short works, particularly Kent Monkman’s film, *Blood River*. Then I will turn to four Native Canadian writers, Richard Wagamese and Eden Robinson, who depict Native individuals negotiating a mixed identity, and to Brian Maracle and Ian Ross, who use humour to examine Native communities that are collectively negotiating traditional and white influences.

The way mixed and unstable identities seem to lend themselves to comic treatment allows us to see it as reflecting that commonplace of comic theory that humour arises out of the perception of incongruity. As Apter and Smith observe, “synergetic identities” produce the comedy of “a situation where any phenomenon is perceived as having two contradictory identities” (100), especially when the synergy is unexpected or exaggerated (101). Because Native identity, so often a combination of “Native” and “white” elements, can be defined through blood relations, self-identification, government-identification, and/or Native community consensus (definitions which may disagree), it is often unstable. Moreover, its contradictory status is intensified by the way popular views of Native people see them as either authentic or assimilated.

Many Native writers make jokes about the difficulty of synthesizing these apparently contradictory identities. In King’s “Indians Anonymous” sketch, part of the humour arises simply from the strangeness of someone being both Native and white.

Drew Hayden Taylor has written about his mixed Ojibway and white background:

I have both White and Red blood in me. I guess that makes me pink. I am a “Pink Man.” Try to imagine this: I’m walking around on any typical reserve in Canada, my head held high, proudly announcing to everyone, “I am a Pink Man.” It’s a good thing I ran track in school. (“Pretty” 9-10)

Métis writer Marie Annharte Baker draws on clichés of colour to express the difficulty of

asserting a mixed identity in “Raced Out to Write this Up”:

I am still in the
red not the black blackened red reddened black but
what about black n’ blue green at the gills yellow belly
but what about the whiteish frightish part I put it behind
behind me when I need to say my piece about togetherness
.....

I’m a half a half
breed a mixed bag breed bread and butter bred my
whole grain bannock will taste as good to me even if I
smear on red jam sink my white teeth down into it down . . . (173-174)

Baker’s frantic repetition and use of clichés create humour and emphasize the frustration of trying to articulate an identity that does not fit cultural or racial labels. Taylor and Baker write of a pressure to be “one or the other,” to be “real,” giving the impression that neither of the identities, “Red” or “white,” are sufficient.

Focusing on this deconstructive element in Native humour, as my deconstructionist *Dead Dog Café* listener did, is currently a popular approach. However, this approach is limited by its lack of recognition that there is a strong element of self-deprecation in hybrid humour. Both Taylor and Baker, for instance, use constant self-deprecation in their writing, an element evident, for instance, in Taylor’s description of himself as a “Pink Man” who is “pretty like a white boy” (“Pretty” 12). Apter and Smith suggest that every humorous situation is “less than” expected and is therefore disparaged (101). In hybrid humour, this disparagement runs in multiple directions. It is directed towards the categories of Native and white but it is also, and often, especially directed towards those who do not fit either category.

An example of this double function can be seen in the recent film, *Blood River*. Its director, Kent Monkman, who is of mixed Cree and Irish-English descent, turned casting tradition on its head when he cast a visibly Native actor to play a white character. Métis

actor Tantoo Cardinal plays Claire, the well-meaning white adoptive mother of a Native girl. At the film's premiere, the audience burst into laughter when Cardinal appeared on the screen "whitened" with pale makeup and a blond wig. To further complicate the situation, Claire, in an attempt to relate to her daughter, tries to act Native with the result that layered over her "white" costume are feathered earrings and beaded medallions. Again, the audience laughed at Claire's unsuccessful attempts to identify with her daughter, who is embarrassed by her mother's ridiculous act. Cardinal's performance is thus an example of what Michael Taussig calls "mimetic excess," in that her imitations of white and Native identities are "over the top." She plays her role of middle-class housewife as stereotypically doting and her scenes are filmed in an exaggerated sitcom style.

Taussig argues that such exaggerated imitation creates "reflective awareness": "Mimetic excess provides access to understanding the unbearable truths of make-believe as foundation of an all-too-seriously serious reality" (254-255). He adds that the response to mimetic excess is laughter (225): "this sudden laugh from nowhere registers a tremor in cultural identity, and not only in identity, but in the security of Being itself" (226). Seen from this perspective, Cardinal's exaggerated performance can be read as deconstructing the notion of pure or authentic identity. She shows us that racial identity is largely a costume that we can put on or take off, a message may seem particularly appropriate coming from a mixed-race actor such as Cardinal. "Mixed" people intimately know to what an extent we "put on" our identity.

Many postmodern theories of humour celebrate this kind of cultural crossing and lack of a stable or defined identity. As Lance Olsen writes, the postmodern humorist

does not affirm “any stable proposition” but is “a freeplayer in a universe of intertextuality where no one text has any more or less authority than any other” (18). However, the move to bring such postmodern approaches to the criticism of Native literature, a field long dominated by notions of “authentic” identity, has been controversial. Gerald Vizenor, advocating a “mixed-blood tribal effort at ‘deconstruction’” (293), views the mixed-blood position as full of potential for humorously subverting conservative notions of race: “The crossblood or mixedblood is a new metaphor, a transitive contradancer between communal tribal cultures and those material and urban pretensions that counter conservative traditions” (*Interior Landscapes* 263). There is a debate over whether the indeterminacy privileged by postmodernists such as Vizenor can be compatible with the pragmatic agendas of “colonized peoples.” Postmodern theories of humour that view mixed-blood people as “metaphors” can obscure the fact that a world without any “stable proposition” can be a painful and anxious one. Furthermore, the postmodern celebration of indeterminate identity may be a privilege unavailable or irrelevant to those concerned with building Native solidarity and sovereignty. Vizenor ignores this when he mocks Native people whom he sees as “putting on” Indianness, dismissing the desire for a “return to roots” as naive and nostalgic. He has repeatedly attacked American Indian Movement leader Dennis Banks, who, like Vizenor, is a mixed-blood Chippewa (Murray 222), arguing that Banks’ humourless warrior image merely perpetuates stereotypes of “the Indian.” In calling attention to Banks’ wearing of “beads, bones, leather, ribbons, and a wide cultural frown” (qtd. in Murray 222) during a court appearance, Vizenor fails to acknowledge that the activist was hardly in a position to humorously deconstruct his status or that his “Indian”

clothing may have served a very practical purpose in trying to convince the court of his cultural authority.

A full reading of hybrid humour must therefore take into account the need for and pressures towards community, solidarity, and nationhood. To turn back to *Blood River*, if we read the film as simply deconstructing race we over-simplify it, ignoring a number of elements that affirm the notion of a stable racial identity and community. First of all, as a story of a return to roots and a critique of cross-cultural adoption, the film reaffirms the idea of an innate Nativeness. Secondly, Kent Monkman describes his decision to “crosscast” Cardinal as a deliberate inversion of Hollywood’s habit of casting non-native people to play “Indians,” with the resulting unrealistic representations of Native people. Thus, Cardinal’s role becomes a parodic critique of casting against race and the audience at the *Blood River* premiere may have been laughing at Claire not because of a “tremor in cultural identity” (Taussig 226) but because they saw Cardinal’s performance as a ridiculous attempt to cross immutable racial boundaries. Perhaps their laughter was therefore an affirmation of normative or authentic racial identities, not a response to their instability.

Indeed, while we may believe that the idea of an “authentic” or “pure” identity is a social construction, the idea of some such authentic self still holds enormous power in our lives. While postmodernism has relentlessly instructed us that reality is artifice, we are emotionally tied to ideas of wholeness, continuity, and growth. Most of us still want to be “real” – a “real artist,” a “real Canadian,” a “real mother,” or a “real Native.” This pressure has only been intensified for Native people by government policies, which divide people of Native descent into status, non-status, Inuit, and Métis, as well as by

popular culture, which still glorifies a clear and visible “Indianness.”

But the pressure to be “real” also exists within Native society. Drew Hayden Taylor complains that, as a Native person, “The lighter your skin, the more difficult it sometimes is to be accepted by your Aboriginal peers (and the non-Native world)” (“How Native” 104). Métis poet Marilyn Dumont vividly depicts this intolerance in her poem “Leather and Naugahyde”:

So, I’m having coffee with this treaty guy from up north and we’re laughing at how crazy ‘the mooniyaw’ are in the city and the conversation comes around to where I’m from, as it does in underground languages, in the oblique way it does to find out someone’s status without actually asking, and knowing this, I say I’m Metis like its an apology and he says, ‘mmh,’ like he forgives me, like he’s got a big heart and mine’s pumping diluted blood and his voice has sounded well-fed up to this point, but now it goes thin like he’s across the room taking another look and when he returns he’s got ‘this look,’ that says he’s leather and I’m naugahyde. (58)

The pressure to show and embrace notions of “real” Nativeness also exists for Native writers. And this pressure may be especially difficult for those of mixed cultural and/or racial descent, as many Native writers in Canada are. On the one hand, these writers are often marginalized (and simultaneously lionized) as writers of “Native literature” by white reading institutions, such as universities and publishing companies. But, on the other hand, they may also be marginalized by other Native people for not being “Native” enough. For example, Mohawk scholar Taiaiake Alfred speaks of writers of mixed descent as “non-rooted marginal appropriators . . . who gain acceptance and fame in the mainstream media and academic circles by promoting an assimilationist agenda” (143). Elizabeth Cook-Lynn, a Sioux critic, similarly writes, “A great deal of the work done in the mixed-blood literary movement is personal, invented, appropriated, and irrelevant to First Nation status in the United States” (“American Indian” 130). And Leslie Marmon

Silko, a mixed-blood writer herself, has harshly dismissed mixed-blood Chippewa Louise Erdrich's writing as not Native enough, calling it "academic, postmodern, so-called experimental," and attacking what she perceives as Erdrich's ambivalence about her Native origins (qtd. in Castillo 180). While such sentiments may not be widespread, they do emphasize the ways in which Native writers may experience pressure to confirm their "true" Nativeness. Native writers then, especially those of mixed descent, are caught in an awkward dilemma. On the one hand, they are aware that no concept of "purity" or "authenticity" can describe their own and others' identities. On the other hand, they have a relationship to a community that sometimes relies on claims of unified identity.

Hybrid humour, simultaneously subversive and conservative, can negotiate this awkward position. Depicting characters who unsuccessfully try to imitate various Native or white identities and thereby suggesting that identities are "put on," it reveals that "whiteness" and "Nativeness" are constructed and easily deconstructed. But it always has another side as well since, as Chris Powell puts it:

The interpretation of any fragment of experience as 'humorous' depends on the recognition from someone, some group or some society, that certain ideas and behaviours are in certain contexts and situations 'deviant', and that such a recognition implies that the 'recogniser' holds certain ideas and behaviours to be 'normal' within such contexts: that is, representative of 'normal' order. (53)

This affirmation of a "normal order" is at work in *The Dead Dog Café Comedy Hour*. The audience (including Jasper and Gracie, who are confident full-bloods) laughs at "Tom" in part because they feel a pleasurable superiority to his bumbling cultural ineptitude. King's deprecation of his own fictional persona is a complex negotiation of cultural identity and community, one that breaks down ideas of Native homogeneity and innate identity. Still, by making hybrid identity the constant object of laughter, King

implicitly reaffirms the value of a more stable (or more “authentic”) identity.

“You Can’t Make a Beaver from a Bear”: Stabilizing Identity in Richard Wagamese’s *Keeper ‘n Me*

Some Native writers resolve the question of identity in their writing by depicting a return home, often to the reserve, as a way for a confused protagonist to find stability. William Bevis argues that this “homing in” – the harmonious integration of the self with a community, a place, and a past – is the defining characteristic in American Indian novels. Richard Wagamese’s *Keeper ‘n Me* is just such a story, recounting a Native character’s journey from instability to stability. This fictionalized autobiography tells of Garnet Raven’s removal from his Ojibway family by Children’s Aid when he was three years old, his life in multiple foster homes, on the street, and in jail, and his eventual return to his family and his reserve.

Prior to his return to the reserve, Garnet defines “Indians” as the losers in Western movies and history books. Thus, the early part of the novel presents his ludicrous attempts to disguise his Native roots. Like a member of “Indians Anonymous,” he takes on various invented identities, always unsuccessfully:

I was a homeless Hawaiian for a while there in Niagara Falls. Had these flowered shirts I found at the Sally Ann We’d be drinkin’ wine in the park and I’d be teaching people how to say things in fictitious Hawaiian and singing these dumb songs on that ukulele Another time after seeing a couple of episodes of Kung-Fu” on TV I became a half-Chinese guy looking for my father That one ran pretty good in a few towns until I got too drunk in Sudbury and gave a traditional Chinese name to a big biker named Cow Pie. Guess he didn’t like being referred to as Sum Dum Fuk. My kung fu skills failed me utterly. (15-16)

Garnet’s clumsy attempts to imitate identities that he hopes will be more acceptable than being “Indian” are both painful and laughable. The imitation of white

stereotypes can destabilize them from within, but such imitation is here a sign of powerlessness. When Garnet finally does find his real family, his arrival at the reserve is a hilarious case of culture clash. He shows up wearing an Afro, platform shoes, and other “funky threads,” inspiring such comments as “Sure he’s a Raven? . . . Looks like a walkin’ fishin’ lure or somethin’” (35) and “Thought he was coming from T’rana, not Disneyland” (41). As with Tom on *The Dead Dog Cafe*, Garnet’s unstable identity is seen as inadequate and hence funny.

In the first part of the novel, it is clear that Garnet’s identity is an invention. But once he returns to the reserve, his actions are presented as natural, no longer imitation. From the time of his reunion with his family, the humour turns away from negotiating chaos and towards creating a sense of cohesion and control. Keeper, the voice of wisdom in the novel, confirms this deterministic message: “[Y]ou can’t make a beaver from a bear. Nature don’t work that way. Always gotta be what the Creator made you to be” (37). Once Garnet switches to a plaid shirt and a ponytail we are to accept that he is no longer wearing a costume or performing his cultural identity. Garnet’s humorous search for an acceptable cultural persona suggests the constructed nature of all cultural identities. But our laughter at Garnet’s dilemma confirms the need for a solution, and we are relieved when a stable identity is finally established. That is, the humour in this novel transgresses identity norms, but it also *marks* this move as a transgression that should be corrected. Wagamese uses hybrid humour to relieve anxieties about identity and finally to affirm stable and conservative visions of Native identity and community.

This novel has enormous appeal precisely because of its ability to tie up

strings and answer all its own difficulties. It makes us feel good. Jo-Ann Thom, who teaches at Saskatchewan Federated Indian College, says that *Keeper 'n Me* is the most popular work in her Native literature course because its humour allows Native students to deal with Native issues without anger and white students to deal without guilt (personal communication). However, it could be argued that the affirmation of community and solidarity in the novel obscures the multiple, shifting, inconsistent and conflicted nature of identity. The happy ending of *Keeper 'n Me* cannot, for instance, account for the many cases in which displaced Native children have been unable to return comfortably to their birth communities. But the issue is not whether or not Wagamese's story is *real* but that it has real effects on its audience. It shows us what we want rather than what we know.

Laughing at Instability: Eden Robinson's "Dogs in Winter"

While Wagamese's hybrid humour may relieve anxiety, Eden Robinson's use of humour in her fiction increases tensions and exposes contradictions, refusing to resolve them. In this Haisla writer's collection of short stories, *Traplines*, the teenaged protagonists are search for a stable identity, torn between two starkly incongruous worlds – the private world of their birth families, characterized by poverty, pain and abuse, and the public world of foster parents, television, brandnames, fashion, and money. The teens' clumsy attempts to copy the ways of both worlds are both sad and funny.

To take one example from the collection, in the story, "Dogs in Winter," the protagonist, Lisa, is at the centre of dramatic incongruities. The reality of a mother

who is a cold-blooded serial killer is starkly at odds with the falsely “perfect” world of her first foster mother, “Aunt” Genna, who “liked to believe she was an English lady” (43), kept performing poodles and told Lisa that her parents were missionaries and who epitomizes an artificially constructed identity, or her later foster parents, whose perfection makes Lisa feel as though she has “stepped into a storybook or into a TV set” (41). Lisa’s birth mother, however, does not seem any more real or “authentic”: her crimes seem unmotivated, and she is obsessed with how they are publicly perceived.

Indeed, Lisa’s environment is made up on all sides of incongruous imitations, which she in turn tries to imitate. She mimics her Aunt Genna, telling people that her parents are missionaries, yet tries to be like her mother by threatening a friend with a gun. The funniest and most disturbing scenes in the story are Lisa’s unintentional parodies of dramatic suicide. She is not trying to be subversive or funny; she is attempting to enact what she believes her mother wants while replicating the sense of performance she has picked up from her foster parents and the public world. Lisa’s feelings may be real and deep, but her actions are superficial because existing on the level of imitation. Her suicide attempts are clearly “performances”: she slits her wrists, but first puts on a bikini, pours Sea Foam bubble bath and mango bath oil into the tub and ensures that the tap is not dripping (56); or she reads *People* magazine while she waits for her overdose to work (52). Unsuccessful, she settles for watching a sad movie, a more successful piece of drama than her own. Her failed attempts at finding an identity are darkly comic.

Unlike Wagamese and King, however, Robinson does not present an alternative to such a failure. Robinson's approach to the "caught between two worlds" model distinguishes her from many other Native writers. She does not identify the characters in most of her stories as Native or white. Nor does she present either world as representing the "real world" or an authentic cultural or emotional experience. There is no "Native" alternative, no original identity, but a perpetual and painful situation of mimicking cultural models, none of which seem to fit. In Robinson's stories, we are invited to laugh at the characters' awkward mimicry, but we also feel that they are hurt by the incongruities of their worlds.

Traditional Identity in Native Politics: Brian Maracle's *Back on the Rez*

The negotiation of a hybrid identity is not only an issue for Native individuals, but also for whole Native communities. In simple terms, communities struggle to balance Native culture with the forces of white society. This communal struggle is particularly visible in the realm of Native politics, which has been, until recently, largely controlled and structured by the colonial Canadian government. Brian Maracle's memoirs, *Back on the Rez*, and Ian Ross's Governor General's Award-winning play, *fareWel*, both depict reserves dealing with the challenges of asserting their rights as nations. As the popular term "First Nations" suggests, it is now more and more widely accepted in Canada that tribal groups are nations with the right to self-government. However, the practical challenges of self-government are enormous. The diversity and geographical scattering within tribal Nations, the power of existing band councils, the small populations of many Nations, questions of

tribal membership, funding difficulties and the sheer complexity of establishing a third order of government are all challenges that the self-government movement must meet. Maracle and Ross both take a humorous perspective to the confusion around Native self-government, but their approaches are very different. Maracle's approach to Native political identity is similar to Wagamese's to individual identity, rejecting a hybrid approach to Native politics in favour of a unified and traditional identity. In contrast, Ross's humour is closer to that of Robinson, depicting all forms of political identity as problematic.

Back on the Rez tells the story of Maracle's first year living on the Six Nations reserve in Southern Ontario. It is, like *Keeper 'n Me*, a story of home-coming. Maracle is a Mohawk and a registered band member, but he was an "Urban Indian" for most of his life and had never before lived on the reserve. The memoirs tell of Maracle's personal process of fitting into rural reserve life, but a large portion is devoted to his self-education about the politics of the reserve. Six Nations, he explains, is "hyper-political" because of the "paralyzing conflict between the Iroquois Confederacy and the elected band council" (20-1). The Confederacy is widely believed by the Iroquois people (which includes Mohawks) to be a divine creation, founded by the Peacemaker under the guidance of the Creator. An elaborate system of government that preceded the arrival of the European invaders, it still operates at Six Nations. However, in 1924, the Department of Indian Affairs decreed that the Six Nations would henceforth be governed by a band council. Most of the people of Six Nations, however, do not recognize this imposed council as the legitimate government, and less than 10% voted in the 1993 band election (Maracle

25).

Back on the Rez satirizes the imposed band council system. In this satire, Maracle is part of a wider tradition: tribal band councils are a common object of criticism and ridicule within Native communities. Under the Indian Act, democratically elected band councils were put into place by Indian Affairs, replacing collective, consensus-based traditional forms of government. These councils are agents of the Minister of Indian Affairs, “dependent on Parliament for [their] existence, powers and responsibilities” (Reiter 1.2). Taiaiake Alfred argues that band councils “have little to do with indigenous belief systems” (24) but that this fact often goes unexamined by Native politicians who suffer from a “colonial mentality” (70). Despite the best of intentions, Alfred explains, once within the colonial system, too many band councillors begin to “behave like bureaucrats and carry out the same old policies” (xiii). The councillors mimic government officials, but they have little real power. They want to help their communities to heal, but they are inextricably tied to the government that created the sickness in the first place. This is a variation on the awkward imitation that we also see in Wagamese’s *Garnet and Robinson’s Lisa*. The failed imitation and circularity of band council politics are sources of humour for many Native people. Here is one of many jokes on the subject:

Investigators at a major research institution have discovered the heaviest element known to science. This startling new discovery has been tentatively named Band Administratium (“Ba” in metric) or Tribal Administratium (“Ta” in imperial measure). This new element has no protons or electrons, thus having an atomic number of 0. It does, however, have 1 neutron, 125 executive assistant neutrons, 75 assistant neutrons, and 111 assistant neutron-interns, giving it an atomic mass of 312. These 312 particles are held together by a force called morons, which are surrounded by vast quantities of lepton-like particles called peons. Since it has no electrons, Band/Tribal Administratium is inert. However, it can be detected as it impedes every

reaction with which it comes into contact. According to the discoverers, a minute amount of Administratium causes one reaction to take over four days to complete when it would normally take less than a second. (Doxtater "Heaviest Element")

Maracle is another critic of the band council system, openly supporting the Iroquois Confederacy and a return to traditional Native values and practices. His satire of the local band council portrays it as cut off from the realities of Six Nations. The chief insists that the councillors wear "proper business attire," in an attempt to look like typical Canadian politicians. The council's formal meeting room also reflects its distance from Mohawk political traditions: "The walls are decorated with various pieces of Native artwork having no particular relevance to Six Nations. There are two pictures of military warships on one wall. A picture of Mohawk poet Pauline Johnson sits on the floor, propped against the wall" (111-112). Despite their attempts to imitate powerful politicians, however, the councillors are obsessed with trivial matters. At one meeting, Maracle recounts, the chief reported on a trip he took to England to rededicate a British warship. He eagerly listed all the tourist sites he had seen: "The only down-side, he declared, without realizing how it would sound to thousands of struggling stay-at home Indians, was that it rained all the time and he and Roger Jonathan couldn't play golf" (115). In Maracle's portrayal, the band councillors are desperately mimicking powerful Canadian politicians, but they in fact have no power at all. Their hybrid political identity is depicted as a source of weakness. His satire reaffirms the need to move away from the colonial band council system and to return to the traditions of the Confederacy.

Maracle can openly satirize the Six Nations band council because it is a target of scorn within his community. However, his humour becomes more indirect as he

approaches another political issue – smoking and the tobacco trade on the reserve. The sale of tax-free cigarettes brings thousands of smokers (and their dollars) onto the reserve. For the people of Six Nations, the tobacco issue is very complex and is closely linked to their sense of self-determination. For one, the Iroquois believe that tobacco is a sacred gift from the Creator. Also, they consider themselves to be members of a sovereign nation that need not pay tobacco taxes to a foreign government. Furthermore, the tax-free tobacco trade is an important source of money and employment for the community. However, Maracle is uncomfortable with his community's reliance on an industry that warps the respect due to tobacco and is unhealthy. The issue is an example of the complexity of self-government; traditional ideals, political independence, and economic prosperity are not always compatible. Not surprisingly, considering his commitment to self-government, Maracle approaches the tobacco question hesitantly: "Could it be that to raise a whimper of complaint against the economic engine that drives a huge portion of the local economy would be to invite the community's wrath and retribution? Hmm" (195-6).

Maracle therefore does not raise a "whimper of complaint" but instead takes the embrace of tobacco to a ridiculous extreme. Sitting in a "nicotine fog" in the band council meeting room, Maracle devises a plan to bring "financial salvation" to Six Nations (196). He envisions turning the reserve into a Disney-style smoking theme park. In this park, smokers could light up wherever they wanted: movie theatres, elevators, and restaurants. He suggests including a smoker's Olympics, a smoker's hall of fame, and a smoking museum with "a hands on display for the

kiddies that would show them how to prime tobacco, how to cure it and how to blend it with chemical additives” (197). The reserve could also, he imagines, get involved in tobacco research and “invent special filters to create flavoured cigarette – imagine how sales would rocket, especially in the teenage market, if we could come up with a pizza-flavoured cigarette” (199). A special clinic for sick smokers would allow them to smoke in their hospital rooms. Maracle concludes this extended celebration of smoking with: “Why, after all, just why did the Creator give our ancestors the gift of tobacco in the first place if He didn’t intend for us to use it so that we could become rich, rich, rich?” (200). This question, of course, exposes how the tobacco trade exploits the sacredness of tobacco. By taking the Iroquois’s love of cigarettes to an extreme where it is obviously destructive and dangerous, he reveals his true opinion: that the community should not support the selling of tobacco, even if it is profitable. Through his humour, he gently rejects the white-influenced cigarette trade and favours a return to the traditional ritual use of tobacco. As in his satires of the band council, Maracle here ridicules cross-cultural reserve politics and rejects the European influences on those politics. He thus reaffirms the value of a traditional, conservative and nativist community.

Identity Politics and Self-Government: Ian Ross’s *fareWel*

While Maracle uses humour to affirm the movement towards self-government, Ian Ross uses humour to reveal its weaknesses. As Ross’s play *fareWel* begins, the fictional Partridge Crop reserve is in disastrous political shape. The band chief is in Las Vegas, the band is in receivership, and the welfare checks have not

arrived. This desperate situation drives Teddy, a local businessman, to start a movement for self-government. However, though self-government of the First Nations is widely agreed to be an inherent right, there has been little agreement within Native communities about the form that it should take. This uncertainty is obvious in *fare Wel*, with one character repeatedly asking, “What is self-government?”

The characters in the play symbolize various factions and positions in the self-government debate. Native people have diverse political perspectives, including traditional, conservative, radical, feminist, urban-based, reserve-based, etc. As Ross shows, this diversity is one of the challenges to the self-government movement. For instance, Teddy, the leader of the movement, stands for a form of radical politics which is cut off from the traditional Native values of harmony and respect. Competitive, confrontational and impatient, Teddy also has little understanding of the complexity of self-government. Looking for the quick fix, he decides that opening a casino will bring salvation to the reserve. Gambling, like tobacco, has a traditional history among aboriginal people, but also like tobacco, it is a questionable source of self-reliance:

Teddy: Did you guys find those ledgers and shit yet?

Melvin: Which ones?

Teddy: The ones for health and education.

Melvin: What do you need those for?

Teddy: How the hell else do you expect me to pay for the slot machines? (78)

Teddy has little ability to relate to or sympathize with others. Because of this, he has

no negotiation skills. When on the phone with the government, he yells:

Fuck forget it alright, you call me back when you're ready to talk. What? Hey, I've got two words for you buddy. Blockade. (71)

Teddy is generally intolerant. He wants to exclude women from the political process. Such sexism is a persistent problem in the Native political process and one that Native women have been fighting. He is also racist, intolerant of the "Bill C31-ers," mixed-race people who were recently given official Native status under new government regulations. Finally, he has no sense of community and little interest in the daily issues of reserve life, concerned only with the excitement of self-government:

(The phone rings) Partridge Crop First Nation. What? You got a bobcat in your tree? Well what the hell am I supposed do about it? Shoot it. . . . (Phone rings) Hello. How the hell am I supposed to know how to cook muskrat? People hear there's a new chief and all of a sudden I'm everybody's friend . . . (Phone rings) Quit phoning here. Oh. Sorry. I thought you were a band member. (70).

Robert, Teddy's nemesis in his self-government movement, is also out of touch with traditional values. Robert is prosperous, articulate, educated, and employed. He supports self-government in theory, but doesn't think that the band should rush into things, insisting that they should follow the rules:

- Robert: Thank you, but I don't want to be chief. I'll help, but please don't nominate me. I'm not standing.
- Nigger: Standing. Sitting. Chairs. Tables. First. Second. How come Robert knows so much. I bet he's just lying to us.
- Robert: I'm not lying to you. Look it up. I'm using *Robert's Rules of Order*.
- Nigger: Aaaahhh. See. I knew it. These are his rules. He's just trying to get what he wants. (50-51).

Nigger perceives that the rules of white society have served Robert well; they are indeed *his rules*. Robert has, as Teddy says, embraced “white man’s ways” (49), taking on the methods and values that maintain the status quo. For instance, he refuses to lend his money with the others on the reserve because he knows he won’t get it back. His sensible stinginess is contrasted with the generosity of other characters, one of whom makes sandwiches for a wake even when she has no money to feed her children. Sharing is central to Native values, and Robert’s individualism and possessiveness are signs that he is out of touch with the traditions of his community.

The characters of Phyllis and Nigger, in contrast to Teddy and Robert, represent many of the traditional values that have both helped Native people to survive. Both characters are sometimes ridiculous, but they hold the community together. They are patient, generous and tolerant, and, no matter what the current system, they always get by. Phyllis watches out for omens and prays for “self-government” though she doesn’t know what it is. And Nigger suggests two approaches when dealing with Ottawa: “look really pitiful” and “just bug the shit out of them” (54,80). While these characters are loveable, theirs is not the path of rapid change. In fact, it seems that without the impatience of people like Teddy, self-government might never be achieved at all. How then can we achieve change in Canadian politics while retaining Native values? The play does not offer us a solution to this dilemma. Teddy’s movement is a comedy of errors that, in the end, achieves little visible political change. Ross never does answer the question, “What is self-government?”

Unlike Maracle then, Ross does not just laugh at those who take a white-influenced political position. He uses humour to critique all the characters in his play, revealing the struggles, weaknesses, and uncertainties that plague Native people's work towards self-government. And like Eden Robinson, he does not seem to offer an alternative to these struggles. In his world, everything is funny. However, *fareWel* leaves the audience with a very different feeling than do Robinson's stories. In this play, the world, though it may not contain any answers, is ultimately a fulfilling place. At the play's end, the welfare cheques have arrived and the harmony of the reserve is restored. Like Nigger and Phyllis, Ross privileges the traditional virtues of humour, patience, tolerance, survival, and social connectedness. Ultimately then, his humour does reaffirm traditional values and identity. Despite its ambiguous depiction of self-government, the play's happy ending ensures that we leave the theatre focused on the community's strengths, not its weaknesses.

fareWel won the Governor General's Award for drama, the first work by a Native writer to win one of the prestigious national awards. Is the widespread success of this play perhaps linked to its gently deprecating depiction of the self-government movement? Michael Doxtater writes that non-native people enjoy it when Native people are self-deprecating: "it allows everyone to laugh at us and get away with it" ("Indianness"). Further, Sioux writer Elizabeth Cook-Lynn claims that the North American public embraces Native writers who thematize colonization but who are not openly or stridently nationalistic (*Why I* 79). Such writers, she says, do not challenge their readers by demanding political change. Indeed, *fareWel* ends with a suggestion that very gradual,

non-radical change is best – a message that is perhaps easy for the non-Native Canadian public to swallow.

This question about the popularity of *fareWel* raises a much larger issue around hybrid humour. How can we evaluate this humour and its politics? Throughout this chapter, I have suggested that Native writers use Native humour to negotiate complex and hybrid identities. They convey the ambiguities and impossibilities of unified identity while, at the same time, ridiculing and rejecting such ambiguities. The ways in which the writers play out this negotiation place them along a politically charged continuum. Wagamese and Maracle, for example, lean heavily towards a traditional and tribal/national identity while Ross and Robinson lean towards a deconstruction and critique of such identity. Where writers fall on this continuum will determine how critics evaluate them. There is a strong feeling among some critics that Native writers should write in a way that conveys political and communal strength. Elizabeth Cook-Lynn is one of these, arguing that too many Native writers believe “that they can and should legitimize hybridity” (*Why I* 84). To her, hybridity represents weakness in the Native community. On the other hand, there are critics, such as Gerald Vizenor, who argue that it is valuable for writers to challenge and deconstruct rigid notions of cultural and racial identity and who see hybridity as a source of strength.

It is probably clear that my evaluation in this chapter tends more towards the latter approach. As a person of mixed descent, I am disturbed by humour that ridicules and rejects the possibility of impure and ambiguous Native identities. Perhaps Taiaiake Alfred would claim that I am simply another mixed-blood writer promoting an “assimilationist agenda” (143). I would respond by saying that most Native people are of

mixed descent; rather than looking at this as a problem, we must accept it as a legitimate part of the Native community. But, on the other hand, I do acknowledge the need for and pull towards unity and community. Indeed, I have, in the company of other Native people, used self-deprecating humour about my mixed status, in an attempt to better “fit in.” In the end, hybrid humour does not fit easily into any political agenda, not into Vizenor’s, Cook-Lynn’s, or my own. Like identity itself, the humour pulls in more than one direction, moving both towards and away from any clear definition of what it means to be Native.

Chapter Three
Tolerating, Teaching, Teasing:
The Representation of Laughter and Community

Pomo-Miwoc writer Gregory Sarris begins his collection of essays on Native literature, *Keeping Slug Woman Alive*, with a joke at his own expense. He describes himself, a Stanford graduate student, sitting at his aunt's kitchen table and taking notes on his relatives' conversation. Soon he was ordered by his aunt to put down the notebook and help her peel potatoes. In a nervous attempt to make his potatoes as smooth and as round as hers, he peeled and peeled, shaving off every rough spot:

I set my knife down and leaned back in my chair, just for a moment, just to let Aunt Violet know I was finished. But she was not moving. Her face was tight, swollen, blushed with color, her eyes set on her pile of peelings where she held her knife, pointing. The peelings, something I hadn't thought of . . . Her peelings were paper thin, shards of skin, thinner than carrot peelings, almost transparent. I felt the thick, coarse lumps under my hand. I lifted my eyes just in time to catch Auntie Violet hiss. "Just like a white man," she managed to say, exploding with laughter. "So wasteful!" The entire room was laughing. (2)

This anecdote may seem an odd beginning to a study in which Sarris relies heavily on his personal experience of Pomo-Miwoc culture. He begins, not by establishing his authority, but by demonstrating just how much he does not know. In fact, rather than asserting individual expertise, by making himself an object of ridicule, Sarris subordinates his position to the communal values represented by his elder, Auntie Violet.

Like Sarris, many Native writers depict Native people's use of humour in order to assert the value of Native community. In fact, such a concern with affirming community is arguably the strongest force in contemporary Native literature. For Native people, a sense of an indigenous community is a necessary part of

self-identity and self-determination: “one cannot be truly indigenous without the support, inspiration, reprobation and stress of a community as facts of life” (Alfred xvi). Native writers tend not to see themselves as writing in isolation, but as individuals who are writing on behalf of a larger, collective experience.¹ As their writings show, Native communities are strongly grounded in shared blood, land, histories, situations, conditions, economies, and routines. Ojibway writer Armand Ruffo quite accurately calls Native literature a “community of voices”:

The form of these voices, like the content itself, varies according to individual author, but as community, theirs is a collective voice that addresses the relationship between colonizer and colonized, the impact of colonialism, and, moreover, functions on a practical level by striving to bring about positive change. (110)

Despite these strong ties, however, Native writers are aware that “community” is neither an absolute nor an ideal. A Native community is an ongoing project, both in reality and in the imagination. And humour is a means of showing the complexity of this project. On the one hand, humour is deeply social: a shared experience of humour is an affirmation of norms, attitudes, and assumptions in common. As such, writers who wish to create a portrait of a strong community will often depict that community laughing together. Laughter is presented as a means of reinforcing cultural differences, shoring up identity, and creating social coherence and control. But these functions can have a problematic side. Auntie Vi’s joking comment that Sarris is “just like a white man,” for example, reveals the exclusion based on difference that can be part of community-building humour. Sarris’s telling of the incident brings to light his struggle, as a mixed-blood Native person raised in foster homes, to fit into his own communal ideal. Likewise, other Native writers also use humour, not only to shore up community, but also

to complicate and challenge it.

It is important to recognize that depictions of humorous interactions between Native people are not merely a reflection of a pre-existing reality. Both in reinforcing and troubling notions of community, Native literature is strategic and, as Ruffo points out, functions on a “practical level.” For instance, Maria Campbell has described how she made quite calculated use of humour in her writing of her autobiography, *Halfbreed*. She explains that, having completed the first draft, she realized that she had created a tragic picture of her life. Since she wanted her book to “help people,” she went back to her draft and added a number of humorous anecdotes (interview with Lutz 42). These humorous moments show the connectedness of the Métis community during Maria’s childhood. Campbell’s comments remind us that the depiction of humour in Native literature is not simply a reflection of “Native reality”; rather it is an interpretation and recreation of that reality.

Of course, the depiction of humour does have a relationship with the actual use of humour in Native communities. The ability of humour to create social harmony has made it an important tool in the lives of Native people. When Native people lived primarily in small, family-based groups, group cohesion was essential.

Mohawk psychiatrist Clare Brant explains:

The individual and group survival of this continent’s aboriginal Plains, Bush, and Woodlands people required harmonious interpersonal relationships and cooperation among members of a groups. It was not possible for an individual to survive alone in the harsh natural environment but, in order to survive as a group, individuals, living cheek by jowl throughout their lives, had to be continuously cooperative and friendly. (534-535)

Today, this group harmony remains necessary in the face of the many threats, mostly

human rather than environmental, to Native communities. This harmony has been maintained in part by suppressing conflict (Brant 535). And laughter has been an effective tool in this suppression, defusing or sublimating tension and negativity. In particular, this chapter explores how humour can allow the tolerance of disruptive forces, teach social values without coercion, and enforce conformity through teasing.

You will notice, as you read this chapter, that the characters who use this socially-cohesive humour are often elders. Breaking the stereotype of the serious and dignified old Indian with whom we are so familiar from popular works such as *The Ecstasy of Rita Joe* or *Dances with Wolves*, these characters laugh at themselves and others. This joking role is an indication for the respect and authority that elders are accorded in Native communities. Métis educator Frye Jean Graveline explains that elder's humour plays a key role in maintaining community balance:

“Too much of one thing can lead to imbalance,” “Don’t take life so seriously,” “Don’t make yourself bigger than you really are,” my Elders taught. Too much power and too much seriousness are feared, for they can unbalance life in the Community and the environment. (214)

Some younger comedians have used the joking power of elders to their advantage. In their comedy stage show, young Dene actors Sarah Shorty and Jackie Bear perform as Dene elders, telling irreverent stories and demanding audience participation. Similarly, Mohawk ventriloquist Buddy Big Mountain uses an “elder puppet” to make the jokes in his act. Many writers also use the figure of the humorous elder, not only as entertainment, but also as the centres of their representations of community.

One of the most common ways in which Native writers represent humour is as a means of coping. Humour is shown as offering a sense of relief and an

acceptance of circumstance in the face of danger or tragedy. Gerald Vizenor

describes this comic perspective:

You're never striving for anything that is greater than life itself. There's an acceptance of chance. Sometimes things just happen and when they happen, even though they may be dangerous or even life threatening, there is some humor And it's a positive, compassionate act of survival, it's getting along. (in Bruchac 309).

An anthropologist who spent time among the Netsilik Inuit provides a striking example of this accepting humour. She tells of a Netsilik man whose house and belongings were destroyed in a storm and describes how she stood and watched in astonishment as this man laughed heartily about his fate. When she asked her informants how the man could laugh under such circumstances, they explained that, had the man yelled or cried, he would have alienated and embarrassed the others in the village. However, by showing his good humour, he was more likely to receive help from others in rebuilding his house (Fagan). By laughing over his problems, the man relieved social tensions and maintained the sense of solidarity that was necessary to his own survival.

In his play *fare Wel*, Ian Ross depicts this accepting and comic perspective through the character called "Nigger." Nigger, an elder, is portrayed as the centre of the "Partridge Crop Reserve," representing the key to the people's endurance. At first glance, Nigger may seem to be lacking as a model for community survival; he is most funny when getting injured – hit by a truck, bitten by a dog, shot, or chewed by a chainsaw. He moves passively and genially through the events of the play, never taking a side in the political issues that dominate the plot, certainly never being the stereotypically sage elder. Instead, he plays the hapless bum, looking only for a

cigarette butt and a free meal.

Nigger is neither an interpreter nor a teacher within his community. It matters little to him whether events make sense. When he reads a comic strip in French and doesn't understand it, he laughs anyway. He rarely gives advice, and when he does, it is never from a position of authority. For instance, when advising Melvin not to sniff gas, Nigger says, "That sniffing's no good. I caught fire the time I tried it" (43). However, Native people have traditionally learned by "observing and feeling" what their elders did rather than by direct instruction (Pelletier 1) and, in the poverty and unrest of the Partridge Crop Reserve, Nigger's generous, tolerant, and unconquerable comic attitude is an essential model. In fact, his attitude informs the very structure of the play.

Despite all the problems on the reserve, Ross does not structure his story as a tragedy. Instead, he takes, like Nigger, a comic view of reserve politics. The choice between the comic and the tragic view of reserve life is made explicit in a conversation between Nigger and a younger woman, Rachel. In this conversation, Nigger criticizes his own survival tactics, saying that he is not a good man because he is not dead: people, he says, "only talk good about you when you're dead" (52). Nigger is describing a tragic worldview, one that has simultaneously idealized Native people and presented them as a tragic and dying race. Rachel, however, responds to this by affirming Nigger's comic-survival response to the world: "You're a good man Sheldon [Nigger]. . . . 'Cause you don't die" (52-3). In the same way, the Partridge Crop community is presented as good because it too does not die. The play has a classic comic ending, with the characters coming together in

their acceptance of each other and the reserve. This ending allows the audience to feel good about the Partridge Crop Reserve. The play asks us adopt Nigger's attitude: focus on the ridiculous, avoid anger or sadness and keep going.

Ross's depiction of Nigger, however, also shows the limits of this comic perspective. Our laughter temporarily alleviates some of the tensions that the play raises about the high death rate on reserves and about the touchy issue of self-government. However, at the end of the play, these tensions remain and the illness, hunger and poverty depicted in the play remain unchanged. We are left wondering if "not dying" is a sufficient goal in life. We get the sense that, with Nigger's approach, the community will survive but will not change. Does the maintenance of community have to mean such a conservative approach?

Perhaps the coping humour used by Nigger is not itself a force of change, but opens up psychological space for future change to take place. This further step is shown in Ruby Slipperjack's novel, *Honour the Sun*. Like Ross, Slipperjack uses humour to emphasize the closeness of a small Native community. In her novel, laughter often revolves around the escapades of a clumsy, clown-like character who is identified only as the "Town Joker." Unlike Nigger, however, the Town Joker uses laughter to inspire resistance as well as acceptance in the face of danger. For the young protagonist, Owl, and her family, which is headed by a single mother, the greatest danger comes from the drunken men who sometimes wander through the village, breaking into cabins. Just after such a drunk has shot the family dog, the Joker makes his first appearance in the novel, tickling people, slipping on fish guts, and generally causing a ruckus. In another incident, a drunken intruder catches and

assaults Owl's mother. But the next morning the Town Joker shows up, falling clumsily through the door that was broken the night before, and the chapter suddenly changes tone, dissolving into slapstick. Owl falls off her toboggan, her brother tears the seat of his pants, and the chapter ends with the family sitting around and teasing one another. They have not called the police, nor have they "worked through" the previous night's trauma. And yet, the Joker's perpetual silliness turns the situation around. He also literally turns things around, helping the mother to build a door that can be barred from the inside and opens to the outside; Owl calls it "a backwards door. Whoever heard of a door opening backwards?" (105). Such reversal occurs often in Native "transformation stories": The physical characteristics of this domain are the reverse of those found in the more familiar world This view of human social order is not a mirror image, but one that (like myth itself) simultaneously unbalances and reorients the protagonist, revealing the ordinary in new ways. (Cruikshank 340-41). Of course, such a reversal of norms is also a common element in humour. So, the "backwards door," representing transformation, humour, and a very practical means of fighting back, becomes an appropriate symbol of the Town Joker's role.

The Joker's gift of laughter even seems able to prevent disaster. On Christmas night, the Joker arrives, teasing the mother incessantly. He leaves and the family is still giggling about his jokes when the man who assaulted Owl's mother crashes through the door. This time, however, they attack him with a broom and pieces of firewood until he runs away. Owl describes the family's response after the incident:

I sigh as I feel my body relax. Then, a slow pressure builds in my chest and I begin to giggle. Still standing around by the stove, they all look at me. Then they, too, start to laugh. That is all I need; I let my laughter go. Oh, that was so good to see. I feel like hugging them all. (120)

In this scene, the family faces challenges and laughs together, showing their shared perspective and collective strength. As Owl becomes older, however, she and her family begin to laugh at different things, a difficulty which I examine later.

Both Nigger and the Town Joker are community teachers, although they never do offer instruction or criticism. In some other works, humour is shown being used in a more overtly educational way. However, even when a joke or humorous story is offered as educational, it is still rarely interpreted. This reticence is in keeping with traditional Native educational practices, which generally discourage direct instruction as inappropriate interference. Stories and jokes encourage people to observe and interpret on their own, allowing them to see multiple possible meanings. Laughter also makes the teaching seem less pushy and coercive and shows that the teacher is not arrogant or self-important. Vi Hilbert, a Salish historian, remembers her own childhood experience of listening to stories from her elders: "While the stories were told to me in great detail, allowing for my delicate ears, the moral was never, ever explained to me" (198). Barre Toelken, in a discussion of Navajo Trickster tales, points out that this indirection does not mean that there is no education taking place:

[The humour] functions as a way of directing the responses of the audience vis à vis significant moral factors. Causing children to laugh at an action because it is thought to be weak, stupid or excessive is to order their moral assessment of it without recourse to open explanation or didacticism. (Toelken 228)

Here, though, Toelken somewhat oversimplifies the teaching function of humour. It

is rare for humour to simply demonstrate unsuitable behaviour. Instead, humour tends to indirectly explore troublesome or contradictory areas of life. There are usually many possible “lessons” condensed in a joke, none of which represent *the* lesson.

As an example of the multiple meanings that can be carried in a seemingly simple humorous story, consider the traditional Innu story of how Wolverine got stuck in a Bear’s skull. Wolverine is a born survivor – an indomitable and self-sufficient hunter, much like the traditional Innu (Millman 209). However, he often makes a mess of things. In this story, as recorded by Laurence Millman, Wolverine is famished, having eaten only lemmings and shrews for a long time. He tricks a bear by pretending to be her brother and kills her. He then has a craving for the bear’s brain, so he transforms himself into a maggot, enters the bear’s skull through the eye socket, and feasts. But when he has finished eating, he discovers that he is too fat to escape the skull. By the time he is thin enough to crawl back out, the rest of the meat has been eaten by other animals (Millman 218-19). So Wolverine must continue his hunt for food, hungry once again.

The humour of this story works in many directions. The fear and reality of being hungry is something that is familiar to northern Native peoples, and Wolverine’s situation revolves around this troublesome issue. On one hand, the listener can identify with Wolverine’s hunger, admire his trickiness in overcoming it, and laugh at the easily-duped Bear. But Wolverine is also a target of laughter. His behaviour in the story is inappropriate and he gets his come-uppance. While hunters need to kill animals, hunting is a process that involves cooperation between the

spirits of hunter and hunted: the spirit of the hunted animal must give permission for its body to be killed. The way in which Wolverine kills Bear is dishonest and therefore immoral. The story also warns against Wolverine's greed and impatience, qualities that ultimately leave him hungry again. But, again, the listeners can also identify with and take pleasure in Wolverine's adaptability and survival skills in escaping the bear's skull. And he is able to shrug off mistakes and keep going – also an important lesson. Clearly the original audience's responses to this story would be complex, multiple and divided. The troublesome issue of how to morally respond to hunger is condensed but not settled.

In written Native literature, humour is also used as a multivalent teaching tool. For example, Louise Halfe's *Bear Bones and Feathers* and Gregory Scofield's *I Knew Two Metis Women* both depict the humorous teachings of Native mothers, grandmothers, and aunts. These elders use humour to teach mixed and ambiguous lessons about life. The women are themselves much like Wolverine, both foolish and wise, both role models and warnings. Scofield's poetry collection is a tribute to his mother and "Aunty" (a family friend), their love of country music, their raucous humour, and their gutsy attitude. Aunty especially uses humour to teach the young Gregory. Early in the collection, Scofield describes how she taught him to count in Cree by counting incorrectly, prompting him to correct her with "Keeskwiyān [You're crazy]" (30). Throughout, Aunty continues to teach by humorously playing up her own faults. But her humour becomes darker and more edgy as the book progresses. She lived a short disordered life, full of music and laughter, but also marked by violence, poverty, alcohol, and abuse. Her humour acknowledges that

life, celebrates it, and warns against it. Scofield describes how she told him about beating up three women in a bar:

She looks up, mischievous
As Wesakeejak
Spinning his tall tales.
“Tapway [It’s true],” she grins,
“No wooman mess around wit me.”

“Ah, mucheementow [devil],” I scold
To her laughter,

Though growing up
How many times I wished she’d come to school,
Hand-talk the bully (53).

In another incident, Aunty gives her common-law husband a black eye. “Aunt-ee,” Scofield protests, “No wonder he brought the cops” (50). But, when the police arrive, it is the husband who is arrested for domestic abuse. Scofield recounts her making blueberry bannock to take him in jail: “‘Blue bannock for dah blue eye,’ she chuckled, heading out the door. ‘Dah bugger will like dat’” (51). Scofield admires and longs for his aunt’s survival and fighting skills, but his repeated scolding response to her also shows that he also identifies her behaviour as inappropriate. She is both kind and unkind, capable and incapable, honest and dishonest. There is no clear moral lesson in her jokes, but rather moral dilemmas that push in various directions.

The speaker in Louise Halfe’s *Bear Bones and Feathers* describes her mother in similar terms, also describing her as “Wesahkecahk” (40) whose “pleurisy mocks [her] laughter.” (39). She, like Aunty, experiences domestic violence, carrying “ghosts of blueberry shiners / and an arm glazed in strawberry stains” (30). The speaker describes her mother’s teachings about “body politics”:

Mama said,

Real women
 don't steal
 from the sky and wear clouds
 on their eyelids.

Real women
 eat rabbit well-done
 not left half-raw
 on their mouth. . . .

When she was finished talking
 she clicked her teeth
 lifted her arse
 and farted
 at the passing
 city women. (32)

Halfe, throughout her collection, celebrates women's comfort with their own bodies, a comfort here embodied in her mother. And yet the mother also wears blue on her eyes and red on her mouth, but from beatings rather than from makeup. Clearly, there is an irony in the mother's concept of a real woman and her humour both teaches and warns.

Maggie-the-Fox in Tomson Highway's *Kiss of the Fur Queen*, offers a message that could perhaps sum up the philosophy of Scofield's Aunty, Halfe's mother, Ross's Nigger, and many other characters in Native literature:

"We dance, we fight, we cry, make love, we laugh and work and play, we die. Then we wake up, in the dressing room, with make-up all over the goddamn place, sweating so you smell like dog's crotch. I mean, get over it, Alice. You ain't got much time before that grand finale. So you get your little Cree ass out there. Just don't come here wastin' my time going, 'Oh, boo-hoo-hoo-hoo, poor me, oh, boo.'" (233)

At first it may seem that the fox's philosophy is the "moral" of Highway's novel; she, in her various forms, is with the characters from birth to death, representing their link to their family and spirituality. However, while Highway celebrates Fox's

survival spirit, his novel can also be read as a warning against the uncontrolled indulgence she represents, whether in sex, alcohol, or art. And she is strongly associated with various female characters that appear fleetingly throughout the novel, characters who are often drunk, pregnant, and abused.

Wolverine and Fox as well as Scofield's Aunty and Halfe's mother are all central to the representation of Native community in the works in which they appear. As traditional figures or elders, they have a long connection to the community and have gained knowledge through experience. And yet, we are left to puzzle out what they can tell us about their communities. In all of the examples examined, the comic characters embody excess, enjoyment, rule-breaking, and disorderliness. And yet, in each situation, there is also a sense of moral and social order being asserted. This contradiction is the source of humour. But it is also a deeply social contradiction; the point at which these forces meet is the fine edge between individual freedom and communal norms. This is an edge which each of us must negotiate, a process that is reflected (and perhaps learned) in our negotiation of this teaching humour.

Of course, this negotiation is never simple and can be painful. Thus far, I have emphasized the ways in which humour is depicted as a non-coercive and harmonious means of maintaining and enforcing community. The truth is, however, despite its innocent appearance, as Native writers show us, humour revolves around the heterogeneity, conflict, and complexity of social life. Thus, while humour can reinforce social cohesion, the flip side of this is that it can be used to pressure people into such cohesion. Community depends on a degree of conformity, and humour can be a way of establishing conformity without openly revealing deep negative

emotions and without directly interfering with, criticizing or blaming others, thus maintaining social harmony. Joseph Bruchac writes that Native humour is used to keep all community members on the same level: “Humor can be used to remind people – who because of their achievements might be feeling a little too proud or important – that they are no more valuable than anyone else in the circle of life. Teasing someone who gets a little too “tall” may help shrink them back to the right height” (159). Vine Deloria further explains the teasing process:

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 . . . were held to a minimum. (*Custer* 263)

A striking real-life example of the use of teasing as a social control can be found in Jean-Guy Goulet’s study of the Dene Tha, *Ways of Knowing*. Goulet recounts the experiences of a young Dene man named Paul. The Dene Tha believe in the reincarnation of souls, and Paul had always been told that he was the reincarnation of a young girl named Denise; he and his community recognized him as being both a man and a woman. However, as Paul grew up, he was pressured to break with his female side (184) and was finally, in his late twenties, pushed into having sex with a young woman. Goulet recounts:

For a week or so after the event, Paul was constantly teased in public, in the store, at church, on the road, with people asking him in Dene Dháh if he had enjoyed himself. Paul would inevitably laugh with them, acknowledging that the experience had, indeed, taken place and it had given him much pleasure. (185-6)

Paul has been pushed to take his place in the normative Dene social order. Though Goulet doesn’t mention it, the story does leave me wondering whether Paul might have preferred a homosexual, bisexual, or transsexual identity. Perhaps the constant

teasing of Paul, however affectionate, is ultimately oppressive. The community repeatedly reminds Paul of his female identity in order to shut that identity down. However, while it maintains social order, the teasing does have another side. It keeps the existence of Paul's double identity in people's minds, maintaining it as a possibility.

Many Native writers use this double function of teasing in their writing. Through their depiction of teasing, they can both show community norms and remind us of the limits of and resistance to these norms. For instance, in her poem, "Fireflies," Métis poet, Marilyn Dumont vividly describes how the speaker's elders use laughter to pressure her into finding a man and taking on her "proper" heterosexual role:

The old women cup their hankies in their sinew hands and giggle and tease like mosquitoes buzzing around my head and they ask 'what does he eat in winter?' I look blank faced and earnest and say 'I don't know,' and they slap their knees and burst into laughter, talking in Cree They talk fast, banter and stifle their cackles and ask 'whether he has teeth left and which ones are left,' and they snort into their hands like insufferable children and one of them tells a story and they all shake like fools with laughter and straighten their scarves on their heads and pull their skirts over their knees that bob like ducks in water. They make more tea and laugh and I know that they do this because they know better and because they have met more fireflies. (69)

The "fireflies" are the men who will lead the speaker into her "hottest flame" (69). As she says, the old women "know better" than their own jokes, recognizing the difficulties and perils of relationships between men and women (difficulties which Dumont's collection depicts). In fact, she says, they laugh *because* of this knowledge, suggesting that perhaps the less normative, less ordered knowledge that underlies such teasing is what gives it its humorous edge. But teasing still allows the women, without giving direct advice, to push the speaker towards the normative and,

the poem suggests, ultimately satisfying world of wives and mothers.

Like Dumont's poem, Slipperjack's *Honour the Sun*, ultimately affirms community norms. However, it also shows that fitting into such norms can be difficult. I earlier described how, in the novel, the Town Joker's teasing is a source of togetherness and strength. However, as Owl gets older, teasing becomes a means of keeping her "in line." Owl describes a humiliating day during which she is repeatedly the butt of her community's jokes. In each incident, the laughter of others communicates to Owl that she must grow up and conform. First, Owl is sitting on a beach looking at a piece of driftwood when her friend, Joe, whom she herself has recently teased because of his changing voice, approaches her:

Then this weird low voice comes out of his mouth. "What are you doing? And don't laugh!" he orders.

I look up at him for a second. "Oh, I'm just trying to see a figure of an animal's head or something in this," I said.

He chuckles, "Looks like the thing between a man's legs to me."

I jump up, really mad now, "You get out of here!" (82)

Here, Joe is initiating a more grown-up relationship between him and the unwilling Owl. This incident pushes Owl towards the adult world of sexual undertones and possibilities that will dominate the latter part of the novel. Later that day, Owl is scolded by her mother for carrying a slingshot:

"They say as long as a girl can stretch a slingshot, that's how long her tits will be!" There's a sudden explosion of choking and giggling all around the table.

"I don't have it anymore. I already threw it away . . ." my voice fades away. (86)

Here, sexual teasing is again used to change Owl's behaviour, in this case to urge her towards acceptable female behaviour. Finally, Owl is laughed at by friends and family when she mistakes a bearskin for a dead dog. She rushes home, tearing her

shirt in her impatience and blurts out, “Hey Mom! Know the old man over there that owns that old, black dog? He’s floating dead in the water at the beach!” (86). Her mother looks at her and says, “The old man or the old dog?” (86). Owl’s mistake is quickly discovered, and her mother’s laughter punishes her for being unobservant, impulsive, and excitable. By showing the ways in which Owl is pressured to fulfill expectations, Slipperjack reinforces our sense that the character belongs to a coherent community. At the same time, however, Owl’s embarrassment and resistance to this teasing continually reminds us of the ways in which she does not fit within those expectations.

As Slipperjack reminds us, the full realization of community is impossible. There will always be threats to a community’s coherence: ideas or people that do not fit in. The differences that prevent the achievement of a completely unified community will therefore be piled on a scapegoat, the victim of the humour. Slipperjack is alert to the potentially negative consequences of teasing, to what James English calls “the peculiar double-edgedness of this process, to the violent exclusionism on which the warm vision of community depends” (28). Eden Robinson explores, more extensively than Slipperjack, the aggression and exclusion that can be involved in teasing. In her short story “Contact Sports” the teen-aged Jeremy uses teasing to harass and torture his cousin Tom. He constantly teases Tom about his looks, his sexuality, and his epilepsy and he then downplays these put-downs, saying that they are just jokes, “Just ragging you, kid” (91). In Jeremy’s actions, we can see the distortion of the gently educational humour seen in previous examples. As the older of the two, Jeremy seizes on the role of the teasing elder and

forces Tom to conform to his standards, making him cut his hair and wear different clothing. Tom's "makeover" is, in Jeremy's eyes, a "joke" – causing Tom to be ridiculed at school. He tries to justify his controlling behaviour as a sign of his affection and his connectedness, saying Tom is like his brother. However, Tom is not permitted to return this kind of humour, as he discovers when he splashes Jeremy with a hose (93) and is immediately threatened. The act of joking is presented as an effort to grab power, and Jeremy wishes to possess all the power in their relationship. Jeremy confirms his position as an aggressive joker by tickling Tom. Tom is forced to laugh until "his ribs felt bruised and he was panting heavily, almost crying" (101). Being tickled, a mixture of laughter and powerlessness, is representative of Tommy's experience throughout the story.

"Contact Sports" raises disturbing questions about the power relations involved in humour. In fact, the title itself points to the pleasure humans seem to take in someone else's pain, especially if that pain is part of a game, a "sport," or a joke. And if we look back over the many examples discussed in this chapter, we can see that all of them involve some form of emotional pain and, often, physical violence. Nigger is punched in the face and the Town Joker repeatedly falls down. Wolverine is starving and Fox is abused. Scofield's Auntie and Halfe's mother are involved in domestic violence and Owl and Tom are humiliated. In every case, humour is entwined with and implicated in violence and ridicule.

It may be surprising to realize that there is a pattern of violence and humiliation in these works since they all (except for "Contact Sports") create a warm image of Native families and communities talking and laughing together.

Furthermore, I have emphasized the importance of harmony within Native societies – an emphasis that does not seem to fit with such a disturbing pattern. It is tempting to say that since the violence occurs within the realm of humour that it is, as Jeremy argues, “just a joke.” And, in a sense, this is true. The humour in the works does not permanently harm anybody. Nigger may fall down but he gets up again and Owl may feel humiliated but she recovers. However, the fact that the humour ultimately “makes nothing happen,” does not tell us why community-building laughter is so often associated with violence.

In order to begin to understand the association of this form of humour with violence, I would like to turn briefly to Clifford Geertz’s important anthropological essay “Deep Play: Notes on the Balinese Cockfight.” In the essay, Geertz analyzes the practice of cockfighting in Bali, a literal “contact sport.” The fights are a “popular obsession” in Bali, participated in by the vast majority of the male populace, held in the town centres, and associated symbolically with the men and with the island itself (5-8). Geertz identifies a number of seeming contradictions in this obsession. He notes that, despite their love of and identification with cockfighting, the Balinese are revolted by animality (6-7) and tend to be a subdued, cautious, and controlled people who evade conflict (25). There are parallels here to the depiction of humiliating or violent humour by North American Native people, who, like the Balinese, tend to value social harmony. Geertz also points out that cockfighting does not actually increase or decrease the status of the men involved (23), nor does it tend to have a great economic impact (16-17). In other words, like humour, cockfighting does not appear to actually “do” anything. So, Geertz

wonders, why bother?

His proposed answer to this question resonates in interesting ways with the examples of humour raised in this chapter. Geertz claims that the fights, precisely because they are set aside from life as “only a game,” become symbolic moments in which the Balinese can articulate and perceive issues of status and hierarchy in their society. He explains that this articulation does not actually change anyone’s status:

What sets the cockfight apart from the ordinary course of life, lifts it from the realm of everyday practical affairs, and surrounds it with an aura of enlarged importance is not, as functionalist sociology would have it, that it reinforces status discriminations . . . but that it provides a metasocial commentary upon the whole matter of assorting human beings into fixed hierarchical ranks and thus organizing the major part of collective existence around that assortment. Its function, if you want to call it that, is interpretive. (26)

Because of their symbolic and interpretive functions, Geertz concludes, the Balinese cockfights must be read, not as reflections of life in Bali, but rather as texts that say something about that life, to be interpreted much as we would literary texts (26).

In his essay, Geertz attempts to move anthropological methods towards something resembling literary analysis. However, when it comes to Native literature, literary critics often move towards an anthropological mode, viewing the literature as a direct and transparent reflection of Native life. If we were to take such an ethnographic approach to this humour, we would probably conclude that the violence in the humour in this chapter is simply a reflection of “problems” – violence, abuse, victimhood – in Native communities. But Geertz’s comments suggest a less limited approach.

Humour, like the cockfights, is episodic, emotional, and understood as somehow “lesser than” or detached from everyday life. As such, it becomes a site on

which to displace, condense, and examine various social tensions, anxieties, and contradictions. This view of humour as a node where contentious community issues meet is, in fact, an underlying assumption throughout this dissertation. In this instance, it can help us to understand why Native writers, in depicting the use of humour within Native communities, would also depict a thread of violence. I would argue that the humour is a means for the writers to reflect on and examine the process of community building. As I have shown throughout, the depiction of people laughing together and teaching one another creates a warm sense of closeness, a sense of “Native community.” However, the communitarian aim of complete social unity is, of course, impossible. There will always be an “outside” that does not easily fit within that community. The push towards that unity may therefore cause passive acceptance of violence (as with Nigger), the violent push to control others (as with Jeremy and Tom), or the maintenance of self-destructive patterns (as with Aunty). Ernesto LaClau has theorized that violence (both physical and emotional) and community are inevitably intertwined: “The first paradox of a free community is that that which constitutes its condition of impossibility (violence) constitutes at the same time its condition of possibility” (qtd. in English 22). This is not to say that all communities are violent, but, rather, that there is always an edge to community, an edge that lies between inclusion and exclusion, identification and alienation, power and victimhood, harmony and conflict. And the Native writers in this chapter use humour to face, examine, and play with this edge. Hence humour is depicted, not only as a moment of sharing, but as a means of survival (but not necessarily of progress), a means of controlling others, or a means of expressing

tense and morally complex situations.

“Community” has become a something of a buzzword in discussions of Native literature. However, the word can be deceiving since, as Raymond Williams points out, “unlike all other terms of social organization (state, nation, society, etc.) it seems never to be used unfavourably and never to be given any positive opposing or distinguishing term” (66). Indeed, the use of “community” in criticism of Native literature generally confirms Williams’ suspicions – it is unexamined and given uniformly positive connotations. However, as this chapter has suggested, Native writers, while valuing and affirming Native community, also critically examine the process of community building. This critical edge in many depictions of Native communities has been little noticed, perhaps because, as Robert Warrior argues, Native people have been acknowledged as producers of literature and culture but rarely as critics (xvi). Warrior further points out that we can learn from the ability of Native creative writers to critically hold factors such as sovereignty, tradition, and community-building in tension without reducing them to absolutes (118). Humour – with its basis in incongruity – offers these writers an effective way to maintain such a tension, both affirming and critiquing the formation of community.

¹ For a survey of writings on the value of community to Native people, see Jace Weaver’s *That the People Might Live: Native American Literatures and Native American Community*, 37-45.

Chapter Four Weesageechak Meets the Weetigo: Humour and Trauma

Tomson Highway's writing has always combined the brutal with the hilarious, the traumatic with the absurd. And this mix can be disconcerting to his audience. For instance, during one speech to an undergraduate class, Highway described his experiences in a residential school and commented, "I had to get out of there. I just couldn't swallow it anymore." The audience nodded seriously. There was a pause and then he laughed, "It's a joke! Don't you guys get it?" The audience squirmed, giggling nervously at his only reference to the sexual abuse he suffered at the school (Presentation).

Highway is not alone, however, in combining humour and violence. In this chapter, I discuss three works of fiction that use humour to approach the difficult subject of child sexual abuse: Richard Van Camp's *The Lesser Blessed*, Eden Robinson's "Queen of the North," and Tomson Highway's *Kiss of the Fur Queen*. *The Lesser Blessed* and "Queen of the North" both depict Native teenagers trying to cope with the experience of incest. *Kiss of the Fur Queen* tells the life story of two Cree brothers who were victims of sexual abuse in residential school. It is not surprising that these three writers chose to deal with the subject of abuse. In recent years, Native people have begun to face and to remedy the prevalent sexual abuse in their communities. This abuse is largely a legacy of the residential schools and foster care system, which took children from their homes, subjected them to sexual and physical abuse, and destroyed family relationships. That abuse was then passed from generation to generation. Robinson's, Van Camp's, and Highway's fiction is part of a rising chorus that is now speaking out against this abuse.

However, readers may be surprised by the humour with which these writers approach their difficult subject matter.

Native artists of all kinds have said that laughter has enabled Native people to cope with painful events. For example, Mohawk actor, Gary Farmer, has remarked:

Because Native communities have gone through probably the worst situations in North America that any peoples have gone through they had to have the ability to laugh. If they didn't, they wouldn't be existing today. So humour has been a means of survival, *the only means . . .* (qtd. in Ryan, *Trickster* 72)

Oneida stand-up comedian, Charlie Hill, has likewise said: "When the situation is the most grim, that's when you see Indian people making jokes about it, just for the survival" (8). However, the ability of humour to help people, and particularly Native people, survive traumatic events is rarely discussed in more detail. *Why* is humour such an effective way for Native people to deal with past and present traumas? This chapter explores this question, considering the psychological connections between trauma and humour. Paula Gunn Allen, a Laguna/Sioux writer, has suggested that Native "gallows humour" must be viewed in terms of "the dialogue that's going on between the writer and his or her fundamental community" (Interview 21-22). This suggests a very different approach than most psychological theories of humour, which tend to be individualistic in focus. However, even one's psychology is formed by a social and cultural context. For instance, in many Native cultures, it is considered unethical to speak directly or accusingly about bad experiences. But humour gives people the ability to say things and not say them at the same time, thus allowing the writers to tell stories of trauma with minimal disapproval from their community. Furthermore, because of its indirect and repetitive form, humour has a connection to the incomplete and repetitive nature of

traumatic memories. But even as humour expresses traumatic memories, it also offers a sense of relief in the face those memories, allowing the community to rally together and survive. Thus, “trauma humour” helps the writer to maintain their position within the Native community, despite the difficult nature of their subject matter.

To begin with an obvious social factor in this “trauma humour,” there is a strong taboo against the sexual abuse of children. However, the breaking of taboos is often very funny. To use a trivial example, there is something simply funny about someone passing gas, especially in a situation where such behaviour is very inappropriate, such as in a church or a classroom. It may seem strange to draw a comparison, but sexual abuse also provokes a strong sense of incongruity. The good father becomes a “sicko.” The celibate priest becomes a sexual sadist. And this breaking down of the normal can indeed be seen as funny. In Newfoundland, a rash of jokes arose out of Father James Hickey’s conviction for multiple counts of sexual abuse, the first and hence most shocking of a flood of revelations of such abuse within the province’s Catholic Church. Here is an example:

A young priest in Father Hickey’s parish was new at receiving confessions and uncertain about how much penance to assign. A young boy comes to confession and says, “Father, I cursed three times this week.”

The young priest answers, “Well, how much does Father Hickey give for cursing?”

“Twenty Hail Marys,” the boy answers.

“Well, twenty Hail Marys then. Anything else?”

“Yes Father, I gave someone a blow job.”

“Oh dear. Well, tell me, how much does Father Hickey give for a blow job?”

“A bag of chips and a bar.”

Such jokes were always told in a lowered tone of voice and people inevitably shook their heads in disapproval, even as they laughed. But “Father Hickey jokes” nevertheless

spread like wildfire. The jokes offered people a way of indirectly and almost secretly dealing with the distressing revelations, which struck at the heart of strongly Catholic Newfoundland communities. They expressed the absurdity of mixing the holy with the profane, immoral and criminal. And as many humour theorists have pointed out, jokes are typically structured around such clashes. Native communities, where the Catholic Church has had a similarly strong hold, reacted with a similar sense of humour to the flood of revelations about abuse in Church-run residential schools. Eden Robinson records one of these jokes in her novel, *Monkey Beach*:

“Hey, how many priests does it take to screw in a lightbulb?”

“How many?”

“Three. One to screw it, one to beat it for being screwed and one to tell the lawyers that no screwing took place.” (310)

The popularity of “Father Hickey jokes” in Newfoundland arose not only out of the incongruity of the abusive situation. They also reflected a changing attitude in Newfoundland society, a move from innocent faith to a more bitter and ironic view of the Catholic Church. In *The Great War and Modern Memory*, Paul Fussell argues that such a change in worldview lends itself to humour. Fussell claims that, since the trauma of World War One, the prevailing point of view in Western society has been ironic. This point of view arose, he says, because of the ironic disjunction between our current cynicism about the war and the innocence and naivete that preceded and drove it. Fussell describes the British soldiers as morally and sexually innocent boys who approached the war with the same sporting spirit that they brought to football (23-25). But their worldviews were quickly and brutally transformed, leading to a kind of retrospective humour: “Now that ideal was broken like a china vase dashed to the ground. The

contrast between That and This was devastating The war-time humour of the soul roared with mirth at the sight of all that dignity and elegance despoiled” (qtd. in Fussell 8). Similarly, Paula Gunn Allen claims that Native humour was transformed by the devastation of European contact. She contrasts the use of humour in traditional Native stories and in contemporary Native writing:

[The humour is] more bitter in the contemporary ones. It’s almost gallows humour [W]hen you’ve gone through five hundred years of genocidal experiences, when you know that the other world that surrounds you wants your death and that’s all it wants, you get bitter. And you don’t get over it. It starts getting passed on almost genetically. It makes for wit, for incredible wit, but under the wit there is a bite. (Interview 21-22)

Like Fussell’s disillusioned soldiers and Allen’s bitter survivors, some abuse victims can look back on their past abuse with a dark sense of humour. In the fiction of Van Camp, Robinson and Highway, the abused characters recall their abuse with this kind of humour, perceiving a painful but ironic contrast between childish innocence and evil reality.

In terms of structure then, sexual abuse *can* lend itself to a humorous treatment. As Mary Douglas suggests, part of the enjoyment of a joke comes from the “congruence of the joke structure with the social structure” (364). Douglas argues that a joke occurs when something formal, dominant, and controlled is challenged by the appearance of something originally hidden, something which is uncontrolled and subversive (364-365). In the case of sexual abuse, there is congruence between the joke and the social, since both the joke and the abuse break down the normal structure of things. The sexually deviant and taboo enter the controlled world of social relations. According to Douglas, this breaking down *must* translate into humour since “the experience of a joke form in the

social structure calls imperatively for an explicit joke to express it” (368). However, here Douglas clearly overstates her argument, since sexual abuse is usually discussed in very serious terms. Why then would some people turn to humour to deal with sexual abuse while others do not?

I will begin to answer this question in a roundabout way. Instead of asking “Why be funny?” I would like to begin with the question, “Why not be serious?” To answer this, we need to understand some differences between Native and non-Native approaches to sexual abuse. Western psychology and pop-psychology currently favour theories of trauma and post-traumatic stress to describe the effects of sexual abuse. I would like to draw attention to two assumptions made by proponents of trauma theory. The first assumption is that it is right to name and blame the perpetrator of the traumatic experience. The second is that it is right to speak about, to bear witness to, your traumatic experience. The process of witnessing may be terribly difficult, it is argued, but it is part of healing and it is a *good* thing to do. For example, Kali Tal, in her book, *Worlds of Hurt*, speaks of witnessing in the following way:

Bearing witness is an aggressive act. It is born out of a refusal to bow to outside pressure to revise or repress experience, a decision to embrace conflict rather than conformity, to endure a lifetime of pain and anger rather than to submit to the seductive pull of revision and repression. (7)

These two ethics — of witnessing and of blame — make sense within white, Western, twentieth-century notions of justice and psychological health. But we must remember that they are culturally formed and informed. In fact, the terms with which Tal approvingly describes witnessing – as aggressive, angry, individualist – are the antitheses of the traditional ethics of many Native tribes.

Studies have shown that psychological theories and therapies do not necessarily work cross-culturally (Duran 2). Native communities are widely hesitant to accept psychological theories based on concepts from other cultures. In an interview, an unidentified Kwa'kwala'wakw woman commented on the inadequacy of the psychological therapy model for Native people. Native people, she explained, have their own systems of treatment which need to be reclaimed, not replaced:

For me it's as if everyone has to understand where the spokes [of the wheel] need to go before we can get anywhere, but the information about where the spokes go is scattered right now But instead, what social work and all those self-help things try to do is create more spokes White people are just starting to discover that yes, we do have a lot of answers, and we did have really elaborate, complex systems that spoke to every aspect of life. (qtd. in Alfred 14)

These elaborate indigenous systems do not fit with the system of blaming and witnessing that underlies much current psychological theory.

The very word, "witnessing," found so often in contemporary trauma theory, points to the difficulties in applying that theory to Native people. Native people have long complained about and worked to make changes to the confrontational system of witnessing in the Canadian courts. In *Dancing with a Ghost*, Rupert Ross, a Crown Attorney in Northern Ontario, describes the difficulties that he has seen many Northern Natives experience when asked to take the witness stand. Ross explains that, at first, he could not understand why the witnesses were so uncomfortable, evasive and emotionally inexpressive. But he goes on to explain that the process of witnessing violates three traditional ethics of Northern Native peoples. His analysis is heavily based on the work of Dr. Clare Brant, a Mohawk psychiatrist, and Charlie Fisher, the first Native Justice of the Peace. I will briefly discuss the three ethics with which witnessing in court interferes:

1. *The Ethic of Non-Interference.* To explain this ethic, Ross cites Dr. Brant: “We are very loath to confront people. We are very loath to give advice to anyone if the person is not specifically asking for advice. To interfere or even comment on their behaviour is considered rude” (qtd. in Ross 13). Clearly this ethic goes directly against the critical and confrontational nature of witnessing.

2. *The Ethic that it is wrong to express anger and grief, especially towards family members.* Ross writes that when he receives psychiatric assessments of Native people in trouble with the law they almost invariably read something like “in denial, unresponsive, undemonstrative, uncooperative” (33). These assessments show a misunderstanding of traditional ethics, which forbid the standard Western therapy of digging deep into your psyche and divulging all.

3. *Finally, what Ross calls the “Doctrine of Original Sanctity”.* Vastly oversimplified, this is the belief that people are fundamentally good and that the emphasis should be on encouraging the restoration of that goodness, rather than the prohibition and punishment of wrongs.

These three traditional ethical beliefs discourage the act of witnessing to traumatic events. Many Native people feel uncomfortable disclosing anger and grief, and blaming or criticizing others, especially those in their family. It is not only that witnessing may be difficult, even impossible, but that it may be seen as ethically wrong, as an improper way to behave. These ethical guidelines suggest personal submission to the community’s need for harmony. Western psychotherapy, on the other hand, has a predominantly individualistic orientation. *The Circle Game*, a recent study of the

residential school experience, condemns the individualistic therapy model as applied to the abuse of Native people (Chrisjohn et al 272-287). And several psychologists working in Native communities have found that therapeutic approaches that emphasize community harmony and integration are more successful than individual therapy (Koss-Chiorno 157-8; Thomason 173-4).

These ethics do not, of course, apply equally to all tribes. Furthermore, Native people have found that following these traditional guidelines may not always be the most successful way to deal with some contemporary situations. For instance, in order to begin to deal with the problem of sexual abuse, Native communities have had to ask for offenders and victims to fully disclose the abuse. They have also had to interfere with the freedom of sex offenders, demanding that they undergo tests and healing programs and restricting their activities and movements (Fournier et al 143-172).

There are then, two contradictory impulses at work for Native people when it comes to speaking about sexual abuse. There is often a need for them to speak about traumatic experiences in order to change what is happening. But there is also a strong cultural prohibition against making direct or angry accusations. There exists simultaneously a need to tell and an impulse not to tell. Our awareness of that conflict means that we are finally ready to answer the question, "Why be funny?" One answer is that joking offers an alternative to witnessing. Humour gives Native writers a means to show their anger and criticism in an indirect and non-confrontational way. Through a joke, one can both say something and not say it at the same time. Thus, humour allows us to communicate the hidden and taboo without openly revealing deep negative

emotions and without directly interfering with, criticizing or blaming others. As Allan Ryan comments in his discussion of Native art depicting residential school experiences, “[H]umour, no matter how cryptic or toxic, has proven to be one way to expose, yet still maintain some distance from, the pain and the anger” (*Trickster* 201).

We can see the reluctance to express negative feelings at work in Basil Johnston’s *Indian School Days*. These memoirs of Johnston’s days in Garnier Residential School use humour to criticize the Jesuit priests who ran the school. He jokingly complains about the poor food, the constant surveillance, and the unjustified thrashings. At the school, such humour was the boys’ only possible form of rebellion. They pelted the priests with rotten potatoes, laughed at their stumbling lectures on sex, and used their inedible bread as frisbees. Johnston explains that this kind of joking resistance was a camouflage for deeper troubles:

Food was the one abiding complaint because the abiding condition was hunger, physical and emotional. Food, or the lack of it, was something that the boys could point to as a cause of their suffering; the other was far too abstract and therefore much too elusive to grasp. (137)

We can guess at the elusive “other causes of their suffering” – loneliness, loss of language, loss of culture, loss of normal childhood relationships and behaviours, perhaps abuse – but they are rarely mentioned outright and never in an angry way. For Johnston, humour is the only mode through which he can let us know about residential school. He seems to leave it to us to read further into his laughing complaints. Although Van Camp, Robinson, and Highway’s descriptions of negative childhood experiences are more direct than Johnston’s, like Johnston, they use humour to bring up negative subjects slowly, indirectly, and even cryptically.

Johnston suggests that the boys' jokes about their physical hunger were linked symbolically, even subconsciously, to a deeper emotional hunger. Because it is such an indirect mode of speech, humour can allow the release of memories, feelings, and images hidden in the mind, including subconscious memories of abuse. Sigmund Freud is the most famous theorist of the unconscious power of humour. In *Jokes and their Relation to the Unconscious*, Freud argues that jokes allow the release of subconscious, childish pleasures and aggressive feelings. Jokes, he says, "must bring forward something that is concealed or hidden" (44). Though he never made a connection between trauma and humour, Freud saw jokes and traumatic memories as emerging from the same part of the mind. He believed that traumatic memories are sealed off in the unconscious because they are too painful to consciously bear. Those unconscious memories can only be expressed symbolically, through hallucinations, dreams, flashbacks, phobias, and art. Following Freud's logic then, humour can also be a means of symbolically expressing trauma. However, it is important to remember that, in many ways, Freudian theories are not reconcilable with Native ethics. When Freud, and many comic theorists since, have emphasized that humour provides a release or escape from the chains of society, allowing "the unconscious to bubble up without restraint" (Douglas 364), emphasis is placed on the individual mind, which is considered superior to yet restrained by rigid social structures. I would argue, on the contrary, that we cannot distinguish our individual psychology from social forces. Thus, when Native writers use humour to indirectly deal with the topic of child abuse, they are not escaping community pressures and taboos. Rather, they are dealing with the subject in a way that is acceptable within the

community.

The notion of the subconscious mind sending us symbolic messages is not unique to Western psychology. Within Native North American cultures, there is a strong sense that the mind contains hidden knowledge. One fundamental means of accessing the unknown mind in Native cultures is through dreaming. Dreams are viewed as an important source knowledge and power (Irwin 19). Furthermore, unlike in Freud, Natives people see dreaming as inextricable from the images and beliefs of their cultures (Irwin 20). In the fiction I will be discussing, the characters often do experience memories of their childhood abuse – often expressed in the symbols and stories of their own cultures – when in a dream, vision, or trance. Furthermore, as we will see, the characters also experience a great deal of humour in these dream-like states. This is not surprising since jokes and dreams have a lot in common. Both can be amusing, have a kind of zany logic, and be a form of wish fulfilment (Parkin 40-41). Whether we choose to use Freud’s theory of the unconscious or the Native theory of dreaming knowledge or not, we can see that there is a psychological linkage between trauma and humour. Cree artist Jane Ash Poitras describes how jokes can shed light on the hidden and the repressed:

Like it’s a camouflage. What happens is that when Indian people use humour – you see, most people will look at it and just see the surface of it, but you’ve got to go deeper below the levels of the real, deep, deep into the humour, and you find knowledge beyond the profane. (qtd. in Ryan, *Trickster* 106).

In the fiction I will be examining, the characters do gradually achieve self-knowledge through their cryptic “trauma humour.”

Not only do humour and traumatic memories arise out of the same part of the

mind, they also emerge in similar ways. Both arise out of the imitation and repetition of previous events. A trauma involves not only the violent event itself but the way that the experience is repeated again and again – through flashbacks, nightmares, and, worst of all, through repetitive, destructive actions. In the case of sexual abuse, the victims will often create imitations of their own abuse, either through inescapable memories, self-destructive behaviour, or the abuse of others. But these repetitions are incomplete, fragmented, changed, and neither fully known nor understood (Caruth 6). The trauma is simultaneously hidden and revealed.

Much humour is built on a similar structure of incomplete imitation and repetition. As Bergson simply writes, “L’imitation fasse rire [imitation gives rise to laughter]” (32). We have all laughed at someone’s impression of a person or event. The imitation is funny only because it is not quite like the original, almost but not quite. We laugh at something as simple as hearing a familiar song sped up to double time, simply because it is the same but different. It is not surprising then that the incomplete repetitions that are part of traumatic experiences might actually sometimes be funny, that they might actually lend themselves to humorous expression. According to Linda Hutcheon, parody is defined by a critical difference at the heart of similarity and repetition (*Irony’s* 4). While the repetition of traumatic experiences is often not critical, the addition of an ironic humour seems to bring an element of knowledge and awareness to this process. In the three works that I will discuss shortly, the humour often comes from the characters’ abilities as mimics. But their mimicry is not only funny, but also painful. The characters replay their abuse over and over, often in humorous ways. These

imitations are a form of resistance, but they also continually connect the characters back to their abusive pasts. Ojibway artist Carl Beam reveals the ambiguity of such imitative humour in one of his photo-emulsion engravings, entitled *Semiotic Converts*. The most prominent photograph in the piece shows the reunion of a group of Native men who once attended a residential school. The men, laughing and smiling, stand in the carefully regimented rows of the official class photo. The title of the piece can be read in two ways. On the one hand, “Semiotic Converts” may suggest that the men have been converted, not only religiously, but to the signs of a domineering and abusive culture (Ryan, *Trickster* 201). Their careful adherence to the inevitable rows may suggest a deeper kind of imitation. On the other hand, “Semiotic Converts” can be read much more positively. The men may be converting and subverting the school systems through their joking parody of a school photo. The message may be something like, “Look at us now! We survived this kind of thing!” Both meanings co-exist in the piece and its title. This kind of ambiguity, this mixture of imitation of and resistance to trauma, can also be seen in the humour of Van Camp, Robinson, and Highway.

Of course, despite all these connections to trauma, humour also offers pleasure and psychological relief. In looking for the “meaning” of a joke, it is important not to forget this. As Basil Johnston comments in a discussion of humorous traditional stories, “First laughter, then thought” (“How Do” 45). Laughter decreases stress, diverts attention from the tragic, provides balance and perspective, and gives hope. As such, it works to maintain Native communities in the face of tragedy. Vera Manuel’s *Strength of Indian Women* and Oskinko Larry Loyie’s *Ora Pro Nobis* are two plays that deal with the

abuse in residential schools. These plays do not use humour to describe abuse.

However, horrific flashbacks are interspersed with scenes of Native people laughing together and enjoying themselves. The humour provides relief from sadness. It reminds the audience that people can still laugh, despite such experiences, that they need not be beaten into submission or depression. Métis writer Mickie Poirier says that he has recently discovered the importance of humour in his life: "I realize now how very scared is the clown who provides a path for the force of my anger towards persistence and survival. Without this, my anger would turn to poison, I'm sure" (118). Such a sense of humorous resistance has been an essential tool for Native peoples over the past 500 years. In fact, Antonin Obrdlik, who has studied the "gallows humour" in Czechoslovakia following the Nazi invasion, suggests that the use of humour for resistance and psychological escape is shared by all oppressed peoples: "I am inclined to believe that what is true of individuals is also true of whole nations -- namely, that the purest type of ironical humour is born out of sad experiences accompanied by grief and sorrow" (715).

Thus far, this chapter has suggested a theory which links the trauma of sexual abuse with humour. To summarize: through a structure of partial imitation, humour allows the indirect expression of repressed traumatic memories. But while humour brings these painful memories to the surface, it also counters them with the pleasure and relief of laughter. However, it is difficult to talk convincingly about humour without examples. So I will now test this theory against three texts.

Richard Van Camp's *The Lesser Blessed* is in many ways a traditional "coming-of-age" novel. The protagonist, Larry, has his first fight, his first drug experience, and

his first sexual relationship, finally coming to a better sense of his own potential. But the novel is made much darker and more complex by the underlying and only partially revealed story of Larry's past. During trance-like states induced by violence or drug use, Larry has flashbacks of his childhood. These flashbacks are written in fragmentary images and, as readers, we must struggle to put together the Larry's history. When we do, the story is horrific. As a child, Larry watched his father rape his mother and his aunt while they were passed out. When his father also forced Larry to perform oral sex on him, Larry killed him with a hammer and then burned the family's house down. In a later incident, also recalled through flashback, Larry was sniffing gas with his cousins in a shed. Larry lights a match in the fume-filled room, yelling, "Let's die! Let's die!" (79) but he instead ends up in the burn ward.

Larry involuntarily repeats these traumatic events in his mind over and over. In fact the novel opens with an image of this kind of repetition. Larry says: "I remember. . . I scratch with a knife the word NO a hundred million times on the back of all the mirrors in our house" (1). This image is a potent symbol of Larry's psychological situation. The mirror will repeatedly reflect his face and the face of his mother, just as he himself mirrors his own abuse. But the word "NO" on the mirror is a sign of Larry's resistance to this process of repetition and imitation. One way in which Larry resists the legacy of his past is through his sense of humour. Throughout the novel, Larry is able to laugh at himself and his problems. When asked how he was burned, he jokes, "I got kissed by the fuckin' devil, man. They're fuckin' hickeys. He sucked me good" (87). This kind of response probably allows Larry to survive the question without having a breakdown.

However, the joke, with its sexually violent images, is also clearly linked to Larry's memories of his father, memories which he cannot escape.

Larry's humour is not usually so dark. He repeatedly makes juvenile sexual and scatological jokes. Such humour largely serves as a release in what might otherwise be an unbearably sad and horrific story. But, at times, as in the example above, the humour itself becomes an imitation of the past. I will focus on two funny moments in the novel, both of which include references to monkeys. Monkeys can be natural mimics, imitating or "aping" the actions of humans. And we laugh at these imitations, find them delightful. But within the context of this novel, monkeys become part of a very black humour. The monkey imagery is introduced in the first few pages of the novel, when Larry retells a story he learned from Jed, his mother's boyfriend. In the story, Jed is in India. He and some buddies are on a balcony, smoking up and having some tea and toast, when eight monkeys jump up on the balcony. According to the story, if monkeys in India are caught stealing, for punishment, they get their hands or arms cut off. So these monkeys, several of them missing a hand or an arm, attack Jed and his friends and steal their tea, their toast, any clothes that they had left lying around, and even their pipe.

On the one hand, this is a funny, though somewhat scary, anecdote. But the story, which is given prominent placement in the novel, also introduces the theme of destructive imitation. These monkeys had been abused, mutilated and crippled by humans. One could even say that these monkeys had been traumatized. In retaliation, they attack and bite humans. But they also imitate those humans, stealing their food, their clothes, even their drugs. Larry's situation is very much like that of the monkeys. He struck back with

violence at his abuser, but he continues to repeat that abuse in his head and to imitate his father's destructive habits of violence and substance abuse. Throughout the novel, Larry is haunted by horrifying images of mutilated monkeys – symbols of his own repetitive trauma (81).

Larry is like those Indian monkeys, both a comic and a mimic, trapped within the cycle of mimicry. It is not surprising then that one of our first hints of what exactly has happened to Larry also uses the image of the monkey. Larry is at a party and has just smoked dope for the first time. He is lying on the living room floor in a trance-like state:

For no reason whatever, I remembered this joke I had heard once. I couldn't remember how it went or who told it, but I stole the punch line and I started to say it. I started to moan, "Mommy, your monkey's eating Daddy's banana . . ." and then I started to wail "Mother, your monkey's eating Daddy's banana." . . . Don't ask me why but I laughed until I was crying and then I laughed some more. (38-39)

The line that Larry remembers is the punch line of a common joke about a child seeing his parents having sex. However, in this context, the line seem to be a disturbing reference to his seeing his father rape his mother. It may also refer to the oral sex that Larry's father forced him to perform, with Larry again playing the monkey. The joke and the trauma have become one. This is just one of several moments in the novel where reliving his past makes Larry want to roar with laughter (42-43; 92). For him, humour and memories of incest seem inextricably and involuntarily linked. Larry's constant humour is a cryptic and indirect way for Van Camp to tell us not only of Larry's past abuse but also of its continual effect on his life. It is not clear whether or not Larry's humorous visions are therapeutic, but another of his stories does suggest that we must call the past to us on order to release us from its power. He tells the tale of how a woman

was haunted by her dead son until she conjured him up and burned his clothing (100).

This story, like many of Larry's, does not have a clear and single meaning. It invokes various images from Larry's past, recombining them in a new way. It seems that, through the culturally acceptable means of joking and storytelling, Larry is able to slowly and repetitively revisit his past, analyse it from various angles, and perhaps, eventually, find a way to live with it.

Unlike *The Lesser Blessed*, Eden Robinson's "Queen of the North" depicts abuse that is on-going. Adelaine's uncle has been raping her since she was a child until she finally becomes pregnant and has to go to the city for an abortion. When she returns to her hometown she decides that the abuse has to stop. She does not, however, directly confront her Uncle and tell him to stop. Rather, she resists the abuse through a series of dark jokes, ironically mimicking her own past experiences.

Adelaine, like Larry, is often described in terms of her abilities as a mimic. Her nickname is "Karaoke." She is given the name in honour of the night she spent drunkenly hugging the karaoke machine, wailing Janis Joplin, and waving a switchblade at those who tried to stop her. This desperate clinging to an act of imitation is characteristic of Adelaine throughout the story. And though the karaoke incident becomes a joke in the village, her penchant for mimicry is tragically linked to other aspects of her life. Her first rape by her uncle is described in terms of Adelaine's "aping":

"Moooo." I copy the two aliens on *Sesame Street* mooing to a telephone. Me and Uncle Josh are watching television together . . . Uncle Josh undoes his pants. "Moo." . . . It's like when the dentist gives me extra suckers for not crying, not even when it really hurts. (190)

Innocent, childish imitation, of the aliens and then of her behaviour at the dentists office, becomes self-destructive. And, later, Adelaine further replicates the violence that has been done to her by beating up other women. But even this imitative violence becomes a joke when Adelaine and another woman get stuck pulling one another's hair, unable to do any further damage. "My friends are laughing their heads off," Adelaine recounts (199). In this ridiculous situation, her fighting is exposed as an unproductive performance, as inappropriate as her "mooring" while being abused.

It is fitting then that Adelaine's attempts at resistance also involve actions of imitation, but with a critical and ironic difference. Like Larry, she is writing "no" on the reflection of her own abuse. Her first visions of resistance and revenge begin on an unconscious level, in her dreams. One Christmas, as a child, Adelaine got the Barbie speedboat for which she had been wishing, but the gift is from her abusive uncle. She then has this dream:

Ronny [Adelaine's cousin] comes to visit. We go down the hallway to my room. She goes in first. I point to the closet and she eagerly opens the door. She thinks I've been lying, that I don't really have a boat. She wants proof.

When she turns to me, she looks horrified, pale and shocked. I laugh, triumphant. I reach in and stop, seeing Uncle Josh's head, arms, and legs squashed inside, severed from the rest of his body. My clothes are soaked dark red with his blood.

"Well, what do you know," I say. "Wishes do come true." (187)

This gory vision has a bitter sense of humour. There is a ridiculous clash between the childish innocence of Adelaine's statement, "Wishes do come true" and her deep hatred of her uncle.

Adelaine's actual revenge on her uncle begins when she finds a photo of her

Uncle Josh as a boy, standing with a priest in residential school. Looking at the photo, she realizes that her uncle was molested by this Father Archibald, an act of abuse which Josh now repeats. The next time her uncle arrives at her bedroom door, she says, "Father Archibald? . . . I've said my prayers" (212). Uncle Josh, reminded of his own victimized past, retreats. Her revenge is a clever impression of Uncle Josh and the rhetoric of his childhood abuse. She has taken the repetition of abuse that has been passed from the residential school and, with bitter irony and humour, has turned it into an act of rebellion.

Adelaine feels "light and giddy" (213) at the success of her "joke" and decides to try another one. Her next act of resistance is to create a "gift" for her uncle:

I use a recent picture of Uncle Josh that I raided from Mom's album. I paste his face onto the body of Father Archibald and my face onto the boy. The montage looks real enough My period is vicious this month. I've got clots the size and texture of liver. I put one of them in a Ziploc bag. I put the picture and the bag in a hatbox The note inside the box reads, "It was yours so I killed it." (213)

This "gift" is once again an imitation and a "re-presentation" of her trauma. The photographic montage is an image of the pattern of abuse that has been passed from the residential school to her. And it is also darkly funny, based on the old joke of pasting a cut-out head on a photograph of someone else. The blood clot, which is part of the last remnants of her aborted pregnancy, is a symbol of her violent but continuing connection with her uncle.

But this "joke" is unsuccessful. Adelaine's boyfriend Jimmy, rather than her uncle, accidentally opens the package. Jimmy immediately cuts off all contact with Adelaine and, we discover at the story's end, gets a job working for Uncle Josh on his

fishing boat. It is not entirely clear why Jimmy does this. But in any case, it is clear that Adelaine's boyfriend has now entangled himself with, and perhaps allied himself with, Adelaine's abuser.

The ending of "Queen of the North" provokes a number of disturbing questions about the connection between trauma and humour. In the story, Jimmy becomes an "audience" for the kind of humour that I have been discussing throughout this chapter, a humour that indirectly, cryptically, and ironically communicates the existence of sexual abuse. But when Jimmy sees this humour his response is not sympathy or engagement. Instead he retreats from the facts and maintains the status quo. We are, like Jimmy, also an audience for this humour. What will our response be? Robinson seems to be self-reflexively asking whether her own black humour is a successful way of dealing with violence. Does humour too easily allow us to stay on the outside, laughing and then looking away?

Tomson Highway prefaces *Dry Lips Oughta Move to Kapuskasing* with the words, "Before the healing can take place, the poison must be exposed" (6). Humour allows Adelaine and Larry to expose the poison in their lives. But does it help them to heal? We do not know whether Adelaine has permanently escaped her uncle. And though Larry is optimistic at the novel's end, he is also entirely alone. Laughter exposes the abuse and offers the audience a sense of escape from what might otherwise be unbearably sad stories. But it does not offer any real escape. In fact, Robinson's story suggests that the humour is complicit, trapped in the continual repetition of abuse.

As Highway's epigraph suggests, he believes that humour can have a much more

positive function than we see in Robinson and Van Camp. Highway, like the other authors, uses humour to deal with traumatic memories. But he also suggests that humour, despite its dangers, can be liberating and central to our enjoyment of life. Highway's recent novel, *Kiss of the Fur Queen*, contains many of the themes that I have already discussed, including the linking between dreams and humour and the repetitive and imitative nature of the humour. But the novel is unusual in its creation of a theory of abuse and psychological trauma that is grounded in Native mythology. This theory explains the characters (and perhaps Highway's) use of humour when dealing with traumatic memories. Anthropologist Michael Kenny has argued that, just as western psychology's current belief in Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder is grounded in a particular history and culture, so other societies have evolved their own theories to explain the connection between past traumas and current misfortunes. As an example of how a variety of cultural interpretations can fulfil the same purpose, Kenny draws the example of a Kwa'kwala'wakw man who experienced a "psychotic episode" and was killed in a confrontation with the police. The man believed that he was transforming into an eagle. The *Vancouver Sun* reported on the incident:

The inquest revealed that his original psychiatric diagnosis was of "complex" Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder, supposedly provoked on return home [to his reserve] by arousal of memories of his childhood with alcoholic and sexually abusive caretakers. Others thought that perhaps his behaviour was due to an old head injury. Still other believed that he was trying to complete his transformation, something whites could not understand. (qtd. in Kenny 162-3).

Kenny views all these readings of the man's death as equally valid. As he emphasizes, psychological interpretation is a *creative act*, an act in which we can see Highway's *Kiss of the Fur Queen* engaging. Drawing on Cree mythology, Highway creates a narrative

that connects his and his brother's past abuse to their adult lives.

The novel recounts Jeremiah and Gabriel Okimasis's experiences at residential school, including their sexual abuse at the hands of the priests. Though they both grow up to be successful artists, they are haunted by the damage from this abuse, damage which reveals itself through self-destructive behaviours. In many ways, this abuse is not so different from the incest in the previous two novels. The abusive priests are the boys' primary caregivers during most of their childhood. Furthermore, the boys cannot disclose the abuse without angering and alienating their deeply Catholic parents. So again, direct criticism of the abusers is impossible. For Jeremiah, the only possible response is to block the memories of abuse from his mind: "Some chamber deep inside his mind slammed permanently shut. It had happened to nobody. He had not seen what he was seeing" (80). Thereafter, the abuse enters the realm of dreams and the unconscious. For both brothers, it can be expressed only through destructive behaviour, through visions and through jokes. The boys explicitly link their trauma to the realm of dreams, specifically relating their memories to "bad dream power." Gabriel asks his brother:

"Do '*maschipoowamoowin*' [bad dream power] mean what Father Lafleur do to the boys at school?" Although he wanted to tickle his brother with this light-hearted joke, Gabriel's question ended with an eerie, spectral chuckle that could have popped out of a bubble of blood. (91)

Here, we see that memories emerging from the realm of "maschipoowamoowin" are often accompanied by laughter. Indeed, it is not surprising that the boys find something funny in their abuse. For them, residential school was an absurd mix of Catholicism and sexuality, of caretaking and abuse, of celibacy and sado-masochism. The order of their

world fell apart and was replaced by a ridiculous and false front. Humour is one way of expressing this incongruity, such as when Gabriel silently propositions a priest while receiving communion:

Gabriel's gaze raked its way up the belly, chest, and neck to the face, where he knew he had induced a flashing spasm in the holy man's gaze "The body of Christ," said the wizard. But the instant the flesh met Gabriel's, a laugh exploded where his "Amen" should have been. The laugh was so loud – the joke so ludicrous, the sham so extreme – that every statue in the room, from St. Theresa to St. Domonic to Bernadette of Lourdes – even the Son of God himself – shifted its eyeballs to seek out the source of such a clangour. (181)

Gabriel laughs at the absurdity of the situation and yet he is still, all his life, drawn towards this kind of abusive sexuality.

Highway analyses this ambiguous reaction to abuse through a mythological framework. Throughout the novel, Highway associates the Weetigo, a cannibalistic creature in Cree mythology, with sexual abusers: "a monster who eats little boys" (271). On the other hand, Weesageechak, the Cree trickster, is associated with the resistance to that abuse. Not surprisingly then there is a great deal of importance placed on the traditional story in which the two figures confront one another: Weesageechak, disguised as a weasel, is eaten by the Weetigo and then "chew[s] the Weetigo's entrails from the inside out" (120). The boys recall this story during a visit to the mall, an place of conspicuous consumption that the text associates with the Weetigo, describing it as "one great gaping mouth [where]. . . the roar of mastication drowned out all other sound" (120). Just as Weasel enters the Weetigo, the boys are sucked into this mall monster, buying the latest "white boy" fashions and eating until "their bellies came near to bursting" (120). But the visit to the mall contains an even more sinister event. When

Gabriel enters the men's washroom, he is confronted by a man exposing himself, "holding in his hand a stalk of fireweed so pink, so mauve that Gabriel could not help but look and, seeing, desire" (121). The man's behaviour is clearly inappropriate and abusive, especially since Gabriel is fifteen and did not ask for such a display. However, the imagery in the scene connects this experience back to Gabriel's experiences with the priests and Gabriel reacts to the man with pleasure and desire. It is significant then, that immediately after the encounter with the man at the mall, Gabriel tells the story of Weesageechak (the weasel) and the Weetigo. The weasel has just escaped the innards of the monster:

"'My coat!' moaned the weasel. 'My nice white coat is covered with shit!'" Gabriel continued the story of Weesageechak, the image of a certain man aflame with fireweed clinging to his senses with pleasurable insistence.

"Feeling sorry for the hapless trickster," said Jeremiah circumspectly, "God dipped him in the river to clean his coat. But he held him by the tail, so its tip stayed dirty."

"And to this day," Gabriel took his brother's words away, "as Auntie would say, 'the weasel's coat is white but for the black tip of the tail.'" Exulting that they could still recall their wicked Aunt Black-eyed Susan's censored Cree legends, the brothers Okimasis danced onto the sidewalk. (121)

This incident, and the story that the brothers tell, has significance on several levels. First, like Weesageechak entering the Weetigo, the Okimasis brothers try to deal with their abuse by diving into it. Gabriel does this by willingly entering into a world of promiscuity and self-abuse that eventually leads to his death. Jeremiah immerses himself in school, classical music, religion, abusive sexuality (259-60), and the desire to be white. Though their paths are very different, both brothers are, in trying to escape their past, actually imitating many elements of that past. Like the black tip of the weasel's tail, part of them is still stained by their abuse.

The story, however, can also be read as a parable about humour itself. Much of the humour in the novel arises out of the brothers' imitative skills. Like Larry and Adelaine, the Okimasis brothers are gifted mimics – this is what gives them much of their artistic powers. But they also imitate their abusers. For instance, the young boys imitate and parody the Catholic religion. They re-enact the crucifixion, throwing in a scene from “The Marriage at Cana.” This addition to the story may actually be a vision or dream, since their mother, Mariesis, is obviously not present at the school and not part of their performance. Gabriel/Jesus, labouring under the weight of the cross, is approached by Mariesis/Mary, who tells him the story of Big Dick’s wedding to Asscrack Magipom:

“Jane Kaka ran out of wine!” she ululated, then paused to suck dry a Javex jug; like excess milk, red wine streaked her breasts. “At the dance! Can you believe it?” She reeled, her knees buckled, and she collapsed in a heap.

“Not now, Mother, can’t you see I’m busy?” said Jesus.

“And Jane Kaka was so upset she fainted –” Mariesis burped, “right there in the church-hall kitchen. Banged her head against the statue of you, and *poof!* the water in Father Bouchard’s tank turned into Baby Duck, can you believe it?” She fell again. “One week later and the party’s still raging!”

Crack! the whip struck the Lord’s round buttocks. Mother or no mother, he could tarry no longer. (84)

Despite the hilarious biblical parody in this passage, the boys’ play is also tied up in the most tragic elements of their lives. The vivid description of Mariesis’s drunkenness invokes the alcoholism which afflicts the boys’ home reserve and which nearly kills Jeremiah. Also, the beating of Jesus/Gabriel’s bottom, which gives him an “unsaintly thrill,” recalls the physical and sexual abuse he received at the hands of Father LaFleur. The brothers’ play is not only a joke; it is also an expression of and imitation of the worst parts of their lives.

Even the hilarious and irrepressible Weesageechak his/herself is depicted as

immersed in oppressive and destructive patterns. Throughout the novel, a number of mysterious female figures appear, all linked by their white fur coats, which in turn connects them to the wily white weasel of the boys story. These are all manifestations of a trickster figure; while in the form of an Arctic fox, she identifies herself as a litany of Native tricksters: “Miss Maggie-Weesageechak-Nanabush-Coyote-Raven-Glooscap. . .” (233). However, this figure is far from ideal – she is repeatedly represented as drunk, pregnant, battered, raped, and murdered. Like the weasel’s white tail that is covered in shit, these women figures are immersed in abuse and trauma. Again, Highway seems to suggest that his humour arises out of and cannot escape an abusive past. The tale of Weetigo and Weesageechak thus becomes a central means of interpreting both the brothers’ lives and the humour in the novel. The playful Weesageechak offers a means of resisting the evil Weetigo, by entering him and destroying him from within. However, this means of resistance is dangerous, as it leaves one permanently stained by that evil. Just as the brothers’ lives are stained by their past. And just as their humorous resistance maintains the contact with that past.

Like Robinson in “Queen of the North,” Highway is self-conscious about the dangers of parody as a form of resistance. However, unlike Robinson, he ultimately chooses to focus on the positive aspects of such humour. Weesageechak may be stained by his/her encounter with the Weetigo, Highway shows, but at least he/she is still dancing (175) and laughing. In fact, she/he seems immortal: “Evelyn Rose McCrae smiled her gap-toothed smile; long-lost daughter of Mistik Lake, her womb crammed with broken beer bottles. A white fur cape fell away from her shoulders . . . she laughed, and fell

across Jeremiah's table" (216). It is Weesageechak as "Maggie the Fox" who makes the novel's most convincing plea for the positive powers of humour and resistance: "Because without entertainment, honeypot, without distraction, without dreams, life's a drag. No?" (233). Ultimately, it is this comic spirit that balances the bad dream power that haunts the brothers. It is Gabriel who first sees this balancing effect: "Then it struck him: if machipoowamoowin, bad dream power, was obviously powerful enough to snuff out a human life, then would not mithoopoowamoowin, good dream power, be as strong?" (247).

The two forms of dream power battle it out near the novel's end. Jeremiah and Gabriel have almost identical visions, in which the "Weetigo" and "Weesageechak" both appear. I will quote here from Jeremiah's. The vision begins with an idyllic recollection of Jeremiah's early childhood. But then Jeremiah laughs, and with that laugh the vision creatures appear:

What's this? A face? Yes. In the forest and larger, blotting out the trotting dogs. Champion closed his eyes, hoping it would go away. But when he opened them again, the old man was still glaring. At him. Why did he look so angry, so embittered, so dreadfully unhappy?

Gradually, against the old man's mouth, an arctic fox appeared. The pretty white creature wore a sequined gown of white satin, gloves to her elbows, white wings whirring. (286)

This vision ends with the Weetigo's triumph. However, at the novel's very end, when Gabriel dies from AIDS, it is Weesageechak who appears to take his soul, winking at Jeremiah as she/he takes his brother away. A few days earlier, Gabriel had imagined this figure meeting their father's soul at death: "Weesageechak, for sure. The clown who bridges humanity and God – a God who laughs, a God who's here, not for guilt, not for

suffering, but for a good time” (298). Finally, then, it is mithoopoowamoowin (good dream power) that triumphs.

Kiss of the Fur Queen creates a theory about the interaction of trauma and humour, one that works on a mythological level and interacts with all the “real-life” events of the novel. But this theory not only helps explain the characters’ actions, but is also a reflection on Highway’s own writing. Highway seems drawn to scenes of abuse. In his musical, *Rose*, for instance, five women are beaten or killed on stage. Highway has commented that musical theatre has a long history of misogyny, which he wants to help change. And yet, a viewer of *Rose* might well ask whether the play instead continues the misogynist tradition. Is it necessary to continually replay scenes of women being victimized? Might it not be better to focus on strong, positive images? One audience member commented, after viewing *Rose*, “Highway seems to want to make us look at trauma again and again and again.”

In light of my reading of *Kiss of the Fur Queen*, however, it appears that such repetition might be inevitable for Highway. Traumatic events seem to demand to be repeatedly remembered, revisited, and relived. In *Kiss of the Fur Queen*, Highway brings this revisiting to his own life story. But his writing also replays the traumas of society as a whole, focussing in particular on the abuse of women and children. Like Weesageechak diving into the Weetigo, Highway dives into this abuse, putting it on the page and on the stage in an effort to destroy it. Does he end up, like the weasel, carrying the stain of this abuse? Perhaps. His plays have been accused of misogyny. And *Kiss of the Fur Queen* also walks a risky line, making some dangerous associations between

sexual abuse, sexual desire and homosexuality. But he constantly tries to balance this stain with a spirited sense of humour and a refusal to give in to the forces of tragedy. In one shocking scene from *Rose*, a naked rapist is strung up and castrated. But seconds later, a large number of men in bikinis dance onto the stage holding large dildos. *Kiss of the Fur Queen* suggests that Highway believes that this comic spirit will win the struggle in the end.

As I pointed out early in this chapter, many Native artists have said that laughter has helped their people to survive centuries of trauma. But this does not mean that laughter is a cure-all. Rather, as the fiction of Van Camp, Robinson, and Highway makes clear, “trauma humour” is the site of a psychological struggle, a struggle between repetition and resistance. This struggle can be a learning process, allowing a slow, repetitive, and indirect rethinking and revisiting of traumatic experiences. But even as humour brings past traumas to the surface, it camouflages and distances them, allowing the relief of laughter. The fight between tragedy and comedy at the centre of Highway’s works may be the fight to survive.

Chapter Five

Niwawiyateyihten: Code-switching Humour

Canadian Native people widely believe that the survival of their ancestral languages is vital to the health of their cultures. In disciplines such as education, linguistics, and anthropology, this concern with indigenous languages has been reflected in the research. However, there has been very little critical attention paid to questions of language use in Canadian Native literature, especially when that literature is in English. Critics seem to assume that when Native people write in English language issues are not relevant. On the contrary, even when written primarily in English, Canadian Native literature persistently grapples with the usage or non-usage of Native languages and/or English.

One reason so few literary critics have addressed language issues in Native literature may be that few of them understand any Native language. They therefore feel an understandable anxiety when approaching questions that draw attention to those languages. As a result, they usually tend to focus on the content of the literature, giving little notice to language and style. Since I am not fluent in any Native language, I too felt anxious as I approached this chapter. Without understanding Native languages, how could I understand their place in Native humour?

My response to this dilemma is to focus my analysis squarely on the anxiety, confusion and wonder that occur at the intersection of two or more languages. Such anxiety is not necessarily counter-productive. By acknowledging what we find unfamiliar, strange, and nonsensical, we can become more aware of our own boundaries and of our and the text's specific positioning (Sarris 131). In this chapter, I will show

how several Canadian Native writers manipulate language to create anxiety in their audience.¹ They do this through the technique that linguists call “code-switching,” moving back and forth between various language and styles. Refusing to let readers see language as a transparent mode of communication, the writers remind us constantly of the power politics and miscommunications that mark the interaction of Native and non-Native languages. Here, to give you a sense of what code-switching can look like, is a brief passage from Marie Annharte Baker’s “Squaw Guide.” This passage, typical of Baker’s style, moves between a variety of “codes,” including racist terminology, English slang, a variety of Native languages, and current feminist lingo:

saw some young women doing some reverse
squaw baiting
they were sitting in a bus shelter
whenever a guy would go by
one of them would say
HEY HUN-NAY
then they would laugh

I should try that stunt
TANSI HUN-NAY
get my voice all husky
BOO JOO HUN-NAY
at the next pow wow in South Dakota
I would say in breathy tone
WASHTE HUN-NAY

maybe feminism makes me too shy
to joke around much
the women now talk about outing
wonder out where?
out in the bush?
probably out of my mind (31)

Baker plays with her ability to imitate many different voices. Like the other writers I will discuss, she uses code-switching to repeatedly disrupt our reading. This passage also exemplifies the playfulness and humour with which many Native writers use this technique. This chapter will discuss the functions of code-switching and explore some popular forms of code-switching in Canadian Native literature.

Native writers use code-switching as a humorous response to the challenge of deciding in which language to write. A Native writer's use of English is rarely simple and transparent, for his or her choice of language is always socially marked and fraught with politics.² Many are torn between the practical appeals of English and the value of Native languages. While most Native writers in Canada today either must write or choose to write predominantly in English, their use of English is not necessarily comfortable. Many see Native languages as the primary carriers of Native cultures and view English as an "enemy language" (Baker "Borrowing" 59). Language is an important symbol of identity, an issue of sovereignty, power, and group membership. As the Cree elders say: "Kinêhiyâwiwininaw nêhiyawêwin [The Cree language is our identity]" (Henderson, "Ayukpachi" 263). However, for many Native writers, English is their mother tongue and/or the means of reaching the most readers, both Native and non-native. Dennis Lee is pessimistic about such a choice, describing "colonial" writers as "gagged" by this dilemma (156). While Lee is referring to Euro-Canadians, whom he sees as speaking colonial English as a foreign tongue, his words would appear to take on a particular aptness when applied to Native people who do not speak their ancestral language³:

Try to speak the words of your home and you will discover – if you are a colonial – that you do not know them . . . To speak unreflectingly in a colony then, is to use words that speak only alien space. To reflect is to fall silent, discovering that your authentic space does not have words. (163)

However, Native writers have not given in to this apparent stalemate. They do not speak unreflectingly, nor do they fall silent. Rather, many Native writers are searching for an “authentic space” and distinctive language within English. In this search, they face two important dilemmas. First, how can a Native person maintain a “language identity” while speaking or writing primarily in English? Second, how can he or she communicate with a wide audience while resisting the power of Standard English? Cree actor and writer Billy Merasty sums up his predicament he faces when deciding whether to write in English or Cree: “[I]t’s very hard to give something that a lot of people can’t get because it’s not their own language. And it’s very hard to give something that’s very hard to translate because what you’re giving can’t be fully translated – so there’s always something left behind You can’t really strike a balance. You just do the best you can” (40).

As Merasty says, it is difficult for Native writers to “strike a balance” when faced with this language dilemma. Instead, many have chosen to emphasise their and their readers’ lack of balance. By code-switching, jumping back and forth between various languages and styles, they challenge the dominance of any one language. By keeping the reader “off balance,” the writers bring their language choices to the reader’s conscious attention, refuting the transparency of language and reminding us of the (very political) powers of language: to disrupt, confuse, exclude as well as to include, inform,

and amuse. They remind us of the confusions and miscommunications that can arise between languages and cultures, and they warn us against being too sure of any language or interpretation. I have seen a number of Native writers use code-switching to such effect in their public readings. Before reading their work, which is in English, they will make a few initial remarks in their ancestral language. This gesture has multiple effects. It maintains the writer's resistance to making English the only public language. It also reaches out to those in the room who also speak the Native language, encouraging a sense of community and communicating a respect for the language. And, finally, it creates a moment of discomfort for those listeners who do not speak the language, reminding them that they do not understand everything. Having made this code-switching gesture, the writer then goes ahead and *uses* English, knowing that they have first challenged its dominance.

Of course, code-switching does not always have such a political undercurrent. The collision, translation, and mixing of languages are everyday occurrences for many Native people. Many switch effortlessly between two or more languages depending on the situation (Douaud). But literary code-switching, because it is not necessary for communication, is *marked*. The choice of code frames the content of the words, signalling that they are to be read in a particular way. As socio-linguists have long recognised, code-switches convey specific messages: "the presence or absence of particular linguistic alternates directly reflects significant information about such matters as group membership, values, relative prestige, power relationships, etc" (Scollon and Scollon 9). As readers, we try to understand the meaning of these various linguistic

choices. But our understanding of some codes is necessarily limited since we may not share the communicative assumptions necessary to fully understand a particular language or style. The audience is pulled back and forth between understanding and being reminded that it does not understand. And authors can use this confusion or delayed understanding to create specific aesthetic or political effects. I want to emphasize here that Native code-switching does not necessarily divide its audience along Native/non-native lines. The multiple codes at work in many of these texts assure that few readers, Native or not, are fully comfortable at all times. If such discomfort is a sign that something has been lost, I would argue that something is also gained – a pressure to reflect on language and on our own position.

Code-switching is widely used by Native people to negotiate issues of language and identity. While little research exists on code-switching in Native literature, there have been several linguistic studies of Native people's use of multiple languages.⁴ These studies can shed light on the literary uses of code-switching. For instance, Basil Sansom's study of the languages of Australian Aborigines who camp outside the city of Darwin shows how they have dealt with dilemmas similar to those of Canadian Natives, trying to maintain a distinctive language while remaining comprehensible. The group of camps around Darwin is a centre for people from fourteen different ethnic-linguistic groups, most of whom can speak two or three Aboriginal languages. To allow common understanding within this multilingual situation, English has become the common and public language. In fact, speaking an Aboriginal language within the camps is considered improper (28-29). Like the Darwin Aborigines, Native writers in Canada usually choose

English in order to communicate with people from many different tribes and linguistic groups. Sansom found, however, that linguistic distinctiveness remained important to the Aborigines, since without it “issues of identity would be at risk” (31). Thus, although the Aboriginal camp-dwellers speak English, their style of speech differs so much from Standard English as to often be nearly incomprehensible to non-native speakers. Furthermore, they make careful distinctions between forms of English, with certain accents, words or phrases having strong social associations. The Darwin Aborigines often switch between these various “Englishes,” sending strong messages about their identity and/or activity (38-9). Thus, even within English, the Aborigines find ways of linguistically signalling their identities, in relation both to white society and to each other. In this chapter, I will show that there is a similarly complex use of multiple languages and language styles in the work of many Canadian Native writers.

Researchers have noticed the humour and pleasure with which many Australian Aborigines regard their rampant code-switching, part of their general enjoyment in “putting things to unintended uses” (Cowlshaw 266; see also Hawkins 28). This sense of humour around code-switching is shared by Canadian Native people. The meeting of two or more languages can create a sense of incongruity, performance, and nonsense, and the potential for many forms of word play. As Bakhtin argues, “varied *play with the boundaries of speech types*, languages and belief systems is one most fundamental aspects of comic style” (*Dialogic* 308). This kind of play is prevalent in Native writing. As Nancy Lurie comments, Native humour “is strong on puns, word play in general, and stunning juxtapositions of seemingly unrelated concepts and contexts” (202). Thomas

King similarly explains that Native humour is characterised by

[v]ery bad puns and lots of them and having to hear the same jokes over and over again. I think the majority of Natives in Canada, if they're not bilingual, they come pretty close to it. Some are even trilingual. It means you can play with language. And because many of the communities still have a strong basis in oral storytelling, play with language, punning, joking is crucial to that thing we call Native humour. (Interview with Farmer 4)

King's suggestion that Native people "play with language" has been echoed by numerous Native writers describing the humour with which they approach "the enemy language."

Billy Merasty says that he "plays around with" English (42). Heather Hodgson speaks of the challenges of "tickling" English (par. 26). And yet another Cree writer, Emma Laroque, quips: "[E]ven though we know the English language well, we may sometimes pay little attention to its logic – perhaps we will always feel a bit rebellious about it all" (xx-xxi).

To understand the humour of Native code-switching, I find it useful to compare a code-switch to a riddle. Like encountering a riddle, reading a sudden switch into an unfamiliar code is disorienting. In his essay on riddles, Robert Finley calls this experience "the nonsense moment." Finley explains that riddles provoke anxiety by challenging our usual ways of making sense of the world: "[Y]ou enter the country of that which eludes you, and in it you are free from being sure of anything. This moment is brought about by the difficulty of the text, by its nonsense" (4). This seems to me an excellent description, not only of riddles, but of coming across, for instance, untranslated Cree words in an English text (if you don't speak Cree, that is). However, a riddle must be more than nonsense. It only becomes funny once we know the answer – which

introduces some “sense” to the transaction. On the other hand, if the question is too “sensible” in the first place, then it is not a riddle at all. Thus, the humour of a riddle arises out of the meeting of nonsense and sense. This conjunction pulls us in, gets us thinking, and makes us laugh.⁵ Even after we have figured out the riddle, we are still reminded that the boundaries our knowledge and our language have been stretched. Cree elder Vern Harper explains that this educational function of riddles is a tradition among his people:

The thing too with the Plains Cree is riddles, riddles our people used to do. We’ve lost a lot of that. The riddles teach you to think, to figure things out for yourself I still try to do that humour with riddles and stuff. Some will get it right away, others won’t. They just scratch their heads. I want people to think, to figure things out, not always have the punchline, create their own punchline, figure out the mysteries of life. Humour is one of the very important parts of the mystery of life. (qtd in Ryan, *Trickster* 38)

Code-switching also draws us into a “mystery of life” – how to negotiate unfamiliar languages. J.E. Chamberlin, applying Finley’s riddle theory to the challenges of reading unfamiliar Native oral texts, reminds us that that we must “go into and through that nonsense moment . . . , surrendering to the language, suspending one kind of belief for another” (“Doing” 86). In the same way, we can begin to “make sense” of Native code-switching by giving over to our impressions of nonsense, our sense of confusion or exclusion. As with riddles, the humour of code-switching works through the simultaneous experience of nonsense and sense. We are accustomed to language operating in particular patterns, systems or codes. When this system is suddenly disrupted, there is a loss of order or sense. Susan Stewart explains that the mixing of multiple systems (in this case, language systems) creates nonsense: “The juxtaposition of

two or more systems of sense will point to the non-sensible character of one or more of them, for such a juxtaposition undermines the suspension of doubt needed to engage in at least one of the domains of reality” (17). And this kind of disruption and nonsense can create humour. Just as the breaking of chemical bonds creates an explosion of energy, the breaking down of the order of language can create explosions of laughter.

Of course, the code-switching in Native writing does not lead to the complete dissolution of sense. Even if the code-switching can make reading difficult, most readers can still distinguish some meaning. Furthermore, the ways in which the authors control the switches can send clear messages about the appropriateness of various language forms. In particular, humour can be a tool to show the writer’s resistance to certain forms of language. As such, writers can use code-switching to unify and centralise language, to impose limits and to correct the multitude of voices.

Cree poet Louise Halfe’s poem, “Stones,” is an apt example of my comparison between riddling and code-switching because it is both a riddle and a code-switching text. The poem’s “riddling” nature actually arises out of the use a language code that is unfamiliar to many readers, a code sometimes called “Cree English.” Cree English is a form of constant code-switching, moving back and forth between Cree and English words, rhythms, and images. Here is a passage from “Stones”:

Men
day hang dere balls
all over da place.

what I didn’t no
is day
whack dem

fundle dem
 squeeze dem
 dalk to dem
 whisper to dem
 scream at dem
 beg dem
 pray to dem
 g ah sh
 even
 swear at dem

I know dese
 cuz I followed dem
 at dat place
 where day use ghost berries
 nd buff alow sticks
 nd play in da
 buff a low mud
 nd day use day
 stick
 nd whack dem
 berries
 into
 dem
 gopher holes

dere always drying
 to put dem
 dere balls everywhere (81-82)

What, this poem leaves us to figure out, are those men doing? Most readers of this poem probably struggle a bit with the language, forced to show down and “sound out” the lines. We begin the poem with one assumption about the meaning of the “balls” and then are forced to suddenly adapt this meaning when faced with some incongruous images. We are working with multiple codes, a Cree-inflected English, English slang, and a cryptic language of prairie images. The play relies on our momentary confusion and consequent

resolution for its humour. If we cannot interpret the Cree English voice at all or figure out what the men are doing with their balls, then the humour is lost. On the other hand, even if we can come up with one answer (playing golf), the poem still plays on another meaning of “balls.” The riddle here meets the pun, where the splitting of meaning disrupts the sensible and single path of understanding (Stewart 161). Together the two meanings create a humorous image of men as ridiculous and self-obsessed. But, even as we “figure out” this poem/riddle, we are reminded of our uncertainty, reminded of the difficulties in interpretation.

Like Halfe, many Native writers use the simultaneous sense and nonsense generated by code-switching as a response to the dilemma that I mentioned earlier: How can one communicate widely while maintaining a sense of a distinctive linguistic identity? Halfe’s poem can communicate with a wide English-speaking audience. And yet, the movement between language forms creates a continual feeling of nonsense. This nonsense element reminds us of what we do not understand, keeps us at a distance, and reminds us of the speaker’s distinctive identity. The space between two or more codes is “a silence beyond which the cultural Otherness of the text cannot be transversed” (Ashcroft et. al. 54). You may understand, but you never feel that you fully understand.

N. Scott Momaday’s telling of the traditional Kiowa story of “The Arrowmaker” crystallises the ways in which contemporary Native literature contains both sense and nonsense, and both includes and excludes readers. He compares the story to a riddle: “there is a kind of resistance in it, as in a riddle; it is the richer for that” (11). Here is the story, in Momaday’s words:

If an arrow is well made, it will have tooth marks upon it. That is how you know. The Kiowas made fine arrows and straightened them with their teeth. Then they drew them to the bow to see that they were straight.

Once there was a man and his wife. They were alone at night in their tepee. By the light of a fire the man was making arrows. After a while he caught sight of something. There was a small opening in the tepee where two hides had been sewn together. Someone was there on the outside, looking in. The man went on with his work, but he said to his wife, "Someone is standing outside. Do not be afraid. Let us talk easily of ordinary things." He took up an arrow and straightened it in his teeth; then, as it was right for him to do, he drew it to the bow and took aim, first in this direction and then in that. And all the while he was talking, as if to his wife. But this is how he spoke: "I know you are there on the outside, for I can feel your eyes upon me. If you are a Kiowa, you will understand what I am saying and speak your name." But there was no answer, and the man went on in the same way, pointing the arrow all around. At last his aim fell upon the place where his enemy stood, and he let go of the string. The arrow went straight to the enemy's heart. (9-10)

As Momaday has said, this is a story that yields multiple meanings, a story about language itself. I read it first as a warning. The Arrowmaker plays a joke (or a riddle) on his enemy. The downfall of the enemy is that he never "gets" the joke. As I have suggested in previous chapters, humour always operates along lines of inclusion and exclusion. Humour draws social boundaries and there is perhaps no stronger creator of boundaries than language differences. The Arrowmaker tells his joke as a test, a test that only another Kiowa-speaker can pass. We are thus cautioned against being too certain of any culturally distanced interpretation. More specifically, we are warned away from thinking that we can always understand humour that passes through or from a language that we do not understand. Those who are too certain, the story warns, may get an unpleasant surprise.

Momaday's telling of the story in English, however, complicates the situation. There is an invisible code-switching happening as we read. We are to imagine that the

man speaks Kiowa even as we read his words in English. As a result, we who do not understand Kiowa, as I do not and as Momaday himself does not, can still get the joke. Yet, that same joke could just as easily be played on us. We are strangely placed both inside and outside the teepee. The joke both makes sense and does not make sense. We know what the Arrowmaker says and yet we do not. Our own sense of inclusion and exclusion draws us into the very dynamics of the story.

In this story then, our lack of knowledge of Kiowa may actually add an element to our understanding. As I mentioned, Momaday agrees that our inability to completely understand and possess the story is productive: “there is a kind of resistance in it, as in a riddle; it is the richer for that” (11). Thus, the story of the arrowmaker also offers a promise. When languages meet, there may be danger, but there are also possibilities – for a riddling humour, an irony, a self-reflexive engagement.

In the remainder of this chapter, I will explore a number of code-switching techniques that are commonly used by Canadian Native writers. One common technique is to incorporate words or phrases in a Native language into a mostly English text. However, this technique requires a careful balance between sense and nonsense, especially if the writer is trying to create humour. If too much of the audience cannot understand too much of the work, then a large portion of readers may lose interest. On the other hand, if the unfamiliar language is too fully explained, then the resistance and distinctiveness that I have discussed may be lost. Because of these risks, some Native writers decide to add glossaries to their code-switching texts. Others, however, choose not to translate. This decision is partially a matter of style and partially one of politics.

Emma LaRoque, for example, complains, “Then, there is the challenge of wanting to use soul language, which for me is Cree, but having to explain it with a running bracketed glossary is distracting” (LaRoque xx). The presence or absence of a glossary also affects the humour of a work. Glossing can give access to humour that might otherwise be missed, but it can also remove a playful element of nonsense from the text.

Some Native writers include a glossary, often because they want their audience to feel included in the humour of their code-switching. However, as many jokers realise, if you have to explain a joke, then its humour is often ruined. Similarly, the gap between a text and its gloss can destroy the funniness of a moment. For instance, when Drew Hayden Taylor’s play *The Baby Blues* was performed in Pennsylvania, he worried that the audience would not understand certain words and would miss the jokes. He therefore provided a glossary in the program. However, he later commented that he would not do this again, since it took away from the immediacy of humour to have people shuffling through their program (“Native Humour”). Tomson Highway’s novel, *Kiss of the Fur Queen*, similarly contains a glossary at the back. Without this glossary, many of the jokes would be inaccessible to non-Cree-speakers. For example, when the protagonist, Champion, comes across a residential school nun playing the piano, he secretly puts words to the music: “Kimoosom, chimasoo, koogoom tapasao, diddle-ee, diddle-ee, diddle-ee” (56). Without the glossary, I would not have grasped the incongruity and humour of this scene. The translation of Champion’s tune is: “Grampa get a hard-on, grandma runs away, diddle-ee . . .” (308). Heather Hodgson observes that the Highway’s glossary paradoxically both reveals and destroys the humour: “While the glossary orients

the reader and enables the reader a glimpse of the humour, it also undercuts Highway's linguistic subversion by annihilating precisely the otherness of the other" (par. 37).

Hodgson worries that the glossary over-explains, destroying the element of nonsense that keeps readers self-conscious.

Other writers share Hodgson's concern that glossaries dull the political edge of code-switching and hence part of its humour. Giving an object or action its Native name is an act of power; the author asserts the right to define the world in a Native-centred way. Some writers believe that to gloss Native words is to remove the power of this naming act and to give the translation the higher status (Ashcroft et al 66). Furthermore, for some writers, the audience's incomprehension is part of the joke. For instance, Métis writer Lee Maracle recounts an incident where untranslated Native words were used to make a powerful and humorous point. Maracle tells of being at an environmental conference attended by Native and non-Native people. For most of the day, various scientists spoke, using a highly technical language that was inaccessible to the non-scientists in the room, including many of the local Native people. Near the end of the day, a Native man stood up and said that he would like to give an Indian point of view. As Maracle describes, "The old man spoke in his language for three hours and then sat down. The Natives cracked up" ("Oratory" 238).

Thomas King is one writer who, like the Native people at the conference, finds humour in the way that Native languages are "nonsensical" for much of his audience. King describes glossaries as "ethnographic" in that they try to "explain" Native cultures, seeking to cover over any incomprehension. Thus, despite pressures from his publisher,

King refused to gloss the Cherokee words in *Green Grass, Running Water*. He felt that this would make the Native language seem “anthropological” and exotic, rather than playful (“Native Humour”). King also plays with untranslated Native languages in *The Dead Dog Cafe Comedy Hour*. In many episodes of the show, Jasper and Gracie have brief conversations in Cree, intentionally excluding Tom. In fact, as King has explained, he really is excluded. He does not understand the Cree-speaking actors, along with most of the audience and the CBC administrators who, he comments, were not happy to hear that King had no control over what his fellow actors were saying. King describes the whole situation as hilarious (“Native Humour”). He refuses to allow the CBC, his publishers, or his audience to entirely “make sense” of his work. But, on the other hand, there is a kind of authorial sense in this nonsense. King intentionally maintains a sense of cultural boundaries and exclusions in his work. He thus subverts any attempt to have power over the words. And this subversion is what King finds so funny.

Rather than using words in Native languages, some writers choose instead (or also) to code-switch between various forms of English. Even within a single language, there are countless variations and each, as Bakhtin writes, “tastes of the context and contexts in which it has lived its socially charged life” (*Dialogic* 293). Thus, certain forms of English can be identified as very “Native” and others as very “white.” Native writers control and play with these various social codes to create particular messages and identifications in their work. Many Native writers have begun, for instance, to write parts of their work in “Native Creole,” also known as “Indian English” and “Red English.” Native Creole, a language spoken by many Native people, involves frequent

combinations of and switches between English and one or more Native language. The growing popularity of writing in this language is a break away from the shame that has long surrounded its use. Louise Halfe admits that she still worries that people will see her as “making fun” of Native Creole (“Interview” 44). But rather than “making fun,” these authors are instead “having fun” with the language. Kenneth Lincoln explains that Native writers take advantage of the expressiveness of what he calls “red English,” “its concise dictions, distinctive inflections, loping rhythms, iconic imagery, irregular grammar, reverse turns on standard English, and countless turns of coiling humor” (15).

While Native Creoles are not, of course, inherently laughable, their frequent and unexpected language combinations do lend themselves to humour. For example, in Maria Campbell’s *Stories of the Road Allowance People*, the Cree-English-speaking narrators do not distinguish between he/she and can/can’t. A reader not familiar with Cree English would probably be amused and perplexed by the following passage, which occurs very early in the first story of the collection, describing the narrator’s seduction by a woman:

so I go wit dis woman to hees shack
Hees man was gone trapping so he tole me not to worry
jus get in da bed wit him. (7)

Campbell recorded the stories from Métis elders who told them in Michif (a combination of French and Cree), and she translated them into Standard English and then into Cree English. The multitude of languages involved in this project reflects a multilingualism that is common among Native people. The stories often emphasise this, giving multiple names for things:

Long time ago I knowed dis ole man

hees name was Harry Tistaymow
 Dat means tobacco in our language but us
 we call him Chi Ka Chee.
 He live wit a woman one time and that woman he was a Rou Garou
 Josephine Jug of Wine dat woman he was called
 Dat not hees real name
 Dey call him dat cause he live in da big city for a long time.

This language's sense of multiple possibilities, of continual renamings, creates a gentle humour throughout these stories.

Some writers use such Creole renamings to make to make more pointed commentaries. For instance, in "T. For," Métis poet Gregory Scofield describes how his Aunty, a speaker of Native Creole, revised country songs to make them more representative of her experience. Her Jimmie Rodgers album was scratched and "even weighted with pennies and promises" the needle would not play beyond these lines:

*If you don't want me mama,
 You sure don't have to stall
 'Cause I can get more women
 Than a passenger train can haul. (39)*

Scofield refers repeatedly to the skips and scratches on his Aunty's old records (39, 128, 138), gaps that allowed her to compose her own music. She improvised her own ending to the Rodgers tune:

If you don't want me daddy
 You sure don't have to call
 If you don't want me daddy
 You sure don't have to call,
 Cause I can get more neecheemoosuk
 than a sled dog can haul

and the needle and Fat Paul [the town bootlegger]
 scratched
 and waited, stubborn

as hell,
 thinking it was damn funny
 till they
 both got busted. (40-1)

Aunty reworks the song to reflect her own northern heritage and throws in a little of her Cree mother tongue. Her revision is also a response to the male “drinkin’, cheatin’, ramblin’” life glorified in most old country songs. Aunty asserts her own right to find many neecheemoosuk (sweethearts), rather than, as Patsy Cline sings, “standing by her man.” There is also an ironic edge, of course, to an “Indian cowboy” (60), especially when the cowboy is a woman, the image challenging the popular history of the West. The poem also brings us back to the subject of humour. As Scofield reminds us, Aunty’s song is “damn funny.”

Louise Halfe also uses the language crossing of Native Creole to create a very pointed humour. For instance, in “Der Poop,” the Cree-English speaker is in the outhouse and notices, on the newspaper that serves as toilet paper, an article reporting the Pope’s apology to Native people for the Catholic Church’s racist legacy:

der poop
 forgive me for writing on dis newspaper
 i found it in da outhouse, saw line
 dat said you is sorry
 So i was sitting here dinking dat we
 maybe dalk
 say, I always wanted to dell you stay
 out of my pissness

The outhouse situation shows just what the speaker thinks the apology is worth. And Halfe’s use of Cree-English backs up that judgement. The Pope’s business, or “poop’s pissness,” is associated with the dirty and scatological.

These examples from Campbell, Scofield, and Halfe reveal the ways in which Native Creoles can mix things up, humorously disrupting standard meanings and forcing us to look at things in new ways. However, by using Native Creole forms, the writers are also asserting a linguistic stability. I explained earlier that Native writers are faced with the challenge of maintaining a distinctive linguistic identity while communicating in English. The use of Native Creole, as a sign of a distinctive cultural and linguistic identity, offers a potential solution to this dilemma. While Native Creoles are decipherable by Standard English speakers, the language slows the reader down, forcing him or her to “sound out” the words. This barrier to easy reading creates a sense of the boundaries between languages, conserving a sense of a distinctively Native identity. Furthermore, Native Creoles, though they are mostly comprehensible to an exclusively English-reading audience, give the writers a strong connection to their ancestral Native languages. The various Creoles derive distinctive and tribe-specific properties through the crossing-over of “rules for ancestral language and discourse,” rules governing sound systems, word constructions, sentence forms and usage strategies (Leap 93). Thus they give the writer a way to communicate, even in English, a tribal-specific identity.

While Native Creoles are distinctively Native forms of English, certain other forms are seen as recognizably “white.” In particular, English that is highly formal, formulaic, institutional, or otherwise “fancy” is often viewed as “whiteman’s words.” To those not used it, such talk may seem bizarre and hilarious. The perception of this language as nonsense is central to another popular code-switching technique. The writers switch into “whiteman’s words” (particularly as that language has been used in Native-

white relations) and then use humour to reveal the absurd gaps in understanding that this language brings about. These gaps, which are often humorous, have existed from the first days of European contact. Upon his arrival in the West Indies, Columbus wrote back to Spain that, when he declared his official possession of the land, he was “not contradicted,” therefore the claim was considered to be the “voluntary choice” of the inhabitants (Greenblatt 58). Columbus’s tactic was, of course, absurd. Because the Natives did not understand the language of the proclamation, they could not possibly have contradicted it (Greenblatt 58). Historian Stephen Greenblatt perceives a bitter humour in this first contact: “That ritual had at its centre . . . a defect, an absurdity, a tragicomic invocation of the possibility of a refusal that could not in fact conceivably occur . . . a hole, that threatens to draw the reader of Columbus’s discourse toward laughter or tears and toward a questioning of the legitimacy of the Spanish claim” (80).

It is precisely this politically charged and absurd “hole” between languages, between understandings, that many Native writers choose to exploit. Sauteaux writer Ian Ross says that he has heard “tons” of jokes in Native communities revolving around misunderstandings of English (*Joe* 118). In his popular CBC commentary, “Joe from Winnipeg,” Ross frequently plays on these kinds of confusions:

An I turn around and there’s my lawyer frien Harvey. I know to some of you that’s an oxymoron eh? Lawyer frien. But I don’t like calling Harvey a moron eh? So we talk a bit an then I offer Harvey one of my free tickets. “Boy, thank you my frien,” he says to me. “Thanks for your largesse,” he says to me. “It’s not that big,” I tell him. An then he tries to explain what largesse means. That Harvey’s always tryin’ to use big words eh? An then he tells me he’s all agog. Imagine this guy thinkin’ he’s a god? What’s up with that? (68)

Ross's character, Joe, combines a Native Creole voice with a joking incredulity about the strangeness of "whiteman words" (the phrase, "What's up with that?" is his constant refrain). Sometimes his code-switching is more extended: "Today I'm gonna be talkin' to you about strategy indexin' yer mutual funs an pickin' stocks usin' characteristics associated with above-average returns on investments over long periods of time. Yeah right. Jus kiddin'. I doan even know what a mutual fun is" (*Joe* 67). By combining Native-inflected speech with an amused distance from Standard English, Ross can both use English and detach himself from it.

Many Native people from around the world use this same technique of comically distancing themselves from the imperial language. Among the Apache, Ojibway, Fijians, and Australian Aborigines, linguists have documented practices of switching, jokingly and disparagingly, into the language of the colonists (Basso; Siegal; Hawkins; Valentine). These performances send a message that the imperial language is peculiar and inappropriate. However, these linguists also all noted that this is a delicate form of humour that can easily be misinterpreted. These switches must be kept short and obviously exaggerated; otherwise, the joke can become inappropriate, with the joker perceived as acting "too white" (or, for the Fijian joker, "too Indian") (Siegal 102; Basso 72; Hawkins 24). In Ontario, linguist Lisa Valentine recorded a situation in which an Ojibway chief switched from Ojibway into "white" bureaucratic language during a radio broadcast. The man wanted a fellow band councillor to join him at the radio station: "Mike, ekwa kekiin pi-ishan [Mike, come up here too.] I want you to come up here and speak on behalf . . . Hm hm heh heh heh . . . Ah, amohsha hi. [Well, that's it.]" (321).

Valentine argues that the speaker's sudden switch into highly formal English expresses his authority and his strong desire to have Mike join him. However, he does not complete the English sentence and breaks into laughter, thus distancing himself from the bureaucratic language and ensuring that his request is not seen as rude or threatening.

This technique, making brief code-switches into highly formal English, is popular among Native writers. Institutional forms of English, such as the tangled language of bureaucracies, as seen in the Ojibway man's speech, or the archaic language of the Catholic Church, are particularly common targets for humorous code-switching. These forms of English are, first of all, unusual enough to be clearly "marked." Furthermore, the church and government's use of incomprehensible forms of English is widely seen as a tool with which to have power over Native people. For instance, the "bureaucratese" of governments and big business is often seen as a way of excluding Native people from decision-making about their land and lives. Lenore Keeshig-Tobias emphasizes the insensitivity and obfuscation of such languages by including passages from government documents in her "a found poem." In the poem, Keeshig-Tobias both repeats and critiques chapter 149 of the Indian Act. That chapter decreed that any Native woman who married a white man (or a non-status Native man) permanently lost her own claim to Native status, as did her children. And yet, a white woman who married a man with status "became Native" in the eyes of the government. This sexist law left many Native women and their children forbidden to live on their home reserve or to receive any of the benefits that "status" Natives received, even if the marriage failed. This Act, as Keeshig Tobias reminds us in her poem, is ironically titled, "An Act Respecting Indians." She

cites sections 11 and 12 of Chapter 149 of the Act. Section 11, as recorded in the poem, reads:

Section 11 Subject to section 12.

a person is entitled to
to be registered, if that
that person (f) is the wife
or widow of a person who is
is registered by virtue of paragraph
paragraph (a), (b), (c), (d) or (e) (123)

By repeating the last word of each line, Keeshig-Tobias makes the document even more wordy, cryptic, and difficult to interpret. Its cryptic and impersonal language, which reduces people to letters, cannot reflect the human consequences of the Act. After this citation, the poet introduces her own words with the lines, “(subsequently and / without reservation)” (reservation can of course be read two ways). The poem then switches into a very different style, a direct and personal form of speech, addressed to the men who created and upheld the infamous law. The piece ends with bitter black humour:

we have ourselves and our daughters
and you my fathers have
sons and sons and sons

and section 12 (1) (b)
in the Act Respecting Indians. (123)

Other writers have tackled the often equally confusing language of the Catholic Church. For instance, in Tomson Highway’s *Kiss of the Fur Queen*, Champion, a young Cree boy in residential school, rattles off the nonsensical prayer: “Hello merry, mutter of cod, play for ussinees, now anat tee ower of ower beth, aw, men” (71). Champion’s prayer emphasises his alienation from the religion that the priests are attempting to instil

in him. Again here we can see the riddling interaction of sense and nonsense at work. Highway's joke works because we can make sense of Champion's strange syllables, even though he cannot.

Louise Halfe is also extremely critical of the language of the Church. I described earlier how Halfe uses Cree English to insult the Pope. In that same series of poems from *Bear Bones and Feathers*, Halfe also switches repeatedly into a language of guilt, apology, and confession, a language that she associates with the Catholic Church. In "I'm So Sorry," Halfe begins by invoking the recent official apologies some churches have offered to Native people. She plays the kind of devastation that the church has wrought in Native communities against the small words, "I'm sorry":

I'm so sorry, the pope said
 I'm so sorry, I just thought
 We could borrow land for a little
 I'm so sorry, I should have told
 the settlers to quit their scalping
 selling hair at two bits for each Indian
 I'm so sorry. I'm so sorry. (98)

The pathetic insufficiency of the repeated "sorry," juxtaposed with the Church's culpability, reveals the insufficiency of the word. Similarly, Halfe plays with Biblical language to expose ironic truths:

i'm sorry the pope said
 i'll write to the priest, the nuns,
 make them say, i'm sorry too
 for *suffering little children*
 coming to me in the red brick schools. ("ten" 99).

This code-switching technique, which Halfe employs throughout her series of "Pope" poems, is used even more elaborately in her most recent collection. *Blue Marrow* is

composed of multiple, intermingling voices from Halfe's family history, including her Cree and Métis ancestors, French trappers, Jesuit priests, and Halfe herself. For Halfe, as for a number of writers discussed here, code-switching is more than an isolated technique. It is an integral element of her writing style.

Thus far, I have emphasized how code-switching works as a practical and political strategy in the face of a language dilemma. However, considering code-switching as a style leads inevitably to questions of aesthetics. As I hope the examples in this chapter have shown, reading code-switching texts is pleasurable; we enjoy seeing language in new and challenging ways, in strange and surprising combinations. Part of this aesthetic effect is, of course, the enjoyment of the humour that so often accompanies this technique. This aesthetic is not restricted to Native people. For example, Ingrid Monson, in a study of irony in jazz, shows that jazz musicians ironically and often humorously "borrow, quote, transform, and invert music from all kinds of repertoires in their musical play" (313). And Wilson Harris makes a similar argument about the mixed nature of Caribbean Creole literature, arguing that language is "better" when it is altered, its power to limit our thoughts exposed, and its words freed to associate in new ways.

Native people share this aesthetic appreciation of the disruption and mixing of languages. For example, Scollon and Scollon, in their linguistic study of a Chipewyan community, describe the pleasure that the people of that community took in the disruption of language systems. At Fort Chipewyan, where the study was carried out, four languages have had a long history of contact: English, French, Chipewyan, and Cree. The linguists found that, not only do the speakers switch easily between languages, but

the four languages have largely converged. The Scollons argue that the community placed a positive value on such switching and convergence because they reduced the “systematicity” of the languages (208). This value, they claim, is just one facet of the community’s general preference for “lower-order structures” (181). As an example of this preference, they discuss the prevalence of practical jokes in the community, in which, they suggest, “the pleasure is derived from the degree of disruption in someone’s thoughts, plans, or activities” (181). This parallel between the disruption of jokes and the disruption of language again suggests, as I have been arguing throughout, that there is a strong connection between code-switching and humour. While the Scollons’ study is an isolated one, it does offer the possibility that code-switching appeals to a particularly Native aesthetic. Furthermore, many other writers, Native and non-Native, have described Native people as tending to be especially open to flux and chaos in language (and life). For instance, Sákéj Youngblood Henderson describes the Mi’kmaq language as “building verb phrases with hundreds of prefixes and suffixes to choose from, to express the panorama. The use of verbs rather than nouny subjects and objects is important; it means that there are very few fixed and rigid objects in the Mi’kmaq worldview With this fluidity of verb phrases, every speaker can create a new vocabulary ‘on the fly’” (qtd in Ross, *Returning* 115). This description also fits many other North American indigenous languages. With a linguistic tradition so open to the improvisation of new words, it is certainly possible that Native people would be especially open to and appreciative of innovative code-switching.

At this point, it may seem that I am moving towards an argument of linguistic

relativity where all languages are constructed and just as easily deconstructed. I have argued that code-switching and language convergence can break down the authority and order of any one language. Furthermore, because code-switching involves constant renaming, it may begin to seem that naming is an arbitrary act. Overall, my description of code-switching, emphasizing nonsense, gaps in understanding, and fragments of language, may seem characteristically postmodern. However, it is important to remember that the prevalence of code-switching in Native literature is largely a response to the devastation of Native languages. Most Native people believe that their ancestral language was a gift from the Creator, a gift that is in danger of being lost. We should be careful therefore not to idealize the disordering of languages. Some postmodern theorists have celebrated and universalized fragmentation as a literary device, losing sight of the actual experience of fragmentation. In contrast, Marie Annharte Baker, a Métis poet whom I cited early in this chapter, reminds us that her people have been left “with fragments of history, culture, and land base,” describing her own fragmented style as a response to this (“Borrowing” 59). I will end this chapter with a discussion of a poem, “Coyote Columbus Café,” by Baker. Baker’s elaborate code-switching highlights both the pleasures and the limits of this technique.

Baker speaks English as her first language and is trying to relearn her Native ancestral tongue, Ojibwe. She admits to being comfortable in neither language. Another Métis poet in a similar situation, Marilyn Dumont, has bitterly described herself as stuck between two foreign tongues: “*Cree Language Structures and Common Errors in English* book-end my life” (“For Bruce” 56). For Baker, English is the “enemy’s language”

(“Borrowing” 60) with “limited foreign meanings”(“Borrowing” 59). She sees the language as full of clichés, questionable phrases, buzzwords, and ‘loose language’ (“Borrowing” 65). She worries that, when talking about personal matters, many Native people use particularly inexpressive forms of English: “Some conversations are laced with words borrowed from AA meetings, government-sponsored conferences, educational workshops, and from a mere glancing through handouts or manuals” (“Borrowing” 59). And yet, English is the only language in which she is fluent.

Baker’s response to this difficulty is to constantly code-switch, undermining the authority or expressiveness of any language she uses. She writes primarily in English but she is, as she says, “a word slut” (“Borrowing” 61), comically playing with word meanings, sliding from voice to voice, and from language to language. She refers to herself as a borrower of language, using various forms of non-mainstream English in order to “massacre” the language (“Borrowing” 60). She says, like many Native people, she finds many moments of amusement in speaking English (“Borrowing” 64). In fact, her attitude is so universally parodic that her writing becomes, as Bakhtin wrote of Rabelais’s, “a parody of the act of conceptualizing anything in language” (*Rabelais* 309).

In “Coyote Columbus Cafe,” Baker moves back and forth between a variety of voices, Native and non-Native, but they are all presented as deceptive, even meaningless. The poem particularly examines the inability of language to work expressively between Native and non-Native people. For instance, Baker presents attempts on the part of non-Natives to learn about Native culture as an “Indian Act,” an insincere effort marked by insufficient language:

& you must crawl before you
 creep up to rich Indians
 playing casino bingo warriors
 subscribe to Aboriginal news
 & pretend Indian sympathy

lo, the po'Indian

Indian Act

*Tell Old Indian joke
 Like Indian affairs*

*Act Indian
 had an Indian affair lately?*

The non-italicized lines explicitly create an image of fraudulent non-Natives who try to “act Indian.” Baker then, in the italicized phrases, switches codes, taking phrases often used by non-Natives dealing with Natives (i.e. Indian Act, Indian affairs) and plays with them, highlighting the stogy and secretive connotations of words like “affair” and “act.”

However, she does not present this false and clichéd language as the exclusive domain of non-Natives. The first section of the poem is told from the point of view of a 500-year-old Native woman (or maybe Coyote) who, by “frequenting colonizers,” tries to “get discovered again / and again” (192). The speaker’s come-on lines, while laced with irony, are clearly indeed “lines,” devoid of meaning:

*Boozho Dude. Hey, I'm talking
 to you, Bozo Dude. My name is
 Conquista. Come on adore me.*

*suppose my moccasin looms
 over your border, mistah,
 and you put a teensy toe
 on my medicine line.*

These lines cross languages (note the play on “Boozho,” Algonquin for ‘Hello) and

codes, playing on multiple stereotypes. Baker also switches into the voice of a “fakey” elder who is exploiting his or her position:

<p>I said sweat lodge makes body clean inside. Keep it up. Dance pow wow. After this, boy. You me go off big West German First International Wannabe Annual Celebration. Take first, don't need to take plastic money visacard. You me same team. Same team. Like hockey team. Zjoonias, my boy. Think of it. Swiss bank account, hey boy!</p>	<p><i>I shed shwatch ludge meks buddy kleen insaid. Kip it up. Danz pahwah. Hafter dis, bah. You me, go hoff big wes churman Furz Hinter Natchinel Wanbee Annal cel brayshun. Tek furz; don need tek plahstik monhee vissacad. You me sam tim Sam tim. Lak hocky tim. Sch – oo – nash, my bah. Tinkobit Swish bank a cunt, hey bah! (194-5)</i></p>
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Unlike some of the writers I've discussed, Baker does not present Native Creole as a more expressive alternative to Standard English. Rather, she shows it as yet another voice among many to be copied, exploited and laughed at. Baker's code-switching style is an aesthetic choice, but it is also a halting and tentative compromise in a painful dilemma. As Albert Memmi writes, “[W]hile the colonial bilinguist is saved from being walled in, he [or she] suffers a cultural catastrophe” (qtd. in Henderson, “Ayukpachi” 249). Code-switching gives Baker a way to write, a way not to be gagged by her lack of an appropriate or expressive language. But hers is a voice of voicelessness.

This poem, like many of Baker's, is not easy to read. The constant code-switching is confusing, as is the sense that there is no stable or authentic voice. It seems that Baker creates this confusion deliberately, presenting it as the usual state of affairs in Native-white relations. She further demands, by using riddles, that the audience take a place within the poem. The speaker demands, for instance, “*what is paler than stranger?*”

and “*how about solving the mystery / did I discover Columbus first?*” (191-192).

However, these riddles do not have any clear answer. The poem also administers “random coyote IQ tests”, once again switching into a recognizable but seemingly insufficient English code:

I warn you multiple answers possible
 circle (a) the landlord comes around
 first of the month to collect rent
 wrong answer but don't pick that one
 please follow directions & circle choice
 what about (c) a landlord of colour?
 right answer is (d) I got my rights
 (b) I am the landlord around here (191)

In this quiz, there is no question and there is more than one answer. In an essay, Baker has discussed the danger of “educating the oppressor,” worrying that when Native people communicate in English, their words may be used by others to seize authority (“Borrowing” 62). Her twisted quizzes and riddles can be seen as a response to this danger, a way of communicating without explaining too much, a way of reminding readers, especially non-Native readers, that they do not have “the answer.” One line, addressed to Columbus, also seems directed towards the reader: “*Don't feel bad bro. / You're lost like the rest of us*” (193).

I began this chapter by admitting my own anxiety in approaching Native code-switching texts. My response to this was to make anxiety and confusion the keys to my analysis. I have argued that Native writers use code-switching to humorously manipulate the interaction of sense and nonsense in their writing, thereby sending particular messages about language itself – its ability to include and exclude, express and hide, liberate and

oppress. In making this argument, however, I do not want to paradoxically eliminate anxiety by making it “the answer” to these texts. My readings locate a humorous intention in the interaction of various codes. However, there are other code-switching texts that I have not discussed because I was uncertain whether they were intentionally humorous. For instance, when Inuk writer Alootook Ipellie writes in English, he experiments with many idioms and conventions. His poem, “Journey Toward Possibilities,” contains a striking example of such a mixture, touching on old-fashioned “poetic” language, colloquialisms, and political terminology. This poem also demonstrates Ipellie’s heavy use of a “written” voice. While many of the writers discussed in this chapter embrace “spoken” literature, which attempts to capture orality on paper, most of Ipellie’s writing is clearly not coming from speech:

Allow us to imagine that
 Wonderful state of mind
 When ecstasy runneth over
 Our goose pimples
 In the final realization
 Of our greatest desire
 To be freed from
 Our dominators’ cage
 The hand that may well
 Secure our sacred freedom
 Is contained in the
 Embodiment of a new
 Arctic Policy
 For our circumpolar world. (263)

In this example, as in Baker’s poem, none of the codes seem marked as preferable. And yet, unlike with Baker, it is not clear whether Ipellie is aiming for humour. Is this parody? Should we laugh? The oblique angle at which Ipellie approaches the

conventions of English poetry is difficult to define. Like English spoken with an unfamiliar accent, Ipellie's unusual code-switching is a mark of cultural distinctiveness, but is also disconcerting, leaving one with the sense that something may have been misunderstood by both speaker and listener. Although Ipellie has said that he usually writes in English first, one bilingual reader has commented that his poetry has a strong Inuktitut accent (McGrath 284). The perception of humour relies heavily on shared and culture-specific information and assumptions. Perhaps lines that seem satiric to the southern reader are, in fact, lines that do not translate well, linguistically and culturally. To return to an earlier analogy, I cannot answer the riddle posed by Ipellie's poem. I am therefore left wondering, rather than laughing.

I believe that the analysis of code-switching in Native literature offers potential for much further study. While my analysis has focussed primarily on how code-switching creates humour, the technique also communicates other important values and ideas. Furthermore, looking at how Native writers quote, play with, and transform words from numerous social contexts offers a concrete approach to the issue of style in contemporary Native literature, an issue that has been relatively neglected. An exception to this neglect is the great number of literary studies on how Native literature incorporates elements of Native oral traditions. Indeed, many of my examples in this chapter could be fruitfully explored in terms of "orality." However, examining code-switching can include consideration of a code's oral sources, while also making room for considering the writer's use of language from innumerable other sources. It thus could put the issue of orality in Native written literature within a broader perspective. Finally, an examination

of code-switching in Native literature is valuable because it raises issues of languages, Native and non-Native. Those of us who study Native literature within the discipline of English are inevitably heavily invested in the use of that language. But we should remember that, for Native writers, writing in English is often an uncomfortable compromise. We need to remember the power that English wields and be willing to look outside its boundaries, both to understand and to know that we do not understand.

¹ Most of the writers that I discuss in this chapter are of Cree or Ojibway descent. This perhaps reflects the fact that Cree and Ojibway are among the most widely spoken Native languages in the country and are therefore an everyday concern for writers from those Nations.

² For an excellent discussion of the issues surrounding the use of Canadian Native languages, see Mark Abley's essay, "Outrunning the Sun."

³ Most Canadian Native people do not speak their ancestral language. Of the more than a million people in Canada of Native descent, only 190 000 have a Native language as their mother tongue (Abley 41).

⁴ See, for instance, Basso, Valentine, Siegal, and Scollon and Scollon.

⁵ Of course, all language contains this interaction of sense and nonsense. Language is itself inherently nonsensical, the equating of a sound and an object for no apparent reason. And yet out of these nonsensical sounds we create sense. What riddles and code-switching do is make this nonsense more visible.

Chapter Six

Is there a “Comic Spirit” in Native Literature?

There are basically three approaches to the study of comedy and humour. First, we can examine specific instances of “funniness.” This is the approach that I have taken throughout most of this project, isolating and analyzing brief, humorous passages. However, this selection of comic episodes does not address the difficult issue of whether these episodes are part of a broader comic approach to literature and life – in the works or in the authors. Furthermore, if we look beyond subject matter, might this comic approach be somehow specifically “Native”? To begin to answer these questions requires that I consider the two other approaches to comedy. We can consider comedy as a genre, a way of structuring a narrative. We can also discuss what is called a “sense of humour” – a comic way of thinking and seeing, a “comic spirit.” Cree writer Heather Hodgson says that considering this wider view is crucial: “Cree humour is not simply episodic; it is a distinctive way of being in and looking at the world” (par. 12). In this final chapter, I take up the question of whether it is possible or useful to theorize such a culturally-determined, comic worldview. I then consider whether such a worldview may be best expressed through a particular narrative structure.

Several influential Native thinkers have claimed that Native people do have a comic worldview and that it is fundamentally linked to their spiritual view of the world. One of the most cited proponents of this theory is part-Chippewa writer Gerald Vizenor who claims that humour is a “spiritual quest” for Native people (Interview 295). Vizenor says that the fundamental difference between Native and non-native cultures is the difference between comedy and tragedy:

[T]ribal cultures are comic or mostly comic And you can characterize Western patriarchal monotheistic manifest-destiny civilization as tragic. It doesn't mean they're bad, but they're tragic because of acts of isolation, their heroic acts of conquering something, always overcoming adversity, doing *better than whatever* The comic spirit is not an opposite but it might as well be You're never striving for anything that is greater than life itself. There's an acceptance of chance. Sometimes things *just happen* and when they happen, even though they may be dangerous or life threatening, there is some humor (Interview 295)

Kiowa playwright Hanay Geigomah similarly claims that humour has spiritual roots in Native culture: "I see the Indi'n capacity for humour as a blessing. 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. It's a force that's part of religion" (336). In Canada, the most famous spokesperson for the comic worldview theory is Tomson Highway. Highway has repeatedly asserted that Christ is to Western culture as the Trickster is to Native culture (Highway, *Dry Lips* 12; Hunt 59; Hannon 41): "One mythology says that we're here to suffer; the other states that we're here for a good time" (qtd. in Hannon 41).

In the context of this project, Vizenor's, Geigomah's, and Highway's statements are very appealing. By making an explicit link between comedy and Native cultures, they offer a clear rationale for the study of Native comedy. However, the connection between humour and spirituality is a topic that I approach with some trepidation. Scholars have too often enveloped both humour and Native spirituality in rhetorical halos, separating the subjects from complexity and contradiction. Thus, combining the two subjects involves the temptation of falling into such idealizing rhetoric. The idealization of Native spirituality has been most visible in popular culture where, presented as pure and timeless, Native religious beliefs have been reduced to a New Age

fad. However, more subtly, such idealization extends to literary criticism. Critics often oversimplify Native writers' use of traditional religious elements, reading them as purely positive, unquestioning, and inevitable. Many ignore the ways in which Native writers *use* these elements, thoughtfully and even skeptically reassessing the religious traditions of their people.

Like Native religion, humour has also been repeatedly idealized by critics. This idealization emerges particularly strongly in an approach to humour that has been called the "mythological strain" (Purdie 151). This approach explores humour and comedy in terms of mythological forms, such as the carnival, the trickster, the fool, and the birth-rebirth cycle. Humour is seen as expressing certain universal forces – such as mysticism, fertility, creativity, and nature – and arising out of the unconscious, of past cultures, or of "primitive" cultures. Rather than focusing on the social uses of humour, this approach "comes to locate *all* laughter as *valuably* involved with energies that are distinct from social convention" (Purdie 151). While many literary critics are now skeptical of mythical criticism, viewing it as subjective, rhetorical, and difficult to prove (Sullivan 12), it persists in discussions of comedy. A recent example is Lance Olsen's 1990 study, *Circus of the Mind in Motion: Postmodernism and the Comic Vision*. Olsen centres his analysis on the circus, which he associates with an idealized "comic vision" that is fundamentally subversive and playful (18). Despite this emphasis on subversion, however, Olsen removes his analysis from socio-historical context, claiming that "postmodern humour" is not the product of a period, but a state of mind (18). He regards the "comic vision" as determined, not by time, but by culture. Thus, he distinguishes

between a “tragic vision,” which he says is distinctively Western, and a non-Western “comic vision” that emphasizes interconnectedness, creative survival, and adaptability (24).

Olsen’s association of comedy with non-Western cultures is a common one. In fact, it is in the analysis of non-Western cultural productions that the mythological strain of humour studies is most definitely alive and well. To observe this association, one need only survey the literary criticism surrounding Native humour, especially that which is focussed on “the trickster.” In this chapter, I begin by analyzing the “trickster approach” to the interpretation of Native literature. This analysis reveals some of the temptations and pitfalls of the mythical or spiritual approach to Native humour. Having done this, however, I then go on to attempt such an approach myself, exploring whether it is possible to overcome these pitfalls. I look at what has been called “Native philosophy” to see whether this wide angle can offer any explanation for the alleged “comic spirit” in Native literature. I then attempt to link this philosophy to a comic structure. It is not my purpose in this chapter to posit a theory of a comic “spirit” or “worldview” in Canadian Native literature. Rather, I want to explore some approaches to the subject, while highlighting the limitations and dangers of any unified theory.

What’s the Trouble with the Trickster?

It may seem strange that I have so far in this thesis made very few references to the so-called “trickster,” a figure that is so prominent both in contemporary Native literature and in the criticism of that literature. In fact, I have deliberately chosen not to

deal extensively with the question of the trickster. With dozens of books and articles already existing on the subject, the trickster approach monopolizes the study of Native humour. Blanca Chester exemplifies this monopolization in her claim that “Native satire . . . is *always* connected to the trickster” (“Green” 51, italics mine). One purpose of this dissertation is to challenge the homogenizing effect of such claims by offering alternative approaches to humour in Native literature. However, I have also avoided focusing on the trickster in an attempt to bypass the weaknesses of much of the criticism on the subject.

It does make sense that critics would be intrigued by the popularity of trickster figures in contemporary Native art and literature. However, instead of considering the current needs and choices that have led to this artistic focus on the trickster, most critics seem to view the contemporary use of this figure as a manifestation of a timeless Native “tradition,” understanding “tradition” in its most popular sense, as “the perfect transmission of beliefs and statements handed down unchanged from one generation to the next” (Mauzé 5). This notion of “tradition” is inaccurate. “Tradition” is in fact continually reinvented, with contemporary cultural responses being framed in reference to the past and to “traditionality” (Hobsbawm and Ranger). Like all other peoples, Native people have adapted their traditions, dropping some and encouraging others. Thus, while the current focus on the trickster is indeed based in part on tribal history, it is just as much a contemporary artistic and political trend. The invocation of this “traditional” figure is strategic and serves to legitimate certain activities or interests. As Marie Annharte Baker instructs, when we see a Native trickster used in a play (or, I would add, any other piece of cultural production), “we must become aware not only of

the special circumstances of that creation and its circular totality, we must know something of the playwright, actor, director, or the events of the day which give inspiration to a particular rendition. You are forced to be particular to understand” (“Old Indian” 227).

While there is not space in this chapter for the kind of particularity for which Baker calls, a brief look at the recent history of the “trickster trend” in Native Canadian writing may help clarify how Native people strategically draw on certain traditions. In Canada, the contemporary popularity of tricksters in Native literature can be traced, at least in part, to Toronto in the mid-eighties. There, Tomson Highway had been doing some reading on trickster figures: “I studied Greek mythology, Christian mythology in the Bible, native mythology here and in other native tribes down in the States – Navaho and Hopi. I began to uncover this incredibly vital character” (qtd. in Hannon 38). He, Makka Kleist, Doris Linklater, and Monique Mojica then held a series of workshops through Native Earth Performing Arts “to learn the tools necessary to approach the traditional Native trickster figures” (Preston 139). Native Earth recruited the help of non-native performers, Richard Pochinko and Ian Wallace, who were trained in mask-making and European clowning techniques (Nunn 99). Out of these workshops arose the strategic body, “The Committee to Re-Establish the Trickster” (Ryan, *Trickster* 4). These workshops were also the beginning of Highway’s enormously popular and influential plays, *The Rez Sisters* and *Dry Lips Oughta Move to Kapuskasing*. With the nation-wide popularity of these plays, Highway became a very public figure and a very influential spokesperson for the trickster, repeatedly asserting the figure’s centrality in the

Native worldview. His statements have had a profound effect, undoubtedly spurring on other Native artists and writers in their use of the trickster.

Of course, this very brief narrative of the rise in the popularity of Native tricksters is not at all definitive. There are many other strands to this story. For instance, Thomas King, a Cherokee-Greek writer, has said that his use of the Coyote figure was heavily influenced by his reading of the transcribed stories of Harry Robinson, an Okanagan storyteller (Fee 146). I offer these narratives to suggest that Highway's and other writers' use of the trickster is not simply the inevitable passing on of a tradition that they learned at their mothers' knees. Rather, it seems, the emergence of the trickster in contemporary Native art took place in a very urban, cross-cultural, organized, and strategic manner. This conscious recreation of a tradition does not mean that the contemporary manifestations of the trickster tradition are in any way "fake." But they are, like all instances of "tradition," recreated because of specific and current needs. Again, it is not within the scope of this chapter to fully explore what these needs are; I will simply offer some quick possibilities. For instance, the concept of the trickster seems to have been particularly appealing and useful to urban Native artists. The urban Native community is tribally mixed and lives with a wide array of cultures and possible life-styles. In this situation, the "trickster," being pan-tribal and endlessly adaptable, but still identifiably Native, may offer a useful symbol of city life. Highway himself explains that this figure has a particular appeal in the city: "Weesakeechak walks down Yonge Street; in fact, he prances down Yonge Street Weesakeechak is making the city into a home for Native people" (Hodgson, par. 43). Highway and other gay Native artists may also have found

the overt sexuality and flexible gender of some trickster figures useful and appealing.

Much as gay Native people across the continent have adopted and adapted the pan-Native figure of the “berdache” or “two-spirited person,” so the figure of the trickster has been used to bring a legitimacy and “traditionality” to the challenging of heterosexual norms (Carroci 115).

Despite the very contemporary uses of the trickster, however, many literary critics have treated the figure as arriving inevitably from the past. In most critical articles on the subject, the trickster is presented as timeless, without any tribal, cultural, or historical specificity. Critics assert certain general characteristics of “the” Native trickster, drawing on examples from multiple cultures and times. Such a comparative mythological approach is now rarely used within anthropology or most literary criticism (though it was popular in from the early twentieth-century through to the seventies), yet it continues in the criticism of Native literature. One critic of comparative mythology, Marc Manganaro, offers a reason for the appeal of the comparative approach when dealing with unfamiliar cultures; he explains that comparative mythology is a “strategy of containment” which authoritatively gathers complex histories and cultures, “reducing multiplicity and chaos into uniformity, harmony, and order” (170). Thus, this literary approach can be seen as a way of containing and explaining Native literature.

Manganaro is writing about influential modernist writers, but the “strategy of containment” that he identifies still exists – with a distinctly contemporary twist. Paradoxically, the trickster is often presented as a *stable* symbol of chaos, disorder, and resistance. For instance, in an essay on Thomas King, Blanca Chester writes, “The

trickster always works from out of chaos rather than within an ordered system” (“Green” 51). With her use of the word “always,” Chester nullifies the very chaotic nature that she is asserting. Such depictions of the trickster are popular largely because they serve a certain critical fashion, one that emphasizes the uncertainty and unknowability of the world. The trickster is read as a metaphor of post-modernism, challenging stable categories and forms. The critic can thus fit into current theoretical trends, while simultaneously appealing to the cultural “authenticity” and hence the authority of an “indigenous theory.” Robert Nunn is accurate in his suggestion that “the trickster is a metonym of those energies of cross-culturality, hybridity and syncreticity” (97), but it is largely critics who have made it such a metonym. For instance, Sheila Rabillard and Peter Dickenson, in essays on Tomson Highway, both slide almost imperceptibly from discussions of the trickster to discussions of hybridity, transgression, and queer sexuality, implicitly equating the subjects. Ironically, both critics castigate Paul Radin’s 1956 study of the trickster for making the same critical move that they do, reading the trickster through the lens of his own culture. By overemphasizing the ordering and teaching functions of trickster tales, Rabillard says, Radin “demonstrates the desire for purity, boundary, and definition that exercises the dominant culture in relation to the colonized North Americans” (4). Academic culture has changed since Radin’s time; the desire is now for impurity, permeability, and ambiguity. But the tendency to see in Native culture what fits the current critical climate remains the same.

Having extracted the use of the trickster from its actual context and made it a tool in the critic’s own theoretical project, the final critical step is to re-apply it to the

creations of Native people. “Trickster” has become an adjective, a label to put on Native humour, art, theatre, and literature. But such classification can be critically limiting. One popular device has been to identify a particular character in a piece of Native literature as a trickster. For example, writing on Thomas King’s *Medicine River*, Herb Wylie writes:

Though Harlen is a realistic character, he also reflects the typical ambivalence of the trickster Thus King’s evoking of the figure of the trickster further distinguishes the novel from the Western tradition (in that the trickster is a central figure of Native cultures). (112)

Wylie’s association of Harlen with the trickster is based, not on any specific allusions to the figure, but merely on the character’s comic ambivalence (a trait that he shares with many characters, Native or otherwise). This equation of the character and the trickster is rendered inevitable by the quick and sweeping assertion that “the trickster is a central figure of Native cultures” (112). Wylie quickly and simply explains both the novel and the character of Harlen as characteristically Native, not mentioning that there are numerous Western trickster figures as well. Pomo-Miwoc writer Gregory Sarris critiques William Gleason’s reading of Louise Erdrich’s *Love Medicine* for just this kind of critical categorization. Gleason writes about Erdrich’s character Gerry Nanapush, “Gerry is Trickster, literally” (qtd. in Sarris 127). Sarris responds that Gleason is trying to “nail down the Indian so we can nail down the text. The Indian is fixed, readable in certain ways, so that when we find him or her in a written text we have a way to fix and understand the Indian and hence the text” (128). Sarris here identifies the critical sleight of hand inherent in such readings; the trickster, presented as a symbol of instability, becomes a way of stabilizing Native texts.

Sometimes, the author his or herself is stamped as a trickster. For example, two articles about Tomson Highway and his writing have both implicitly and explicitly equated the playwright with the trickster (i.e. Hannon, Wigston). In both cases, this labelling is part of a rhetoric that describes Highway as natural, animal-like, magical, and spiritual. Drew Hayden Taylor takes an ironic view of this kind of labelling:

That seems to be the latest fad with academics. Subscribing all actions and at least one character in a written piece to the trickster figure. As playwright/poet Daniel David Moses describes it, "They all like to play 'Spot the Trickster'." So perhaps, just for clarity's sake, I should take the time to make sure these no-doubt intelligent people understand that it's just the inherent trickster tendencies that exists on a subconscious level in all literary works penned by Aboriginal writers and are representative of our culture. In other words, I'm not responsible for these views or criticisms, the trickster is at fault here. The trickster made me do it.
Yeah, they'll buy that. ("Academia" 88)

Taylor here points to the most serious problem with many readings that look at Native texts in terms of the trickster: they ignore the agency of the Native author or artist.

This tendency to underestimate the active role of the artist can be seen in Allan Ryan's recent dissertation and published book on humour in contemporary Canadian Native art, both entitled *The Trickster Shift*. Ryan's is currently the only book-length, published study of humour in contemporary Native Canadian culture. It is an excellent survey of humorous Native art and a valuable collection of the views of Native artists and writers on humour. However, Ryan's analysis of this material is limited by his use of an over-generalized trickster theory.

In his introductions to both his dissertation and his book, Ryan establishes his theoretical approach to Native humour. He clearly allies himself with the "worldview" school of comic theory, stating his conviction that there is "indeed a sensibility – a spirit

– at work (or at play) in the practice of many of these artists, grounded in a fundamentally “comic” (as opposed to “tragic”) worldview and embodied in the traditional Native trickster” (*Trickster* 3). The structure of this sentence is telling; Ryan makes the comic (or trickster) “spirit,” rather than the artists, the active and controlling subject of the sentence. The artists and their practice are presented, not as using and drawing on tradition, but as guided by a tradition and a “worldview.” Thus, for example, Ryan writes, “The tribal Trickster may in fact revel in the opportunity afforded by the postmodern moment” (“Trickster” 37). The trickster appears to be the one making artistic choices.

Ryan’s study dehistoricizes Native artists by grounding his trickster theory in a cross-cultural past. He relies heavily on anthropological readings of the trickster, from numerous places and times, and then unquestioningly applies them to contemporary art. He slides simply and unquestioningly from the past to the present: “It is hardly surprising that the interplay of irony and parody so prevalent in traditional trickster narratives would emerge as a major feature of contemporary Native artistic practice” (“Trickster” 20). With such a slide, Ryan obscures the contemporary context in which Native artists are using traditions. While he considers the influence of the trickster, he does not substantially consider the influence of artistic movements or of Native artists on each other. In ignoring historicity in favour of “traditionality,” Ryan obscures the complex political and social functions of these artists’ humour. Having stripped the trickster of historical specificity, Ryan then explicitly claims the figure in the name of current theory: “Clearly, the Native Trickster, when conceptualized as ‘postmodern,’ can be considered

'postcolonial' as well" ("Trickster" 39). This claim allows him to move further away from the question of how and why the trickster figure is actually used. Indeed, the trickster becomes a broad label for the artists' humour and entire artistic process: "[T]he 'Trickster shift' is best understood as process – as creative practice and subversive play whose ultimate goal is a radical shift in viewer perspective (and even political positioning) by 'imagining and imaging' alternative perspectives" ("Trickster" 11). "Trickster" becomes a term so broad as to be virtually meaningless.

Most of this limited theorizing happens in Ryan's introduction. In his analyses of specific artworks, Ryan is much more historically grounded, showing himself to be aware of the ways in which Native artists are influenced by contemporary events and by each other. However, his overall argument and analysis are limited by the inability of his theoretical stance to accommodate the artists' active and contemporary choices. While his approach does illuminate many aspects of the works, it obscures others. Ryan can only view the art as "subversive," a view that, as I have explained throughout this dissertation, is limiting. With such an approach, we may end up ignoring aspects of humour that do not seem to fit within the transgressive, postmodern, "trickster" type.

Of course, there is nothing inherently wrong with critically exploring the ways in which Native people invoke and use those figures that are grouped together as "tricksters." My argument is, rather, that such explorations have become loaded, often even for the most well-intentioned critics, with problematic assumptions and approaches. Furthermore, the over-emphasis on "the trickster" has led to a critical neglect of other ways in which Native humour works, and, more specifically, the ways in which Native

humour and Native religions may be intertwined. The question then is: How can we move beyond the trickster?

Beyond the Trickster: The Bigger Picture

Rather than focussing on any one figure or story from Native culture, in this section I will explore some of the beliefs, values, and assumptions that are called “Native worldview” or “Native philosophy.” This worldview can be structurally paralleled to the workings of humour. My broad hypothesis is that Native North American people may be particularly inclined to see the world in a comic way since their cultures tend to be open to the conjunction of order and disorder in the world. Throughout this project, I have been arguing that humour in Native literature pulls in two directions – ordering and disordering, building up and breaking down. I will now consider whether this double role can be connected to a distinctly Native way of seeing the world.

While this approach suffers from a lack of specificity, it does offer a perspective on the conceptual and spiritual complexity that may lie behind seemingly simple moments of humour. As Basil Johnston has commented, too many people see Native religions as made up of “little spirits” (such as tricksters) rather than as being complex and comprehensive views of the world (“Foreword” x). As a result, academic culture has tended to treat Native stories as objects to be examined using Western theory. Instead, researchers need to consider “Native theories” as active, complex, and fully-developed ways of seeing and interacting with the world, on-par with standard academic theories: “[T]he heritage of an indigenous people is not merely a collection of objects, stories, and

ceremonies, but a complete knowledge system with its own concepts of epistemology, philosophy, and scientific and logical validity” (Daes qtd. in Henderson, “Ayukpachi” 261). Recently, Native scholars, such as Taiaiake Alfred, Marie Battiste, Sakej Henderson, Gregory Sarris, and Robert Warrior have led a movement within the academy to consider this larger perspective, claiming that there is indeed an indigenous worldview that is different from that of non-Natives and that it is a legitimate research issue (Ross *Dancing*; Henderson; Little Bear; Alfred 21; Trimble and Medicine 149; Battiste xix). In this section, I draw extensively on the writings of this “indigenous knowledge” movement.

One of the repeated claims of this movement is that Native and Western European cultures deal differently with order and disorder. Western Europeans are said to be more likely to emphasize the importance of control, looking to God and Reason for the right to dominate the rest of creation. Blackfoot scholar Leroy Little Bear, for instance, argues that European systems of thought are “linear and singular, static, and objective” (82). Sakej Henderson, in drawing a comparison between Native and “Eurocentric” thought, describes Eurocentrism as the “anti-trickster,” the twin of the trickster, representing rigidity and oppression (“Postcolonial” 58).

In contrast, it is claimed by many indigenous people that their societies face up more easily to humans’ lack of control over the world. This reconciliation with disorder arises out of the assumption that human beings are not intended to have power over all things, since they are “the least powerful and least important factor in creation” (Murray

Sinclair qtd. in Ross, *Returning* 61). Sioux scholar Robert Bunge explains the distinction:

What is radically different from Caucasian philosophy and religion is man's place in the cosmos. In Western tradition, man has usually had a good estimate of himself, assigning him a place only slightly lower than God and the angels. The Indian saw man as occupying the nether ranges of the world ladder, because he was comparatively weaker than most wild animals and because he required the sacrifice of so many of his fellow beings (animals and plants) to survive and maintain himself. (493)

Cree architect Douglas Cardinal describes how he came to the insight of humans' relative weakness during a prolonged fast:

Finally, this being said, "you know, you're judging yourself," and "You have to come to terms with yourself. You're too arrogant, you're just a human being. Can you see that you're just a human being and you're stupid?" (qtd. in McPherson and Rabb, *Indian* 72)

Cardinal's recounts his humbling realization with a wry sense of humour. Indeed, humour often arises out of our lack of control over the circumstances of our lives. In the face of our powerlessness, laughter is an alternative to despair. This may be why comedians constantly put themselves down, depicting themselves as buffeted uncontrollably by the absurdity of life. It makes sense then, that if Native people do see humans as lacking control over the world around them, then this view would express itself in terms of humour.

However, several Native theorists point out that the recognition of disorder must be balanced by the assertion of order (Ortiz 149). They have described Native spirituality as a process of integrating order and disorder, what Sakej Henderson calls "reconciling the opposites" (qtd. in Ross, *Returning* 115). Recently, Western science has begun to perceive that this integration, long recognized by Native people, is inherent in the natural

world: “the underlying duality of chaos and order, the one emerging out of the other” (Peat 176). Physicist David Peat acknowledges the parallel between recent scientific findings and Iroquois stories of the “two brothers”: “When one of the brothers produces something, the other produces its opposite; when one of the brothers produces order, the other turns this order upside-down” (176). This reconciliation of order and disorder seems to be central to Native beliefs; the thirty elders and spiritual teachers who collaborated on the book *The Sacred Tree* agreed to include it as one of their twelve principles of Native philosophy:

All of creation is in a state of constant change. One season falls upon the other. Human beings are born, live their lives, die and enter the spirit world. All things change. There are two kinds of change. The coming together of things (development) and the coming apart of things (disintegration). Both of these kinds of changes are necessary . . . (Bopp 27)

This reconciliation of order and disorder is more than just a metaphysical principle; it implies a certain approach to dealing with change and chaos. Such flexibility may have evolved as a response to living off the land, helping Native people to tolerate and adapt to the complex and uncontrollable patterns and changes in the natural world (Ridington 164). Furthermore, when living through the changes in their societies since the arrival of the Europeans, it has been necessary for Native people to adapt to radical change and disorder while maintaining control and coherence. For instance, when the Plains Cree were faced with the white arrival, their understanding of order and disorder provided continuity and identity, while also allowing them to creatively and innovatively respond to those disruptions, maintaining a “moving equilibrium” (Harrod 30, 96). While change is universal, Native people may be unique in the degree and

speed of change that their communities have faced. To survive in the face of such chaos, they have had to both change and stay the same. Rupert Ross describes this integrative process as “riding the waves” (*Returning* 76-77). Ross’s image emphasizes the skilful balance between holding on to order and giving in to disorder that seems to be central to what is called the “Native worldview.” You cannot “ride the waves” if you are stiff and resistant, nor if you are loosely flailing about. And if you cannot ride the waves, you may drown.

We can draw a parallel between this reconciliation of order and disorder and the structure and function of humour. Humour theorists have again and again discussed humour as the reconciliation of order and chaos, or what Freud called the “simultaneous sense and nonsense of jokes” (181). This point is also commonly made in terms of the acceptance and reconciliation of congruity and incongruity (Schaeffer 9). Paula Gunn Allen claims that Native humour is just such a reconciliation process: “Reconciling the opposites of death and life, of celebration and grief, of laughter and rage is no simple task, yet it is worthy of our best understanding and our best effort” (“Answering” 231). I will not discuss the double ordering/disordering function of humour at length here, since I have posited it throughout this dissertation. Each chapter has dealt with a form of change and challenge: “the whiteman,” cultural and racial hybridity, diversity within Native communities, historical traumas, and threatened Native languages. And in each case, humour has provided one means of negotiating such change, both dealing with it and asserting continuity. Perhaps then this dual function of humour is particularly apparent and appealing within Native ways of thinking. This parallel between the structure of

humour and the “Native worldview” may be why, as Vizenor and others have asserted, the two are so fundamentally tied together.

It may be difficult to grasp how humour can be connected to such broad categories of experience as order and disorder, but these categories are expressed in concrete examples with specific Native images, rituals, and stories representing the reconciliation of order and disorder. Order is represented through rituals, rankings, and rules, disorder through what anthropologists call “symbolic inversion,” defined as any expression which “inverts, contradicts, abrogates, or in some fashion presents an alternative to commonly held cultural codes” (Babcock 14). Alfonzo Ortiz provides a striking example of order and its inversion in his description of a Hopi summer solstice ritual: The sombre kachinas (priests) were “dancing in perfect and restrained harmony in a straight line,” while alongside them a number of cross-dressing clowns did a caricature of a Navajo dance, “shuffling about, often out of step, and turning around frequently with awkward, jerky motions” (158). Here, the co-existence of order and disorder is vividly and humorously portrayed.

This description of the Hopi clowns is one of many examples of how Native people have symbolically depicted the conjunction of order and disorder. Such ritual clowns, who bring a hilarious side to otherwise serious events, exist in many Native Nations across North America (Hieb 163). Native trickster figures play a similar role as representatives of chaos and change. Less widely known are Native religious symbols that disorder time and place by literally inverting them. For instance, many tribes tell of an absurd land of the dead where things are the opposite of the living world. Eden

Robinson draws on the humour associated with the land of the dead in her recent novel, *Monkey Beach*. Robinson's Haisla protagonist, Lisa, has a connection to the dead and can predict when a death will take place. And yet this seemingly dark gift is constantly associated with laughter. The spirit which visits Lisa to tell her about immanent deaths glitters and giggles, sparkles and summersaults, and looks, she says, like a "troll doll" (132). Lisa can hear ghosts laughing, can see her dead relatives singing, dancing, and joking with her, and even feeds her dead grandfather Johnny Walker and Twinkies (79, 107, 373). The tradition of inversion that lies behind this depiction of the dead is invoked in a scene where Lisa makes a rubbing of a headstone in the old community graveyard. The inscription is simply a mirror image of the word "FOOL." Her grandmother explains to her, "everything in the land of the dead is backwards. When you are in the next world, our day is your night; our left is your right; what is burnt and decayed in our world is whole in yours" (141). Perhaps it is because of this kind of inversion that another character remarks, "that's the problem with the dead . . . They have such a fucked up sense of humour" (232). Death is arguably the thing in life over which we have the least control. And so it is perhaps not surprising that Robinson and other Native people choose to deal with it through the integrating force of humour.

As Lisa's experience seems to suggest, symbolic forms of disorder, such as clowns, tricksters, or inverted worlds, offer a training-ground for dealing with the real chaos of life. Psychologists studying disorder in children's play contend that such play teaches children to endure real disorientations, confusions and tensions (Peckham and

Sutton in Babcock 20, 25). Humorous Native stories may involve a similar teaching element: “What people miss about Trickster stories is that they’re talking about a process of flux. They’re talking about how things change. They change quickly and dramatically. The Trickster may have outrageous behaviour and then change again. We’re teaching our children to have tolerance for change, to understand it, not to fight it” (Henderson qtd. in Ross, *Returning* 125). Thus, there may be a pragmatic imperative behind the use of humour. As Maria Campbell suggests, perhaps dealing with the humour of stories can teach us a valuable lesson about the acceptance of disorder: “It’s the job of the storyteller to create chaos . . . that’s why we have to be so damned brave and shake things up like the thunder” (“It’s the Job” 269-270).

While humour and this Native philosophy parallel one another neatly, any “worldview” theory must be viewed with scepticism. General statements about Native spirituality and philosophy are difficult to prove and can easily become stereotypes (Alfred 20). Furthermore, many assertions about a Native worldview rely on terms and categories, such as “order” and “disorder,” so broad as to be applicable to almost anything (Trimble and Medicine 149). I could comment here, as Frye does in his study of Shakespearean comedy, that this sweeping analysis is “clearly over-simplified and rhetorical rather than factual; . . . designed to give us some perspective on the shape of a big subject, not to tell the truth about it” (*Natural* 1). A broad look at Native beliefs and values can, I believe, shed light on the cultural forces behind Native humour. Much as we may step back to look at medieval European writers in terms of their treatment of Christianity or Renaissance writers in terms of humanist values, so too can we approach

Native literature in terms of a broad cultural worldview. However, we have to be careful not to assume equivalence between this worldview and individual writers. Rosemary Sullivan criticizes Frye's mythological analysis for depending on such an "explicit analogy between writer and culture, such that a shared mind, imbued at some level with informing images, is assumed. Perhaps there is such a thing as a cultural gaze but if so generalizations have to be carefully posed" (112). The same warning can certainly be applied to any generalizations about a comic spirit in Native literature.

A further comparison can be made between Northrop Frye's mythological approach and that which I have taken in this section. In his "Conclusion to a Literary History of Canada," Frye posits a Canadian mythological imagination. This was an act of nationalism, a reaction against the feeling that Canadian writers were without a literary identity. Critics, including myself, who attempt to define a comic spirit in Native literature are embarking on a similarly nationalist project – seeking a kind of certainty and identity in a disparate collection of cultures and literatures. This chapter is in part an effort to legitimize the very field of "Native literature," by finding something characteristically "Native" about the body of works as a whole. Many of the theorists on whom I have drawn in this section are involved in similar projects of legitimization. For instance, for Ross, Henderson, Battiste, Peat, and Alford, their "Native worldview" theory allows them to critique the assumptions of academic and governmental institutions. The purpose of their critiques is to make these institutions more open to other cultural approaches, but the danger is that they may end up replacing one set of confining assumptions with another. In this chapter, I face the same possibility. I began

by critiquing the problems with mythological criticism of Native literature and then went on to engage in such criticism, albeit with an effort at greater self-consciousness. Perhaps the problem is with the very question with which I began this chapter, "Is there a comic spirit in Native literature?" This question looks for a force behind the literature, the existence of which it is possible to imagine but very difficult to prove.

The Sense (and Nonsense) of an Ending

Since it is so difficult to confirm a Native worldview *behind* a text, in this section I will examine whether we can identify such a thing *within* a text. Can the reconciliation of order and disorder be identified within the structure of a text? Might there be a comic structure that reflects a Native way of seeing the world? Within Western literary history, comedy has long been identified with a particular structure, defined as a text (usually a drama) with a happy ending that celebrates family and romance. Over the course of the text, repressive forces are overcome and the social order is re-established. Looking at examples of Native literature, however, this ordering structure is often challenged. For example, at first glance, Tomson Highway's play, *Dry Lips Oughta Move to Kapuskasing* appears to fit the conventional Western comic structure. However, further examination shows that this play incorporates elements of disorder into its resolution, showing an ironic self-consciousness about the desire for an orderly comic ending. While this much-studied play has repeatedly been read in terms of the comic figure of Nanabush, little critical attention has been paid to its comic structure. In this section, I offer a structural

reading of *Dry Lips*, both as an alternative to the usual mythological approach and as an exploration of the notion of a Native comic structure.

Highway's play is not alone in its variation on the traditional comic ending. To point to another well-known example, Thomas King's *Green Grass, Running Water* also fits and challenges the orderly ending. These works are not simply part of the increasing move towards open-endedness in Western literature. Rather, they both carefully question the ethics and politics of an orderly ending for Native people in particular. This suspicion of endings has a long history in Native storytelling and prophecy, a suspicion that is grounded both in Native ethics and in specific historical events. I will begin by briefly exploring Native perceptions of endings and will then explore how such perceptions can be seen in Highway's *Dry Lips*. In particular, I will look at Native stories of the end of the world, in which the issue of endings is explicitly thematized and examined. Highway alludes to such stories as a means of reflecting on his own narrative ending.

It is not within the scope of this chapter to give more than a brief outline of the extensive tradition of stories of "the end" among Native people. Such end stories appear to predate the arrival of Europeans and are widely spread. In my survey of some collections of Native prophecies and myths, I have encountered prophecies of "the end" by the Athapaskan, Aztec, Chippewa, Dene, Flathead, Hopi, Iroquois, Lakota, Mayan, Nez Perce, Ojibway, Paiute, Pawnee, Shoshone, and Ute peoples.¹ It would be misleading to call these myths "apocalyptic" since, unlike the biblical myths of that name, these do not involve a movement from this world to "heaven." Rather, most of them tell of the cyclical destruction and regeneration of the earth, and of the ultimate

survival of the people. Since the European arrival, these stories have taken on a new use, offering meaning to the violence and degradation that has accompanied the invasion by transforming them into signs of the coming end. Such stories of the end are still widespread among Native people (Clemmer 37-38); the theme is, in short, that the world has become a corrupt and unjust place where Native people are unfairly oppressed, a situation that can only be resolved through the end of civilization as we know it and the birth of a new society (Clemmer 66).

Native people's use of end stories has been politically and historically informed, responding to specific events and needs. The Sioux Ghost Dancers of a hundred years ago, for instance, embraced an end story in the face of widespread hardship and hunger caused by a military invasion. Black Elk, who was among the Ghost Dancers, recalls: "The Great Spirit had told [the prophet] how to save the Indian peoples and make the Wasichus [whites] disappear and bring back the bison and the people who were dead and how there would be new earth" (232). Such prophecies continue to have relevance. At a public hearing about the construction of a pipeline across the Yukon, Joe Jack, a Southern Tutchone man, spoke of the predictions of a local shaman who foretold the coming of the whites:

[He] said that he saw many white people coming to this land and they will build trails to travel on. He said they will block our waterways and they will tear up the land to take our rocks . . . lastly he said that they would build an iron road that cannot be driven on. And, he said, when this happens, it will be the end of the Indian people. (qtd. in Cruikshank 55)

Even more recently, at a stand-off in Gustafson Lake, British Columbia, the Native protestors created a video predicting the coming of the end of civilization in the year

2000, when only those who could live off the land would survive (“Doomsday”).

Such end stories are clearly an organizing and ordering force, assigning significance to lived experience. However, it is precisely because of this ordering function that Native people have been sceptical of the use of end stories. Perhaps Native people’s sense that the world is inherently both orderly and disorderly may temper their use of end stories. They recognize that the firm structure of end stories can be oppressive, fitting people into categories and making injustices appear to be natural and even desirable signs of the end. In fact, Native people have been the object of such repressive end stories. Many Europeans considered the “discovery” of America to be the fulfilment of the apocalyptic prophecies of Revelation. They believed the Native peoples to be the lost tribes of Israel who were to reappear and be converted to Christianity before the final Judgement (Chamberlin, *Harrowing* 12; Zamora 7-8). A character from Louis Owen’s *Wolfsong* argues that Christians continue to use the promise of an ending as a justification for injustice:

I think white people treat the earth like they do because they think they’ll only be here for a little while. They believe Jesus Christ, our Lord, is going to come and fix everything and take them all away, so they don’t take care of things. (77)

Thus, as we will see in *Dry Lips*, even as it draws on the end story tradition, Native literature is widely suspicious of the orderliness of such stories, whether the story comes from tribal religions or from Christianity (Blaeser 22).²

End stories can be paralleled to the classic comic ending: both move cyclically from suffering and disorder to rebirth and order. So it is not surprising that we see a similarly ambiguous and suspicious use of the comic ending at work in many pieces of

Native literature. In fact, in *Dry Lips*, the comic ending and the end story overlap.

But before turning to the play, I would like to present a shorter example in which an end story becomes a comedy and in which this story is explicitly challenged (as opposed to Highway's implicit method). In Mik'maq writer Lorne Simon's novel, *Stones and Switches*, Mik'maq fishermen Skolch and Megwadesk are having a debate about a local story of the judgement day. The story tells how Glúskeb, a Mik'maq trickster figure, became tired of looking after the earth and so asked his cousin, Jesus, to fill in for a while. But Jesus was lazy and left the priests to "make a mess of thing":

"As far as I see it, on judgement day Jesus will come down on a cloud and he'll go to all the reserves first and tell all the Indians to just keep right on fishing, that's all Jesus was a fisherman! And don't you forget it! So judgement day's going to come around just after Glúskeb wakes up and just before he gets back here! Glúskeb is going to shoot his arrow ahead of him and it'll land in the Minas Basin, see, to tell Jesus he can pack up his stuff and get ready to go back to his home! And Jesus'll get scared, see, 'cause he's let his messengers make a big mess of things here, and it's really all his fault 'cause he's been so lazy, see! Gisúlk, éq! That's when he'll come around on his cloud and tell us to keep right on fishing and then he'll take all the other people together, even the dead ones – he'll call them right up from their Loyalist graves and all – and tell them, 'Listen here,' Jesus will say, 'either you go back with me or you go to hell!'

Of course, you know how stubborn white people are! Many of 'em'll stand around their farms with their shotguns in their hands! Nisgam! They'll be just ready to kill Jesus all over again Then Glúskeb'll come back and if there's any left over – shotgun or not – he'll take them by the scruff of their necks and throw them across the ocean and tell them to stay there!" (42-43)

This story is both a comedy and a story of "the end of the world." Through a series of humorous events, repressive forces (white people) are overcome and the Mik'maq social order is restored. As with both end stories and comedies, the structure is cyclical, with the Europeans returning to Europe and the Native people continuing in their traditional ways.

However, Simon's novel offers a number of challenges to this orderly comic ending. One of these challenges is implicit in the story itself. Its indiscriminate mix of Native and Christian traditions reveals that there can be no simple return to pre-contact times; Natives and non-natives are in life, as in this narrative, inextricably linked. But this end story is also explicitly challenged by Skolch's and Megwadesk's differing responses to it. The characters' argument creates an awareness of the social functions of the story, an awareness that inevitably undercuts the story's reassuring effect.

Megwadesk sees the story as an emotional outlet that has no real positive effects:

But, really, eh, it's just a fill-in for justice. It's all really 'bout wishful thinking, and nothing 'tall else! Nisgam nuduid, why do you think people believe in spirits and witches for, eh? It's 'cause they feel like they got no real power. So they need this magic power. If they can't get back at the whites for stealing all the land, then they'll say that the spirits like Jesus or Glúskeb or whatever'll get back at them one day! (45)

Skolch disagrees, feeling that the story affirms the integrity of the Mik'maq people:

This story I told you tells me that we're not like them! We never went across the ocean and stole their land and told them they couldn't do this or they couldn't do that! So who's right? We're right! Now if we're right, does it mean that we should forget about our honest ways just because we're in a weaker position now? No sir! I don't think so! Like I said in the story, we keep right on fishing and living the way God wants us to! (45)

Skolch's response emphasizes order and continuity. Megawadesk, on the other hand, sees the story as one of radical change and disorder. Indeed, his scepticism about Mik'maq traditions is a source of disorder throughout the novel. Overall, then, Simon allows for both order and disorder in his reflection on endings.

Such a reconciliation of order and disorder is also central to the deeply self-reflective ending of *Dry Lips Oughta Move to Kapuskasing*. In the play's last scene,

Zachary awakens on his couch and realizes that the tragic and disturbing actions of the play were entirely a dream. The drama ends with a scene of family togetherness, as Zachary chats with his wife and cuddles his baby daughter. In what may appear to a classic comic ending, love and courtship are emphasized, the family is restored and there is, through the baby, a sense of rebirth and renewal. After the fast-moving and disorderly action of most of the play, this peaceful ending provides order and relief. This comic ending has been criticized as escapist: "a thin frame of hopefulness which is unconvincing" (Johnson 260). However, this criticism does not take into account the way in which the play undermines the desire for such a tidy ending. In fact, the text challenges the ethics of its own comic resolution. In order to create this self-reflexivity, Highway alludes to both Christian and tribal stories of the end of the world. As in Simon's novel, the comedy and the end story overlap.

Both structurally and allusively, Highway parallels his plot to an end story – a story that he will go on to critique. Structurally, the play moves from the repression of the Christian First Coming to the renewal of the Second Coming. The character of Dickie Bird is repeatedly associated with Christ; he is fascinated by the crucifix and by the question of who his father really is. His birth in a tavern recalls Jesus's in a stable and his mother is repeatedly referred to as "The Madonna" (52, 76). As the birth of Christ is to Christianity, Dickie Bird's birth is a repeatedly invoked part of the reservation mythology, an emotional touchstone for all the older men. However, Dickie Bird's birth and life are associated with violence and sexism. The play moves away from these forces through the revolution of the Native women's hockey league. One character is certain

that women playing hockey is “THE sign” while another cries that all the women are at the arena “and the world is about to explode!” (69).

In fact, many characters in *Dry Lips* are preoccupied by the desire for an ending. Spooky LaCroix, a fervent, over-the-top Catholic, is convinced that he is living in the last year and see the violence in the world, and particularly on the reserve, as a sign of the end. Simon Starblanket has portentous visions of the end. He repeatedly dreams of Native people “dropping like flies” and speaks repeatedly of a desire to dance with the Rosebud Sioux, a reference to the apocalyptic desires of the Ghost Dancers in Rosebud, South Dakota, a hundred years before. And even the usually pragmatic Zachary, when faced with Simon’s death, is overcome by apocalyptic desire and despair, daring God to “come down and show us you got the guts to stop this stupid, stupid, stupid way of living. It’s got to stop. It’s got to stop” (116).

The end of the play can be seen as a response to Zachary’s plea. In relation to the pattern of references to “the end,” the last scene is a “New World.” The newborn daughter can be viewed as the outcome of the women’s revolution. Her birth is a “Second Coming” which responds to and supplants the birth of Dickie Bird. Even the family’s names suggest that they are a new cross-cultural holy family: Zachary was an Old Testament prophet, Hera was the wife of Zeus, and their family name, Keechigeesik, means “heaven” or “great sky” in Cree.

This pattern of end story references found throughout *Dry Lips* contributes to the sense of order and inevitability in the play’s ending. The play seems driven towards its resolution, one that makes sense of and also escapes the horrors that its characters face.

But, on the other hand, this pattern of references also allows Highway to show the dangers of such an ending. This criticism is seen most obviously in the depiction of Spooky LaCroix. Spooky's desire for an ending is an extreme reaction to and escape from his own history of violence and alcoholism. Apocalypse allows him to explain the world around him but it also alienates him from the true complexity of that world. Spooky is an example of Megwadesk's argument, in *Stones and Switches*, that stories of the end are a form of escapism. Less obviously, Simon Starblanket's end stories appear to lead to his untimely death, just as they did for the Sioux Ghostdancers of whom he dreams. Perhaps because of his end story, Simon seems to rush towards his own self-destruction. And, as Zachary cries out for an ending, God sits on a toilet, filing her fingernails and ignoring him. Through these characters, we see that the orderly ending can be unrealistic, escapist, repressive, and futile.

So, even as the structure of *Dry Lips* enacts an end story, the play criticizes such stories, providing evidence of their dangers. The classic comic ending is undercut and its offer of comfort and order challenged. This tension between desiring and resisting ending runs throughout the play, creating an incongruity at its centre and, in the last moments of the play, this incongruity seems to explode into laughter. Zachary holds his little daughter, cooing, "Oh yes, my little goddess, you've come back to me, haven't you" (129). With this line, Highway invokes the end story/comical/mythical cycle of fertility, renewal, and rebirth. But then, as the lights fall, we hear the silvery laughter of the baby and Hera/Nanabush. Perhaps they are laughing at the ending itself, an ending that the play has destabilized. Order and disorder mingle in this rethinking, and perhaps

indigenizing, of the comedy structure. While it is not, of course, possible to generalize about a Native comic structure based on this single text, this example does suggest that it is possible to examine specifically indigenous concerns within the structure of a comic text.

In these last moments of *Dry Lips Oughta Move to Kapuskasing*, we can see the coming together of the three levels of comedy that I mentioned at the beginning of this chapter. In Hera's laughter, we can see the humorous episode. In the pull between ending and not ending, we can see a comic structure. And, in both of these, we can see the tension between order and disorder that I have theorized as a possible key to the Native "comic spirit." It may appear then that I have managed to rather neatly tie together all three levels of comedy and humour. However, this identification of parallels *does not* necessarily imply any kind of direct or necessary relationship between the three. To posit such a relationship would involve a much more detailed exploration, preferably focussing on the philosophy, stories and jokes of a particular Native band, tribe, or social group.

This chapter has been highly speculative. My purpose has not been to establish a definitive theory on the relationships between comedy and a Native worldview but to explore the potential and pitfalls of such a theory. My outlining of rough patterns of order and disorder can be seen as a preliminary step towards examining how specific writers or groups of writers use, alter, or challenge these patterns. I have put Native literature in a certain order but since, as Maria Campbell reminds us, "It's the job of the storyteller to create chaos" ("It's the Job" 269), Native writers will inevitably exceed the

limits of this order. My hope is that the hypotheses that I have outlined will open up new avenues of discussion in the study of Native humour, a topic whose complexity moves well beyond the trickster.

¹ For a sampling of Native myths of “the end,” see Cruikshank, *Social* 116-137; Armin Geertz; Johnston, *Manitous* 10-13; Jorgensen 6; C. Miller; Peterson; Ramsey 157; Strozier 102; Young Bull 97-99; “Walum Olum” 101.

² For examples of this scepticism, see Thomas King’s *Green Grass, Running Water*, Drew Hayden Taylor’s “The White in the Woods,” Lee Maracle’s “Sojourner’s Truth,” and Sherman Alexie’s *Reservation Blues*.

Conclusion

As I started work on this dissertation, I asked myself a question that is fundamental to any piece of research: What makes my particular subject different from other, similar subjects? In my case, this question could be phrased as, “What makes Native humour different from all other humour?” In other words, what is the justification for studying “Native humour” at all?

In the last chapter, “Is there a Comic Spirit in Native Literature?” I explicitly address this question. However, as I wrote that chapter, I found myself pulled uncomfortably back and forth, unable to settle on an answer. On the one hand, I wanted to put my finger on something specifically and deeply Native in the humour that I have analyzed. And this desire arose not only out of the need to legitimize my study but also out of my belief that there exist uniquely Native ways of knowing and seeing the world, ways that I feel must be reflected in the humour. On the other hand, whenever I attempted to articulate these forms of knowledge, I found myself unhappy with my statements. They felt too easy, too broad. The association of Native humour with such qualities as disorder and reconciliation falls dangerously close to the idealization against which I have explicitly positioned my argument. As I came closer and closer to this conclusion, I became more and more uncertain as to how to make any conclusions at all.

However, as I reread the body of this thesis, searching for a way out of this discomfort, I realized that the double forces that I have identified in Native humour – order and disorder – are the very forces at work in my own dilemma. I am not happy with bringing all Native humour together into a grand and orderly scheme, one that would inevitably oversimplify the subject. But nor am I willing to say that Native

literature is a false term imposed on a disorderly and disparate group of writers. In the same way, the writers that I have examined maintain a tension between order and disorder. They refuse to either completely homogenize or completely undercut Native communities, identities, values or forms of knowledge. It is reassuring to realize that the writers on whom I am working have to negotiate the same dilemmas, the same contradictions that I do. The difference is that they, through humour, can perform this double-act much more economically (and much more entertainingly!).

Of course, the ordering and disordering of knowledge are constants, not unique to Native literature or to my project. As the elders who collaborated on *The Sacred Tree* remind us: “There are two kinds of change. The coming together of things . . . and the coming apart of things . . . Both of these kinds of changes are necessary” (Bopp 27). These wise words raise the question of whether I have merely shown the obvious – that Native literature, like all complex things, cannot be described as moving in any one direction, representing any one political stance or sending any one message. After all, haven’t we been taught to see the tensions and contradictions in *any* piece of literature? In the last chapter, I grappled with the question of whether Native humour may be seen as *particularly* inclined towards the reconciliation of order and disorder. However, even without this tentative theorizing of a connection between Native worldview and humour, there are still two major arguments for examining the complexity of Native humour. First of all, as I have argued throughout this study, both humour and Native literature have too often been idealized – viewed as uniformly positive, subversive and healing. As a result, there has been an over simplified, feel-good discourse running through much of

the criticism on Native humour. My examination of the complexity of Native humour is in part a reaction against this trend.

Second, humour brings the complexity of Native literature to the surface in useful ways. Because it reduces tensions and is seen as “just a joke,” humour often gathers around tense and complicated issues. It also tends to bring these issues together into condensed episodes, lending itself to close analysis. Furthermore, humour not only brings complex issues forward, it also demands that we respond. Of course, all literature invokes a response, but humour demands one much more directly. This is perhaps why stand-up comedy receives a more open reaction – positive or negative – than other forms of theatre. One laughs or – and this is just as much a response – one does not laugh. When we study humour, this response can become the basis of discussion, bringing to light readers’ assumptions, knowledge, and expectations. Hence, humour can force readers of Native literature to articulate their own relationship to that literature, a useful process in a field that is fraught with power-relations, stereotypes, and loaded expectations. Gregory Sarris argues that such engagement can help critics to move beyond a stance of ethnographic detachment:

The task is to read American Indian literatures in a way that establishes a dialogue between readers and the texts that works to explore their respective worlds and to expose the intermingling of the multiple voices within and between readers and what they read. (130-131)

The analysis of humour offers one promising way of establishing such a dialogue.

Precisely because humour is episodic yet complex, and disarming yet engaging, it also has great potential as a tool in the teaching of Native literature. I have not yet taught Native literature to Native students, but one of the problems that one encounters when

teaching the literature to undergraduate non-Native students is a lack of engagement with the texts. Perhaps because many of the students feel unfamiliar with the literature, its writers, context, and issues, they feel that they have nothing to say. And perhaps they are fearful of responding, fearful that they may be seen as racist or politically incorrect, or that they do not have the right to speak.

I have found that focussing on the humour in Native literature can be an effective way of overcoming some of these barriers. For one thing, humour offers a way of entering the literature and the issues that is non-threatening. Because humour is seen as “just a joke,” it can serve to momentarily defuse fear, anger and guilt. At the same time, humour often carries undertones of those very emotions and may provoke them, bringing about discomfort as easily as comfort. In the classroom, one can easily assess whether students find a moment from the text funny; even an inexperienced or unfamiliar reader will either laugh or not laugh. These responses can then become the beginning of a discussion about how the students read the text. As this study has shown, an example of humour often contains at its core multiple and conflicting messages about contentious issues. Drawing these out, through the students’ responses, can show them that Native literature is not about any one correct “message,” thereby opening up the way for less reticent discussion.

One important advantage in the study of humour is that it demands specificity. Because humour is fundamentally social we must, in order to analyze it, look at the social context: of the teller/writer, of the telling, of the listener/reader. However, while I have tried to provide some context in my discussions, I have been limited by my broad scope.

Working within the sweeping category of “Native literature,” I have been unable to give close attention to more specific traditions and influences, to individual artists, or to particular audiences. In fact, I suspect that it is precisely the generality of my study that has led to my difficulties in coming to conclusions about the “Nativity” of the humour. At this point, I have resolved that the best approach to Native literature may lie in a balance between understanding the distinctive aboriginal quality of the literature and resisting any over-arching and over-simplifying conclusions. This is a balance, not so much between construction and deconstruction, but between similarity and difference. There is a deep value in looking at the shared history and perspectives of Native people on their own terms. But this move should be balanced, not by deconstruction of Native knowledge, but by careful attention to the diversity of Native people, their particular complexities whether they be individual, tribal, regional, political, etc. Such specificity, which is often missing in criticism of Native literature, can give content and meaning to our broader work on Native people, preventing it from becoming too vague. I would like to conclude by offering some possibilities for the future study of Native humour, possibilities that move towards such specificity:

1. Critics need to extensively study individual Canadian Native writers, their styles, visions, and influences, recognizing that the writers are unique and not only products of “groupness.” Too often we try to lump together extremely different writers. A recent review of Eden Robinson’s *Traplines* tried at length, but unfruitfully, to compare her to better-known Native writers such as Thomas King (Horne, “Trapped” 160-161). In fact, Robinson can more easily be compared to

Stephen King, one of her primary influences. Fortunately, the field does seem to be moving towards the more extensive study of individual writers' styles and influences. There are new and upcoming works on single authors, including the new critical edition of Beatrice Culleton Mosionier's *In Search of April Raintree*, which contains numerous critical articles on this groundbreaking novel, and the forthcoming book-length study of Thomas King by Percy Walton and Jennifer Andrews.

2. There is, of course, a place for studies of Native literary traditions and movements, but such studies need not attempt to cover all Native people. Looking at particular traditions would be particularly useful in understanding Native humour. For instance, one could examine whether there is a distinctive Cree humour and whether and how Cree writers draw on it. Such an approach would allow a close look at how humour is informed by the Cree language and by very specific historical circumstances, tribal norms, traditional stories, rhythms of speech, etc. While they do not deal extensively with humour, Gregory Sarris's *Keeping Slug Woman Alive*, which focuses on Pomo-Miwoc traditions, and Craig Womack's *Red on Red*, which examines the Creek literary tradition, illustrate the significant insights that can arise from a taking a tribal approach to Native literature. Furthermore, we need not be limited by tribal categories. For instance, there is a strong community of Native artists and writers in Toronto. What traditions are they creating among themselves? One could also examine the humour around a particular issue or event. There was, for example, a cluster of

jokes around the 1991 events at Oka, a humorous tradition picked up on by several artists and writers. Such narrowed-down approaches would force literary scholars to look more closely at the specific circumstances of Native people's lives and creations.

3. Moving towards the specific study of particular groups of Native writers logically leads to a further step – learning the language(s) of those writers. Many Native writers speak a Native language and many who do not are still influenced, aesthetically and politically, by their ancestral language. In Chapter Five, I examined how Native writers humorously codeswitch in order to create an awareness of the politics of language. However, I was limited, by my own lack of fluency in any Native language, to looking at how misunderstanding and confusion can contribute to our readings. As far as I know, there are no studies by literary critics that draw on knowledge of Native languages to read contemporary Native literature. Understanding Native languages could add considerably to one's understanding and appreciation of the distinctive textures and rhythms that carry over from Native languages into Native literature in English. I suspect that such rhythms and textures are key to Native humour. Furthermore, such knowledge would open up a world of literature, stories, and ways of speaking and thinking about the world that are not available in English. After all, Native literary traditions existed long before the arrival of the English language.
4. Native languages are just one form of Native people's knowledge that can help us in our understanding of Native literature. Rather than seeing Native people and

culture as “objects of knowledge” to be examined using Western critical theory, critics need to be willing to look at Native people as producers of theories, philosophies, and interpretations. In Chapters Four, Five, and Six, I base my readings of humour on indigenous knowledge. While working on this study, I have deliberately turned first to Native writers and thinkers as theoretical sources. This is not to say that non-Native sources are inadequate – indeed, I have used many – but rather that I was deliberately trying to resist the usual pattern of using non-Native theory to explain Native subjects. However, I could have gone further. In looking at indigenous theories, I relied almost entirely on a relatively small number of Native writers working on recording and interpreting indigenous knowledge. However, many forms of indigenous knowledge are not written down. If we are to move towards greater specificity in the study of the literature, literary critics working on Native literature must be willing to talk to people in various Native communities about their work. This can be difficult for scholars trained to do all their research in the library, but I believe that it will help them to ground their criticism in reality rather than in fantasies and generalizations.

5. Finally, work needs to be done on the reader reception of Native literature. This need became particularly evident to me as I worked on this project. Finding something funny depends largely on the listener/reader’s relation to the joke – their identity, assumptions, and knowledge. So, when I write of the “funniness” in various works, what I mean, in fact, is that those works are funny *to me*. While I assume that I am not alone in my sense of humour, I would not assume that my

perceptions are universal. Moreover, while as literary critics we can reflect on how our position informs our reading, presumably there are differences between the reading practices of critics and those of non-professional readers. As Janice Radway discovered in her “ethnography” of readers of romance novels, the theories of scholars on how other readers read is often very different from what the readers themselves say they are doing. Jonathan Rose calls the lack of attention to this difference the “receptive fallacy”: “the critic assumes that whatever the author put into a text – or whatever the critic chooses to read into that text – is the message that the common reader receives, without studying the responses of any actual reader other than the critic himself” (49). The obvious solution to this problem, and the one suggested by Radway and Rose, is to undertake a sociological or historical study of actual reading practices, using techniques such as questionnaires, interviews, examinations of sales records, etc. No such study of readers of Native literature exists, but by answering some important questions such research would help enormously in understanding the growing popularity and appeal of Native literature. Who is reading Native literature? Which authors are they reading? How are they reading? What are their expectations and preferences? How might reading practices, attitudes, and preferences differ inside and outside Native communities? And, more specific to my study, who is laughing at what?

This wish-list points to potential research directions not only for the subject of

Native humour but in the field of Native literature as a whole. In general, these suggestions offer ways of moving beyond the categories of Native/white, Oppressor/Oppressed, Colonial/Postcolonial that have dominated and simplified the field of Canadian Native Literature. Scholars need to grant Native literature the same kind of literary, political, and theoretical density and complexity that they perceive in Western authors and texts. Some critics have worried that such movements towards cultural specificity and complexity may involve a retreat: from using critical theory, from making more general, cross-cultural conclusions, and from acknowledging large political forces of hierarchy and subordination (Chow xix, 9). I would like to respond to these concerns, appropriately, with a joke:

Thomas Jefferson was talking to an Iroquois Chief, trying to persuade him of the superiority of white ways. "Tell you what," Jefferson said, "Give us two of your sons. I will educate them and turn them into civilized gentlemen."

"Very well," said the chief, "on the condition that you give us your two sons and we will teach them to be real men."

I invoke this joke as a reminder of how humour can bring complex issues into sharp focus. In a few short sentences, this story plays on the very issues that I have briefly discussed in the latter part of this conclusion – inequalities in our ideas of what constitutes real knowledge and education. We immediately perceive that the chief's offer, in his eyes a fair trade, would be, from Jefferson's point of view, incongruous and impossible. It is not the chief who is in retreat from education but Jefferson. There are clearly parallels here to the need to value Native languages, experiences, theories and perspectives in the study of Native literature. Native people have had to adjust to the Western education system; surely it is fair that the Western academy be willing to do

some adjustment as well.

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