Anguish Of Snails

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Patterns and Themes in Native Humor

Why should we attack them? They’re finally headed in the right direction!

—A Yakima spokesman, responding to an invitation to stage a mock attack on the 1976 Bicentennial Wagon Train as it moved east through the state of Washington

It was Custer who originated the Bureau of Indian Affairs; as he left for the Little Big Horn he said, “Now don’t do anything ’til I get back!”

—A Native joke in wide circulation during the 1970s

We’re just lucky that Columbus wasn’t searching for Turkey!

—Larry Calica, Warms Springs leader, commenting on the aptness of the name “Indian”

Still alive in the oral traditions of elderly Native people in the Pacific Northwest are stories about negotiations between the United States government and the many tribes around Puget Sound. Large, outdoor meetings were held so that tribal members could hear what offers (or threats) were being made, and a principal speaker at these events was Isaac Stevens, the army major appointed governor of the newly created Washington Territory. Apparently, Stevens was self-conscious about his short stature and made up for it with long, impressive orations where he called the Indians “our children” and referred to their leader, Suiattle, as “my son.” They say that when it came Suiattle’s turn to respond on one occasion, he drew himself up to his full height (he was about six feet, six inches tall) next to the diminutive Stevens, put his hand on the shorter man’s head, looked down at him and began, “My father . . .” to the open amusement of the Native audience.

Subtle (and not so subtle) critiques of the whites and their juggernaut system range from biting remarks (e.g., the bumper sticker: “We gave an inch; you took three thousand miles”) or one-liners like “Custer died in
an Arrow shirt,” and “Custer was disappointed: He heard that blondes were supposed to have more fun,” to deliciously funny stories about inter-cultural “events,” both real and imagined.

We are not surprised at the vitriolic political remarks—given the history of conflict between the invaders and original inhabitants—but our convenient stereotype of the stoic Indian often blinds us to the ongoing expressions of humor which in many ways are even more pointed in their critique. In this arena of subtlety, humor coalesces and gives dramatic shape to culturally shared Native attitudes and experiences. For example, Native people around Pendleton, Oregon, still reminisce about the year when the Indians played a grand trick during the Pendleton Roundup’s famous (and tacky) Happy Canyon outdoor pageant by reversing their assigned roles. Scheduled to come out whooping and attacking the pioneer stagecoach as it lumbered across the arena, the Indian riders actually captured the coach and rode out of the rodeo grounds with it and its white-actor occupants—and didn’t bring them back until the next day.

During a Kiowa Gourd Dance (performed by veterans), you can hear the strange sound of a bugle playing. According to the story, during the Plains wars, Kiowa warriors would capture an army bugler, bring him home, and make him blow “Charge!” while they danced; if he did well, they let him go back to his unit (one wonders how he could even pucker up, never mind sound a note or blow “Charge” in the middle of a lot of dancing Indian enemies!).

In spite of many recorded instances like these, in spite of hundreds of photographs that show laughing Indians, in spite of numerous studies of Indian clown societies, in spite of all the well-known Coyote stories, many non-Indians persist in believing that Native Americans have no sense of humor. On the polite level, a colleague of mine, hearing me mention this chapter, gingerly suggested I should merge it with other material since obviously there would not be enough Indian humor to make a whole chapter. On a less polite level, I recall a southern Utah gas-station owner in the 1950s telling me in puzzlement, “I just don’t see how you can live with those Navvies—they aren’t like other people. Why, I’ve lived here all my life, and I’ve never seen one laugh or cry!” I couldn’t summon the words to tell him that there was a good reason: Navajos usually only express personal emotions in the company of good friends (fig. 60); in front of strangers, laughing may possibly be interpreted as an insult. He had lived in his hometown for some forty years and had—apparently—never become friends with any of his Navajo neighbors.

In this chapter, I want to explore the proposition that folk humor is one of the best and most revealing ways to learn about the shared values
of any culture. Corollary: Our continuing belief that Indians have no humor is a serious sign that we have not come very far in understanding the cultural values of the people on whose land we Europeans have established our transplanted societies. And while some may naïvely hold onto the stereotype of the stoic Indian simply because they’ve had no opportunity to test it, others have maintained the intentional, or at least convenient, stance that Indians are just too difficult to know. The unwillingness to understand is not limited to gas-station attendants in the rural Southwest, either. In 1969, anthropologist John Greenway characterized the leaders of the American Folklore Society and its Journal like this:

Several were the greatest folklorists of their day. Franz Boas, for example, is the father of American anthropology. He is also the father of abominable editing of a scholarly journal, the father of interminable Indian myths. . . . During his fifteen years and the fifteen years of his protegee, student, and fellow indiscriminate lover of Indians, Ruth Benedict, the Journal was the refuge for the dispossessed redskin. Some think it was the Depression that cut the list of subscribers in 1935 to 191; I think it was those incessant Coyote Trickster stories. . . . Things have improved since World War II, which was a terrible conflict bringing much suffering upon the world, but worth it in that it put an end to Coyote Trickster tales in the Journal of American Folklore.
Perhaps you can understand why, when I began editing the *Journal of American Folklore* in 1972, the first piece I published was an article on humor in Paiute Coyote stories written by a Paiute woman, Judy Trejo. Greenway responded immediately with an angry letter, suggesting first of all that the article was counterfeit, then following up this way:

. . . I am pleased to see you are retaining some of my rules [for Journal style], grieved to see you are reinstating others I banished. Among the latter are those Coyote Trickster tales. I say nothing further about them, except that they will be in themselves your punishment. . . . Instead of a sense of humor—or anything else—Indians have feathers. And whoever heard of an Indian who was anything other than 1/32 Cherokee? You may give her [Judy Trejo] a copy of this letter—I give you a carbon for that purpose. . . . To say nothing more to the point, I ask you whether it is not bad enough to have Indians in real life without having them in the *Journal*. Tell her if she is ever out this way I will take great pleasure in pulling all her feathers out.

What is it that otherwise-intelligent and witty people like John Greenway are missing? (And why do they get angry when it appears that they are wrong?) Let’s look at some different kinds of Native humor and speculate about the way they embody serious cultural issues in coded form. We already discussed some examples in chapter 4, where we noted that even when Coyote stories are uproariously funny, the laughter (often with implied ridicule) points our attention to culturally moral issues. Old Man Coyote uses (misuses?) his magic power to make a hollow tree close around him so he can be comfortable during a hailstorm; when he can’t get out, he has to cut himself in small pieces, push the pieces through a small hole, and then reassemble himself outside (and during this process, Bluejay flies away with his anus). The story is performed as if it’s funny, but the moral implications about the self-destructive result of using magic for personal comfort are far from humorous.

In one Navajo story, Ma’i (Coyote) proposes a race against Skunk to see who will get the most prairie-dog meat (planning, of course, to get back to the campfire in plenty of time to eat it all himself). He gives Skunk a head start, but the smaller animal just runs up a nearby hill and hides under a rock until Coyote goes rocketing past (with a torch tied to his tail to show arrogantly how fast he’s running). Coyote runs all the way to a distant mountain and back, arriving exhausted at their hunting camp to find only the four skinniest (and by now sandy) prairie dogs. It’s difficult to say which is funnier: his duping of himself because of gluttony, his
hubris, or the final scene, where Skunk, from a ledge above, drops occasional bones down to him but refuses to share the meat. Obviously, the cultural moral about sharing food is not funny but quite serious.

In another Navajo story within a longer myth, Ma’i is being pursued by larger animals because he has disguised himself and has been sleeping with their sister (in some versions, it is the woman herself who changes into a bear and tries to catch him). Close to being captured, he nonetheless stops to taunt a pair of spiders down in a canyon. He yells, “You’re ridiculous! You don’t even know how to screw properly!” The moment in the story is hilarious, but it brings a number of serious issues to the forefront: sexually active Navajo couples who live in crowded, single-room hogans often go out for some privacy, and people are expected not to call attention to them—much less shout critiques or instruction about their style. Moreover, spiders are the ones who taught us about weaving and string games, and we should show them respect. And Ma’i, who has just been having sex with someone else’s sister and is about to be dismembered for it, is in no position—either morally or tactically—to stop and make disparaging remarks about another’s sexuality. Notice that the text does not say any of these things overtly, but it suggests them all so that they have a combined effect on the knowledgeable audience.

The following story is an even more striking example of what a performed text can say without actually stating it. In the 1970s, this story was told to me several times, usually by teenagers, who called it “the funniest Navajo joke”:

Long ago, they say
(a man off to one side):
“Which of you dreamed something last night?” he said.
Another said, “I don’t know.”
Another said, “I don’t know.”
“I dreamed last night,” another one said.
“Last night I dreamed I was sitting on [hatching] four little birds, and three weren’t mine; only one was mine,” he said.

What can this possibly mean? In any case, it’s clear that the bare text isn’t going to tell us, so we need to discover what such a sequence of statements may signify to Navajos: What does it make them think about or remember? Why does it start with “long ago”? Is this equivalent to our “once upon a time,” thus a stylistic hint that the story is fictional and not a report of a “real” event? Why is the questioner described as off to one
side? Are we to see him as somehow marginal? Do Navajos ask each other about their dreams? Do they talk about dreams openly with others? What about the phrase, “I don’t know”? In Navajo the term is hólica, which basically means “I don’t know,” but it’s often used in conversation to avoid answering an uncomfortable question, as if to say, “I don’t know what you’re getting at.” Are the two men uncomfortable at being asked? And why is it the fourth person in the sequence who answers; why didn’t he speak up at once? We may guess that the cluster-of-four logic is working here: Just as in Western culture Cinderella is the third (and not the first) to try on the glass slipper, here the key line is spoken in the fourth position, after we have been presented with the problem. The final position is held by the speaker who “solves” the puzzle (or gives the punch line). But what does his answer mean? Is there anything funny (or culturally loaded) in the image of a man sitting on birds’ eggs? Why are there four eggs/birds? And what can he possibly mean by saying that one of them is his? Is he talking about children and not birds? And why, in a female-centered culture, are the actors all men? These few questions give us a place to start, at least, but they don’t tell us everything.

Taking some cues from Navajo culture, we can supply at least some of the life values and attitudes to which the joke refers. For one thing, Navajos usually don’t talk about their dreams to others (though grown-ups sometimes joke about what a restless child must be dreaming); so those who answer hólica are giving the culturally correct response to the first man’s question. The fourth man describes a dream which is full of natural discrepancies: a human is playing the role of a bird, a man is playing a woman, something heavy is sitting on fragile objects. Discrepancies in nature are usually signs to Navajos that things are not in order, symptoms that indicate potential sickness or fragile mental health. In this case, since the man dreams that the young birds are his responsibility, though only one of them is “mine,” there is the hint he suspects three of the four children he is raising have other fathers. When I asked some Navajos, they said, “Well, yes, that’s in there, but of course that’s not what’s funny about it.” Part of the humor, it seems to me, is that since Navajo women are considered the owners of their children, Navajo men sound ridiculous if they show concern about paternity.

So we have an apparent breaking of the custom of not sharing dreams, a cluster of discrepancies in nature suggesting mental or spiritual imbalance, and an odd concern about infidelity. Navajo friends tell me there are other nuances, among them the fact that when the man says he has been hatching tsídii yáázh (literally “young birds,” but by implication eggs, since they are being sat on), because of the Navajo logic about who can do what to whom, most Navajos picture not a man but a bird sitting on the eggs.
Their conclusion? The joke appears to depict a dangerous situation, but in fact there is no threat because the audience (unlike the speaker in the joke) realizes the man did not really dream he was sitting on eggs but that he was a *bird* sitting on eggs—thus, there is no discrepancy (it’s a bit like a pun that appears to say something questionable or a so-called pretended obscene riddle).

Even after this clarification, however, the non-Navajo is unlikely to find the joke suddenly very funny and start laughing, and this is probably because the discrepancies in jokes need to reflect concerns in the listener’s own language, culture, and experience. Just knowing intellectually about another culture’s issues does not confront the outside listener with an emotionally recognizable dilemma and its resolution. Building on this, I suggest that the humor in Coyote stories does not lie in a depiction of ridiculous behavior but a response to what in that behavior makes deep cultural values palpable. For this reason, even though we may think we see the humor in a Coyote story (or in that long-lived cartoon character, Wiley Coyote), we can be confident that we are missing the depth that makes the laughter culturally meaningful to Native people.

When my friend Yellowman told Ma’i stories to his family in the winter, their laughter was made up of several layers of acquaintance with the tradition: On the surface, of course, the story is entertaining (Ma’i’s mannerisms, his foibles, his rationalizations are all funny in and of themselves the same way that, when we see Bugs Bunny appear in a cartoon, we humorously anticipate everything that’s coming); as we’ve seen, however, the real bursts of laughter come during particular scenes where Ma’i is not just being quaintly idiotic or goofy but challenging an important Navajo value or breaking a taboo. When a singer (medicine man) refers to a particular Coyote story during a break in a healing ritual, the audience’s laughter includes these two levels but adds a third: the realization that the ceremony is addressing an imbalance that may have been caused by the kind of behavior depicted in the story. If someone tells, or refers to, a Coyote story before a political or educational meeting, the laughter recognizes and mitigates the bothersome possibility that some human weakness (like competition or selfishness, for example) may come up during the ensuing gathering. Clearly, while such articulations may be funny, the issues behind them seldom are.

Today jokes and humorous remarks are among the most common “tools” Native people use to register their perceptions of cultural frictions between themselves and other tribes, between Natives and non-Natives, and between tribes and the U. S. government. Even a brief anecdote can carry an immense burden of meaning, such as the joke going around Navajo country during the heavy winters of the mid-1950s: “Did you hear
about the [Navajo] woman who heard a plane circling her place and ran out to see what it was? She got out there and was killed by a case of condensed milk.” The Air Force and National Guard were indeed dropping supplies to snowbound Navajos, but no one thought to ask if they wanted or needed milk. Most of them do not metabolize milk very well, so the joke dramatizes the irony of getting bombarded and killed by a kind of help you can’t use, epitomized in a commodity food someone else assumes is good for you. In this vein of being surrounded by people who don’t pay attention to your culture, Lakota friends tell me that there is an old story about women who went over the Custer battlefield after the fighting was done to see what useful items they could retrieve. Some of them recognized Custer, and two of them ran their sewing awls into his ears, saying, “Now can you hear us better?” Whether or not either of these two events actually happened, retelling such anecdotes testifies to the way Indian humor expresses the almost inexpressible dimensions of living among the whites.

Less macabre, but equally telling, was an event I witnessed in Montezuma Creek in the spring of 1955. Government scientists (from the Soil Conservation Service, as I recall) called a meeting to propose an idea to local Navajos. They had set up a couple of long tables, each loaded with stacks of paper anchored against the incessant wind by chunks of sandstone. They suggested a complex combination of alternate sheep grazing, limited local irrigation, and reseeding as an attempt to retard soil (to be honest, sand) erosion in Montezuma Canyon. For some reason I couldn’t figure out, the local people were not charmed by the plan, though I could tell that part of their resistance had to do with anyone telling them what to do with their sheep—advice that brings back terrible memories of the devastation of the government’s sheep-reduction program during the 1930s. But there was something else hanging in the air, and I was not enough of an insider to catch what it was. After a long and uncomfortable presentation and tedious, negative discussion from the petulant crowd (made even worse by the reluctant translation of the sullen Navajo interpreter), my adopted father, Little Wagon, got up and grimaced at the white visitors for more than a minute. The crowd got still, apparently anticipating that this short, bandy-legged man would put their thoughts into funny words (he was famous for doing so). Finally he said, very slowly,

A long time ago, people came here from Washington [a kind of pun because the Navajo term, wááshindoon, means both the city and the federal government] with a pile of paper to show us [the Navajo word for paper, naaltsoos, means “a flat, flexible (therefore potentially impermanent) object is carried about”]. They said they wanted to stop
soil erosion in Montezuma Canyon, and they asked if we would help. We said we would, and they went away. A long time after that, some people came here from wááshindoon and said they had a plan for soil erosion, and they asked for our help in this area. We thought maybe the first ones didn’t hear us, so again we said we’d help if they’d tell us what they wanted us to do. A long time after that, some other people came, carrying even more paper, and they told us they had a plan for soil erosion in Montezuma Canyon. And then we decided to wait and see what you people were really up to. Then nothing happened until now. Today you people carried lots of paper to us here, and now we understand that you want to control our sheep; but wááshindoon killed most of our sheep a long time ago, and the ones we have left are being scared by the oil hunters and the uranium prospectors. So we’ve decided you’re really not interested in soil erosion; all you’ve done for a long time is carry paper here.

He took a long pause and then continued, “Now I have a plan for stopping soil erosion here in Montezuma Canyon, and I want to tell you about it. You take every piece of paper on that table and wipe yourselves with it [he used the phrase naaltsoos bee ‘ádit’oodí, “flat and flexible (thing) with which one wipes himself”], then throw them all into the canyon. There’s so much of it that it will keep the sand from sliding away.” The audience laughed heartily, and the soil experts picked up their packets and retreated. For years I recounted the story to friends as an example of Little Wagon’s wit, but I later found out that essentially the same comment had been made by others at numerous meetings across the reservation from the 1940s on. Little Wagon was applying a well-known joke to the immediate situation.

A common comment during the 1960s and 1970s was “whites get headaches; we get anthropologists” (fig. 61). People tell of an elder who puts his arm around his grandson’s shoulders, sweeps his other arm across the horizon, and says, “My son, someday none of this land will belong to you.” A tourist asks, “Where does this road go?” and an Indian answers, “Road stay; you go!” Columbus tells his first mate, “Throw those Indians a line!” An older Native explains a puff of black smoke on the horizon as proof of a government requirement to make a carbon copy of every message sent.

But despite the widespread use of such vignettes, some of the most finely honed commentaries on the differences between whites and Natives are expressed in narratives. According to one widely told story, an old Indian is sitting comfortably in the shade of a tree next to a government office building when the whites come out on lunch break. A
A parody of the white mania for owning and saving things—as viewed from the Native perspective—gets at least part of its humor from the gesture of cultural disgust allowed the old man at the end, so the assumed cultural superiority of white behavior is turned on its head. Indians return things to nature; whites keep everything, even snot. The whites think they know how to behave and assume the right to instruct others, but the Indians get the last word.

A parallel story is told by the Nez Perces on the Colville Reservation in central Washington (where Chief Joseph and his band were banished...
after the Nez Perce War). They say that in early times, a group of white explorers came through Nez Perce country and made camp there for a while. Some Natives argued that they were dangerous and should be killed, but others—led by a young woman who had been treated well by whites on an earlier occasion—argued for hospitality. The consensus finally favored being friendly to the whites. Having watched the explorers in the meantime, the Indians had noticed that many of them were blowing their noses into pieces of cloth, and someone got the idea that it would be a friendly gesture to help them out. A deer bladder was rinsed out, passed around so people could blow their noses into it, and eventually presented, fully loaded, to the strangers. Is this an episode that somehow missed getting into Lewis and Clark’s journals? Did it ever really happen? Lewis and Clark scholars have told me privately that they doubt its authenticity, partly because many whites in those days also blew their noses on the ground—and besides, we don’t have a written confirmation of the event. But all that means—in terms of historical accuracy—is that we simply don’t know if it happened or how it happened.

Folklorists know that the story carries its own cultural comparisons whether the event occurred or not: if the story didn’t mean anything to the Nez Perces, they wouldn’t keep telling it. So what does it mean? It does not seem to focus on cultural superiority but on the naïveté of the Natives—again from their own point of view. It is very much like the stories told by Natives along the Oregon and Washington coast which emphasize how little their grandparents knew about the new culture by ridiculing the awkward Native efforts at trying to understand it. The Chehalis and others tell about their first encounter with a white hunter carrying a rifle: They see him shoot a bird out of a tree, and they immediately demand that he shoot at them so they can prove their powers are greater than a bird’s. Before the scared white can escape, he shoots and kills several Natives at their own insistence (a bit reminiscent of “The Sun’s Myth”). In Coos anecdotes, people encounter coffee for the first time and keep boiling the beans, pouring off the evil-smelling liquid, but never manage to get those beans soft enough to eat. Self-parody of being easy victims for whites is also apparent in such stories as the one about a young urban Indian who spends weekends with his grandfather on the reservation learning old methods of tracking and hunting. One day he arrives and finds his grandfather spread out on the highway with one ear to the ground. “Grandfather! What is it?” he yells. The grandfather replies, “Red Cadillac, 1980. Blonde woman with a sundress. Male driver. Two kids.” “Grandfather, that’s amazing! How can you tell all that just by putting your ear on the road?” “I can’t, you idiot! I just got run over by a car full of white people!”
It is said that as astronauts were trying out some of their hardware in the southwestern desert, they noticed some Navajos watching them from a distance. Their public-relations man asked the Navajos if they wanted to meet the astronauts, and when the two groups were introduced, one old Indian asked if he could send a message in case the astronauts met some Navajos on the moon. The message, slowly and laboriously translated by a young (and nervous) Navajo, was, “Be nice to these people, but whatever you do, don’t sign any papers and don’t accept any beads,” acknowledging the ease with which early whites were able to flimflam the Indians.

Self-critiques also include Natives making fun of their problems at mastering the invader’s strange language and idiom. According to Neet Brown, a Navajo emergency medical technician, a man phoned the Navajo police and yelled, “My hogan’s burning! My hogan’s burning!” When the operator asked, “How do we get there?” he yelled, “You got that big red truck, i’n’t it?” A Hopi mother overhears her young son doing his mathematics homework: “Two plus two sonofabitch is four; four plus four sonofabitch is eight,” so she goes to ask the white teacher why her son has been taught to swear. The teacher answers, “I said, ‘Two plus two, the sum of which is four. . . .’” A coastal Indian goes out to get crabs with some white friends, and they notice that the crabs all stay in his bucket, while they try to climb out of the others. He explains, “Well, I only pick up the Indian crabs; that way, when one tries to climb out, the others hold him back,” a subtle and complex reference to the way traditional Natives sometimes treat younger people who adopt white concepts of competition and upward mobility.

Of course, another kind of humor involves parodying white behavior seen as odd or compulsive. Some years ago, for example, Hopi clowns used to wear alarm clocks strapped to their wrists and, during an otherwise religious ceremonial dance, ran around the crowd yelling, “It’s time to be tired!” (then they laid down and pretended to sleep), or “It’s time to be hungry!” (they pantomimed shoveling food into their mouths). Larry Calica at Warm Springs Reservation in central Oregon tells the story of a white anthropologist who was trying unsuccessfully to collect Coyote stories from local residents when he suddenly discovered a coyote caught in a trap. He was about to shoot it for the bounty, but the coyote spoke to him, promising to give him money and help him get all the stories he wanted if he would only spring the trap. The anthropologist accepted a roll of bills, freed the coyote, and was then treated to several hours of authentic Coyote tales narrated by the coyote himself. But when he got home that night, the big wad of bills the coyote had given him had turned to a handful of mangy fur, and the next day, when he opened his tape
recorder to play the precious stories for his colleagues, he found his machine was stuffed with coyote turds.

Sometimes the humor acknowledges simultaneously the Native’s own modest position in contrast to the white tendency to brag. In one story, a Texan stops his Cadillac along the highway in Montana and asks an Indian, “How much of this land do you own?” The Indian replies, “I own the land from here down the highway to that next road down there, then up the valley about a mile, then across to those hills, and back to here.” “That’s nothing,” says the Texan; “Why, I can get in my pickup at the house and drive two days before I come to my property line!” “Yeah, I know what you mean,” says the Indian; “I had a pickup like that once.”

In another story, a white hunting enthusiast in Farmington, New Mexico, saves up and buys an expensive English pointer. He asks his next-door neighbor, a Navajo, if he’d like to go out bird hunting and if he has a bird dog. The Navajo replies that he has a Navajo pointer and goes out to hunt for him in the dusty backyard. He kicks the dog awake, throws him into the back of the white’s pickup, and they drive off in a cloud of dust. When they reach a good bird area, the white goes out first, the expensive pointer walking ahead and freezing into pointing position every now and then, followed by a bird flying up and the hunter shooting it. The white comes back with six pheasants and tells the Indian to try his luck: “But I don’t think that dog of yours has any real talent for this.” The Navajo walks out with his dog following him; the dog just looks calmly around in all directions, sitting behind the hunter. Every now and then, the Navajo looks back at his dog; then a bird flies up, and he shoots it; then another, and another. He comes back with twelve birds. The white hunter says, “It must have something to do with you being an Indian; you just have a sense of where the birds are. Your dog didn’t do anything but just sit there and look around!” The Navajo responds, “I told you he’s a Navajo pointer: You just have to watch his lips real close!”—a reference to the custom among many Southwest tribes to point with their chin or pursed lips rather than a finger.

Even the contemporary debate about gender gets into Native inter-tribal humor. From my Lakota son-in-law, Peter DeCory, comes the following story: Three Lakota men are stranded on one side of the Missouri River and don’t know how to get across. The brother from Eagle Butte makes tobacco ties and prays to Wakan Tanka (Great Holy) to make him smart enough to think of a way to cross the river. Wakan Tanka turns him into a Ponca Indian, and he swims across. The brother from Rosebud prays to Wakan Tanka to make him even smarter, so he can think of a better way to cross the river. He gets turned into a California Indian, and he makes some fry bread and floats across on it. The brother from Pine
Ridge prays to Wakan Tanka to make him the smartest of all, so he gets turned into a woman, and she walks across on the bridge.

Conflicts with other ethnic groups also register in Native joke lore. A Navajo sitting in a bar in Gallup gets into an argument with an Asian and suddenly finds himself on the floor, recovering consciousness. He asks the Asian, “What in the world did you hit me with?” and the Asian replies, with a curt bow, “Judo. Blackbelt. Tokyo. 1980.” The next day the Navajo comes in and sees the Asian sitting there again; he rushes up to him and slams him into unconsciousness on the floor. The Asian gets up saying, “What in the world did you hit me with?” and the Navajo replies with a bow, “Tire iron. Green Chevvy pickup. Gallup. 1960.”

Intertribal differences, cultural variations, and frictions are common themes in Native humor. Western Native people joke about the Sioux being dog eaters by asking, “What’s a Sioux seven-course meal?” (answer: a six-pack of beer and a puppy), or “What’s a Sioux’s favorite sandwich?” (answer: BLT—black Lab on toast). Two Sioux went into town for the first time and couldn’t find anywhere to eat. Finally, they saw a sign that said “Hot Dogs” and went up to the stand and ordered two, politely looking away as the proprietor prepared them. After they got down the street and one guy opened his napkin up, he said to the other, “Hey! What part did they give you?” As if in retaliation, the Sioux counter with “What do you get if you cross a Navajo and a sheep?” (answer: a retarded sheep), or “What can you get at Navajo Community College?” (answer: a BAA degree). At Warm Springs, you may hear the question, “What does a Hopi give to his wife on their wedding day that’s long and hard?” (answer: his name). Navajos, who consider the Hopis to be short and ineffectual, ask, “What’s four feet tall and a mile long?” (answer: a Hopi parade), while Hopis, many of whom consider the Navajos to be aggressive bullies, ask, “Why do Navajos prefer to buy used police cars?” (answer: So they can see what it’s like to ride in the front seat).

A Navajo, ruffled by anthropological notions that his people had come to North America by the Bering Strait “land bridge,” told a committee I was serving on, “We didn’t come over by any bridge. It was the Hopis. In fact, their own stories talk about it: They were on their long migration, and they were caught by freezing storms in the far North. They noticed some animals swimming in the water nearby, and they went over and asked them, ‘Excuse me! Is the Bering Strait land bridge around here anywhere?’ and the seals said, ‘Aoo!’” The word ‘aoo’ is Navajo for “yes,” and if enunciated properly with volume, sounds a bit like a seal’s grunt. In this story, the seals are already speaking Navajo by the time the Hopis arrive in North America.
Whites who want to be Indians (or who claim they are) come in for humorous treatment as well, as the Wanna-be Dance anecdote in chapter 3 illustrates. Someone who claims (as millions of whites do, apparently) to be part Cherokee may be told, “Oh yeah? If you had a nosebleed, you’d lose all your blood quantum.” According to one story, a white tourist came back from the Navajo reservation overjoyed that the Indians liked him so much they gave him an Indian name, bilagáana (“white person”). Lakota columnist Tim Giago recalls that when he was in a mission boarding school, a young Jesuit teacher was being visited by his mother, who asked if the Indian kids liked him. He said, “Of course they do; they even have a nickname for me in their own language, and, although I shouldn’t allow it, since they are forbidden to speak their native tongue, I just let it go because it shows they appreciate me. . . . The boys call me ooahloh [ooahloh means ‘Watch out, he’s coming!’].”

Parodies of white fads and fascinations are common on the Internet today; you can find out, among other things, what kinds of things Indians can say to a white person when being introduced, including, “How much white are you?” and “I’m part white myself, you know,” and “My great grandmother was a full-blooded white princess,” and “What do you think about those riverboat casinos your people are building? Do they really help your people, or are they just a quick fix?”

Through the Internet, you also hear about NDN Barbies (reflecting the colloquial western Native pronunciation of the word “Indian”). According to recent messages, you can get a Commod Barbie doll (referring to welfare commodity food), who comes with a can opener and cheese slicer, plus pliers and thread so you can make a jingle dress out of the lids (the latter bonus is available only on the Cree Reservation). The Rez Ball Barbie comes with sports bra, knee brace, wristbands, and sports goggles, plus her own oxygen bottle. The Forty-nine Barbie sits in her pickup until her beer is gone, then “closes in on the next snag.” The Wanna-be Barbie comes with jet-black (Clairol) hair, a brown corduroy dress, made-in-Japan moccasins, a turkey-feather fan, “and an attitude that is intolerable.” The New Age Barbie has her own crystals, beads, and “sacred” smudge shell. Wolf Woman Barbie (a Cherokee version of the Wanna-be Barbie) includes a pet mutt alleged to be “part wolf.” And the My-Great-Grandmother-Was-a-Cherokee Barbie is an exact replica of regular Barbie, “no different from all the Barbies in the store.” The extra commentary, plus sarcastic reference to common white misperceptions, makes it clear that these Barbies are not just clever Indian parallels to the dolls but rather, observations on white, especially New Age, misunderstanding and commodification of Indian attributes.
Recently circulated on the Internet was an Indian version of the popular survival television series where a limited number of people are left on an island to see if they can survive. The Native author proposes to drop ten white people onto a reservation, where they will have to endure “one week of hardship, gossiping, back stabbing, jealousy, teepee creeping, forty-nining” and be able to survive on high-cholesterol commodity foods. The ten contestants will be given five sacred rocks, a rez rocket (reservation car) with no doors and no back window, an unwinterized HUD house, and three-days’ worth of food stamps, plus moccasins, head-bands, and feathers “to wear around the rez to demonstrate cultural sensitivity to reservation inhabitants.” The last one to survive will be awarded a casino coupon booklet worth ten dollars, an authentic Indian handmade dream catcher, homemade tattoos from an ink pen, and a Princess Pale Moon special-edition Pendleton blanket.

All this humor suggests superficially that the Indians have been jolly good sports about everything that has happened in America—and I do think the Indians have maintained a better sense of humor about whites than whites have about Indians on the whole. But the images and styles, the themes, and the nuances of Native expression show us pretty clearly that—like the humor of most cultures—what’s being communicated is not pleasure but anxiety. Think about the most common themes in Euro-American humor, especially jokes: religion, sex, politics, race (to name the most common). There is nothing particularly funny in these topics. Indeed, they represent exactly those issues which are far from settled in our society, issues that cause interpersonal and intercultural friction, issues that provoke fear and anxiety. The same is true of Native humor, which tends to dramatize a continuing and perhaps even intensifying sense of disequilibrium and anxiety about personal and tribal existence, about maintaining stability in a world that requires people to act like witches or crazy persons to succeed, about Indianness itself in a political and economic setting where tribes and other ethnic groups are victimized by their own government or provoked into corrosive competition with each other.

In the processes of what we have politely called “assimilation” (which, incidentally, has not taken place), we have continued with remarkable naïveté to ask the Indians’ help in securing their own cultural demise—along with their language, heritage, value systems, and religion. We seem to control all the rewards: jobs, school, money, reputation, financial stability, upward mobility. The temptations for Indian people are great, and the tensions are more complex than anyone can easily articulate in intellectual or sociological terms. In James Welch’s Winter in the Blood, the protagonist spends most of the novel discovering that he’s more Indian than
he thought, even though he has not been leading a traditional Native life. Indeed, for most of the book, he leads an apparently empty, meaningless life. The one clear Indian gesture he makes, which lets us know that he is acknowledging his identity, comes right at the end of the novel when he tosses his grandmother’s medicine pouch into her grave. But the scene where this serious, symbolic moment occurs is framed in hilarious terms since his mother and her second husband, aping white ways, are wearing too much lipstick and garish double-knit clothing. The hole they dig for the grave isn’t big enough, so the expensive, lacquered coffin sticks, requiring them to jump up and down on it. When the scene was dramatized by a Native theater group at the University of Montana, Indians in the audience howled with laughter, while whites in attendance were offended by their behavior and wrote letters to the student newspaper advising Indians to learn proper theater manners and “respect for their own culture.” Obviously, the whites didn’t understand the important way Native humor functions in dramatizing dead-serious issues.

Native humor—ranging from funny aphorisms and wry comments, to old Coyote stories, to contemporary jokes—provides a culturally structured system through which shared anxieties, fears, and concerns can be played out, foregrounded, dramatized, and—most importantly—reexperienced and mastered. Like all poetry, the forms of humor utilize a style and imagery that speak to us of issues far deeper than a simple story line. Like
all jokes, their content is not really funny, but they become funny if performed for a knowledgeable audience because the imagery dramatizes and stimulates personal responses to shared values and fears (fig. 62). Humorous expressions in any culture are sensitive dramatic documents, barometric readings, pulse soundings which give us a sense of cultural worldview by projecting abstract emotional systems onto a human stage. By paying serious attention to Native humor, we can finally learn something really deep and genuine—and most of all, human—about our Indian neighbors, and—if we’re attentive—about ourselves as well. But it’s a subtle process: we’ve got to watch each other’s lips real close.

Notes

The sources of the Chief Suiattle story are anthropologist Jay Miller, Agnes Ferdin, and Terry Tafoya. An early version of the “Kiowa Gourd Dance with Captured Army Bugle” can be heard on the record that accompanies John Bierhorst’s A Cry from the Earth: Music of the North American Indian (New York: Four Winds Press, 1979).

John Greenway’s comments on the Journal of American Folklore appear in Folklore of the Great West (Palo Alto, Calif.: American West Publishing Company, 1969), 8–9; his letter to me, on University of Colorado stationery, is dated 24 June 1974 and signed “John Greenway, Professor of Anthropology.”


The “funniest Navajo joke” was collected from Matthew Yellowman, then a teenager, on 12 December 1974. For more on the several levels of meaning in Navajo Coyote tales, see my essay, “Life and Death in the Navajo Coyote Tales,” in Arnold Krupat and Brian Swann, eds., Recovering the Word: Essays on Native American Literature (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1987), 388–401. For a whole treatment of Coyote across several Native tribes in the West, see William Bright, A Coyote Reader (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1993)
The term “i’n’t it,” as used in Navajo vernacular English, is a contraction of “isn’t it” in the sense of “isn’t that so?” or “isn’t that correct?” One is likely to hear “you’re going to town today, i’n’t it?” or “they’re crazy, i’n’t it?” The pronunciation is almost exactly like “in it?” I am obliged to Chiyo and Pete DeCory, George Wasson, James Florendo, and Denny DeGross for keeping me supplied with examples of NDN humor on the Internet. Tim Giago’s article on Native humor appeared in his syndicated column in *The Idaho Statesman*, 14 July 2001, p. 7.

James Welch’s *Winter in the Blood* (New York: Harper & Row, 1974) is the first in a line of extremely penetrating fictional works about Native Americans caught in a meaningless, threatening, confusing white world.