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COMMENTARY

Tatsey and the Enemy-Friend

SIDNER LARSON

The Native American Renaissance has generated a number of excellent discussions of tribal humor, including Vine Deloria's *Custer Died for Your Sins*. In the book's pivotal chapter, "Indian Humor," Deloria reminds readers that humor is often simultaneously entertaining and an essential aspect of survival: "When a people can laugh at themselves and laugh at others and hold all aspects of life together without letting anybody drive them to extremes, then it seems to me that that people can survive."¹

These discussions of tribal humor are varied, ranging from analyses by and about American Indians such as Deloria; mainstream scholars attempting to locate Indians within the larger genre of humor; and postmodern texts such as movies, stand-up comedy, and television shows. Although many of them are yet to be reported, there are also important local and specific strands of tribal humor that serve to illustrate the rich diversity among various tribes. I am particularly interested in lesser-known aspects such as the Gros Ventre concept of "enemy-friend" and humorists such as John Tatsey, a Blackfeet man who was not only a tribal policeman in the Blackfeet community for many years but also wrote a regular column for the *Glacier County Reporter*, a newspaper serving the Browning, Montana, community.

Custer Died for Your Sins is specifically Native and a near-mandatory source for discussions of American Indian humor. It is also interesting to note that *Custer Died for Your Sins* was, for practical purposes, Deloria's opening salvo in a subsequent career that was caustic in its criticism of mainstream authority and Indians alike. Not unlike Arthur Penn's use of the humorous Old Lodge Skins character in order to deflect Hollywood censors' attention from his

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unprecedented film portrayal of military violence against American Indians in *Little Big Man*, Deloria often used humor to add layers to his skewering of those he felt deserving of such treatment. This fits into the category of corrective humor, in which, in the tribal community, humor is used to help people change inappropriate behavior. For example, Indians often refer to brothers and sisters perceived as being too assimilationist as “apples,” red on the outside but white on the inside. This is an extension of other observations of ethnic capitulations to white influence in which blacks refer to members of their own culture as “Oreos,” Asians refer to members of their own culture as “bananas,” and Hispanics refer to members of their own culture as “coconuts.”²

Deloria observes that “one of the best ways to understand a people is know what makes them laugh.”³ Fellow academic Kenneth Lincoln elaborates on this theme: “Indi’n humor, since it is so little discussed yet so widely acknowledged among tribes, projects a perfect inner circle or play-sphere, in Johan Huizinga’s sense, to gauge how we read one another across the Buckskin Curtain.”⁴ From the world of fiction writers, James Welch’s use of humor is often quoted, particularly his use of scatological humor to convey a pivotal scene of self-discovery in *Winter in the Blood*: “Bird farted. And it came to me, as though it were riding one moment of the gusting wind, as though Bird had had it in him all the time and had passed it to me in that one instant of corruption.”⁵

Welch’s mixing of the sacred and profane in fiction is similar to Deloria’s strategies in the academic world, a strategy by which both often engage in very serious games with their readers, using the play sphere to create an expression of reality that is extremely resistant to ideas and attitudes forced on them by others. Another complexity Welch introduces is his signification upon the popular stereotype of the dysfunctional, or drunken, Indian in *Winter in the Blood* and *The Death of Jim Loney*.⁶ Although Welch’s portrayal of the main characters in these books at first seems to exacerbate the stereotype, in the fullness of time his strategy has served not only to acknowledge problems with alcohol but also to urge readers to consider that many people living in enforced poverty tend to self-medicate.

Humor can be viewed as an ethnographic orchestration of multivocal exchanges occurring in politically charged situations, spontaneous play, and a means of leavening the unbearable.⁷ Those who speak for certain groups, expressing essential elements and boundaries of particular kinds of humor, also identify clashes and conversations within certain representations of local humor. More importantly, strands of American Indian humor begin to set the stage for other things, such as confrontation of genocide and reparations for lost lands, which must be accomplished in order for American Indians to advance progress toward more complete restoration of sovereignty.

Disruption of the status quo may be observed in contemporary mainstream humor, such as *Seinfeld*, *The Simpsons*, and *South Park*. *Seinfeld*, the show about nothing, is actually rich in content related to subjects usually avoided; for example, the episode entitled “The Contest” focused on masturbation for nearly twenty-one minutes. *South Park*’s off-color content often outrages critics by masquerading as a children’s program, but it also effectively points out the

fact that rotten behavior is not limited to adults. The *South Park* episode about Indian gaming, "Red Man's Greed," has proven an effective way to present common stereotypes associated with Indians in the classroom in comparison to lecturing from academic materials.

The Simpsons, an animated production now said to be the longest-running sitcom on television, is also sophisticated satire, treating many issues intrinsic to the television culture that spawned it. The success of *The Simpsons* is tied to television in many ways, and "for over four decades, American culture, for good or bad, has been filtered through television. The explosive growth of television in the 1950s is one of the defining features of postwar American culture."⁸

The early popularity of television was facilitated by humor, such as Milton Berle's *Texaco Star Theatre*, in 1948. Ethnic sitcoms, however, were also very much a part of early television humor and included the Italian American humor of *Life with Luigi*, the Irish American *Life of Reilly*, and the Norwegian American *Mama*. As Michael Rust explains, "*Amos n' Andy*, [the low] point of political incorrectness was, for years, virtually the only place blacks could be seen on television; it has never appeared in syndication because the stereotyping of African Americans would be too offensive to modern viewers."⁹

A strand of American Indian stand-up comedy exists that can be considered part of the trickster tradition of tribal peoples. Charlie Hill (Oneida/Mohawk/Cree) was raised in Detroit and on the Oneida Reservation in Wisconsin and is perhaps today's foremost American Indian stand-up comedian. The numbers are growing, however, and now include Robin Van Dyke, Trina Sxwithul'txw, Chaz Chilcote, Abel Silvas, Rosalie Jones, Vanessa Shortbull, Don Kelly, and Jim Ruel, all finalists in the Four Directions Talent Search held recently in the trendy SoHo arts district of New York City.¹⁰

In addition, Native American Public Television recently introduced *Club Red*, the first Native American comedy series. *Club Red* stars Charlie Hill and the Club Red Players: Bruce King, Carla Plante, Steve Tokar, Joe Paulino, Peggy Berryhill, and Cathy Chapman. The series is based on valuing Native ways and shines its light on every topic from mascots to casinos.¹¹

Stand-up comedy often turns on presenting a strong persona so that a particular point of view can be presented to the audience. This can be accomplished in a variety of ways by including features such as ethnicity, race, gender, or body type. As part of establishing such a persona, "Indian identities may serve as central, secondary, or even minor aspects of routines, and may be conveyed in numerous humorous ways."¹²

For example, Silvas, who grew up in San Diego, did not feature his American Indian heritage when he began performing. It was not until he was encouraged by French master Marcel Marceau, with whom he was studying mime, that he began to develop characters that reflect his California Indian heritage. "Beecher" Sykes (Otami/Mexican) initially began doing stand-up comedy as a Mexican "cholo" character, and Rebecca Ward (Cherokee) concentrates on issues she deals with as a woman.

In most cases, although these comedians may use different personas, their American Indian identities ultimately prove very valuable in conveying

messages about issues such as multiethnicity, cultural criticism, and the differences between urban and rural Indians. As an important part of this process, “Establishing self-identities helps stand-ups open audiences to their way of seeing things. In turn, making jokes about themselves or their own ethnic groups ingratiates themselves with their audiences and increases their ability to make fun of the dominant group.”¹³

Contemporary tribal humor is also strongly connected to television, a hallmark of inclusion in the postmodern performance world. *On & Off the Res with Charlie Hill* is a genuinely funny one-hour documentary that also raises consciousness by tackling stereotypes.¹⁴ Hill uses material from his own life and works his experiences into routines that show how working as a comedian, for an Indian, is no laughing matter. The film pays tribute to Will Rogers, as well as other comedians and humorists such as Dick Gregory and Vine Deloria. Deloria has observed ways that Indian humor has been a central aspect of Indian life.

In *Indi'n Humor* Lincoln observes that “the Indian poorest of the poor today have their humor, the fact of their survival, if little else materially. This is their psychic wealth and long-term salvation.”¹⁵ Lincoln draws on Freudian analysis in order to clarify humor as being different from joking in the way it completes itself within a single person, rather than needing a comic butt of the joke, examples of which are common among tribal people.

Lincoln continues his comparison of Freudian and American Indian notions of humor by suggesting that neurosis, delusions, and intoxication can serve as repudiations of the compulsion toward suffering. Such juxtaposition of seeming opposites is then shown to parallel Indian accommodation of mainstream culture; a painful, yet economical biculturalism illustrated through the statement, “Modern ways help a little; but the whites come and go, while we Hopi stay on forever.”¹⁶

Contemporary tribal humor exists as a bicultural genre, wherein, for example, “The Lakota ‘heart’s eye,’ as [a] native index to human understanding, struggles against a white ‘mind’s eye’—intuitive wisdom against positivist logic, tribal healer against psychic scientist. Indi’n humor, with its emphasis on bonding and human reciprocity sides with the heart’s emotions, in some affective balance with the head’s intellect.”¹⁷

The binary nature of the world of tribal humor is also reflected in Alan Velie’s observation that Welch’s *Winter in the Blood* is composed of scenes that are paired opposites: tragic-comic, climactic-anticlimactic. Velie then concludes that *Winter in the Blood* is not “heroic and romantic, like that of the horse opera, but ironic: the cowboy is an Indian, and the horse is out of control.”¹⁸ If we can begin thinking about Indian humor by accepting that “all things live in their opposites, play out their inversions, are known by their distortions, gain power through their contraries,” we can subscribe to Lincoln’s sense that “these comic twists can prove humorously wise to survivors of hard times.”¹⁹

The post-apocalyptic world within which American Indians now live, a world in large part defined by continuing genocide practiced by the American government and tolerated by the American people, certainly qualifies as hard

times. As a result, it is appropriate to assert that one of the binary principles of contemporary tribal humor is the fact that it is literally based in human tragedy of the worst magnitude.

At the same time, however, in the now-famous words of Deloria, “I sometimes wonder how anything is accomplished by Indians because of the apparent overemphasis on humor within the Indian world.”²⁰ This is in direct contrast to one of the most common stereotypes of American Indians, that of the stoic, humorless Red Man, probably a result of the fact that the mainstream knows so little about Indian people in general, let alone more subtle cultural features such as humor.

The rich diversity of contemporary tribal humor certainly runs contrary to the stereotype of the stoic Indian. This kind of joking, however, has an unusual complexity in that it is based on the most unimaginable human suffering. Understanding the binary nature of a genre such as tribal humor is a first step to appreciating others; therefore, if we judge others we do so more responsibly, from within their particular situations, and influenced by an open mind toward their values.

The preceding examples, as well as those from a number of other writers often included in such discussions, represent diversity in tribal humor. Perhaps the most well-known (and commercially successful) is Sherman Alexie. In true binary fashion Alexie is revered and criticized among Indian people, about whom he has written, “Forget about the cowboys versus Indians business. The most intense competition on any reservation is Indians versus Indians.”²¹ Although Alexie often captures aspects of modern Indians and their lives, his exaggeration of despair is ultimately inaccurate.²²

Others exist, to be sure; however, they just don’t “do it” for me, in the sense of Luci Tapahonso’s delightful poem “Hills Brothers Coffee”:

So I usually buy hills brothers coffee
once or sometimes twice a day
I drink a hot coffee and
it sure does it for me.²³

Those who do it for me are differentiated in other ways as well, one of which is the regional difference between Northern Plains and Southwest Indians. Pueblo people are without a doubt different from Plains Indians because their traditional cultures remain much more intact due to the fact that they were largely left untouched by colonizers, who perceived the great southwestern deserts as being of little value. Similarities between tribal regions exist, however, and their senses of humor are perhaps the best examples.

Human clowning, for example, is common to *Winter in the Blood* and Leslie Marmon Silko’s *Ceremony*. Welch’s relatives jump up and down on their grandmother’s coffin during her funeral not only to get it to fit in the hole but also as a means of leavening the unbearable; Hopi clowns throw a fellow’s corpse from a rooftop into a gathering in the town square, at his request, as a means of ridiculing death. In *Ceremony*, drunk Indian veterans get into it over a woman, but soon forget about her as they narcissistically begin pushing at

each other: "Their lack of real love for women goes with their general ineffectuality. The whole scene parodies the war, all its supposedly ardent love for motherland, all its proclaimed desire to protect wife and home forgotten in the blundering, futile rituals of fighting."²⁴

Regional difference is not the only method in Silko's multicultural text. A supreme moment of self-inversion is there as well: "Old Grandma shook her head slowly, and closed her cloudy eyes again. 'I guess I must be getting old,' she said, 'because these goings-on around Laguna don't get me excited anymore.' She sighed, and laid her head back on the chair. 'It seems like I already heard these stories before . . . only thing is, the names sound different.'"²⁵ In this simply subtle passage Silko defuses any notion among Indians and whites alike that she is doing anything other than passing on the stories that belong to all.

Another snippet of humor in *Ceremony* is Silko's punishment of Emo. Although Emo is significantly evil, the Pueblo way is to exile him from the community, and he chooses to go to California. "'California,' Tayo repeated softly, 'that's a good place for him.'"²⁶ Elizabeth Evasdaughter expands on this, saying: "This brief and quiet comment scores off evil more aptly than Emo ever scored off good. Emo will be in harmony with California; the apex of his desires is as bad as he is."²⁷ It is likely that not everyone shares Tayo's feelings about California; however, those feelings definitely reflect the prevailing attitude in the rural place where I was raised.

Although these examples of literary humor are helpful, they are also limited by mainstream conventions and tastes regarding form and content. As a result, they only get us so far in understanding certain realities of Native life, such as those found on reservations. Finding ways to add examination of less pleasant or unfamiliar forms of joking often found in tribally specific, nonfiction, and journalistic humor can help provide better balance. For example, Joseph Bruchac has retold a joke that Creek people find hilarious, but that is confusing to others:

It was spring and the wild onions were up big enough to gather. Saturday and the Indians were in town to get supplies. One Indian stood on the street corner just looking at the traffic and passers-by. He had eaten a good dish of wild onions at home. A friend of his came up to him and noticed a piece of green onion on his teeth. So he said, "Are the onions up pretty good?" With a broad grin the man who'd just eaten onions answered, "I don't know."²⁸

The joke is a wonderful example of the kind of economy to which Lincoln refers, wherein the joke is complete within an individual simply feeling good, in which there is much less need of another to be the butt of the joke.

Bruchac also explicates other forms of Indian humor, one of which is teasing that works in many ways. Teasing is a method of control, a means of flattery, and a binary structure delineating family relations; for example, in many tribes it is forbidden for a man to tease his mother-in-law and vice versa. He illustrates the taboo by telling the story of a man who became good friends

with a woman of his mother's generation. He spent so much time at her house that a romance developed between him and the woman's daughter, and they eventually married. The marriage changed the relationship between the man and his mother-in-law so severely, however, that it became a problem for all. "Finally, the daughter could stand it no longer. . . . She suggested they should divorce. Less than a month after the divorce was final, that young man was back sitting by the stove, teasing with his former mother-in-law."²⁹

Another form is the strike-pole dance that allows the Iroquois to tell jokes on one another. In this ceremony, a man would rise, strike the pole, then tell a funny story about some facet of another person: "When he finished and everyone was done laughing, the joker would then give a small present to the butt of the joke to soothe any bad feelings."³⁰ Bruchac emphasizes the fact that whoever had a story told about him was sure to reciprocate, and in this can be seen a form of "drive reduction," wherein aggression between tribal members is worked out in less aggressive ways.

The strike-pole dance common to Iroquois people has a parallel among Gros Ventre peoples' tradition of "enemy-friends." Enemy-friends is a highly evolved ritual based on the giving of spoils of war, obtained at risk of life, to a carefully selected individual. Often a successful older man selected a promising younger man for such a relationship, which involved liberties in word and action that would not be tolerated in other settings.

As The Boy [the last traditional Gros Ventre leader] phrased it, "This was an honor for the younger man and the older had nothing to lose. If the older continually won out over the younger in a fair 'fight' he ruined the younger man's reputation and thus eliminated a possible rival. On the other hand, if the younger man showed that he could take 'abuse' as well as give it, the older man could go along with him as an enemy-friend of long standing."³¹

In cases in which there was no serious rivalry, being enemy-friends opened up the possibility of play as well as social control. In one case a woman received a horse captured from the enemy from one of her husband's nephews. They could then play jokes on one another, which the young man initiated. The joke backfired but opened up the opportunity for the woman to go to the young man's lodge and walk in whenever she would hear him abusing his wife: "He had to stop when I came in there because if I actually caught him at it, I could dub him a wife-beater or worse in public."³²

A unique form of tribal humor that is also perhaps one of the most effective examples of the use of humor as a means of social control is found in the life of Tatsey: "For seven of his 18 years as a tribal policeman on the Blackfeet Indian Reservation, John Tatsey (Weasel Necklace) wrote a weekly newspaper column for the *Glacier Reporter* at Browning, Montana."³³ Tatsey's columns are a collector's item for those interested in grassroots commentary and they gained national recognition for their earthy portrayal of Blackfeet life. Mike Mansfield, venerable senate majority leader from Montana, appreciated them as a means of remaining connected to the spirit of his Montana home, half a

continent away from Washington, D.C. In his introduction to *Black Moccasin*, Mansfield said, “The epic doings of Stoles Head Carrier and Tom Lame Bear assure me that, no matter what becomes of the Federal budget or all of the problems of war and peace, life goes on at Heart Butte. . . . [Tatsey] pokes fun at life in general and makes us all chuckle a bit at our own absurdities. We are all better off for it.”³⁴

Tatsey was a tribal policeman in a rough-and-tumble community that would have presented a challenge to the likes of Wyatt Earp or any of the other, more well-known frontier officers of the law. Those Wild West sheriffs might have taken a lesson from Tatsey, who can be perceived as having done at least some of his law enforcement through a regular column in the local newspaper. The Blackfeet world of the time was a small one, and the prospect of having one’s indiscretions show up in print was without doubt a powerful deterrent.

Among other strategies, Tatsey used a modern variation of the Gros Ventre enemy-friends relationship in his writing, organized around his friend, Stoles Head Carrier: “We tease the older ones and the younger ones they do the same. . . . Like Stoles Head Carrier, he is a younger man than I am and I like to razz him. When I write about him I put a joke on the end. He would like to [do] the same to me, but he can’t write. I got the best of him.”³⁵

Alcohol was and is a serious problem for law enforcement among the Blackfeet, and incidents related to intoxication often made it into the *Glacier Reporter*: “Louie [Red Head] landed in Dupuyer and found a team of Gallos. They ran away with him and Tribal police were called . . . kept him in the Heart Butte cooler and then over to J. W. Walter’s quarters.”³⁶ The reference to “Gallos” is Gallo Brothers California wine, which, along with Thunderbird and F. I. Port, was favored among northern Montana Indian drinkers of the time. The reference to J. W. Walters is to the Browning jail, which Tatsey also calls the J. H. Walters Motel, Walters Brick House, Walters Hotel, or Walters Den.

Domestic abuse was another topic of concern for Tatsey, who often framed his criticism with wit and graphic description: “She was beating on the man. He ran back a ways. When he came back to her he had a car tire around his neck. When she struck at him she hit the tire and bounced back. Dan Calf Robe was smart to think of getting the tire for protection.”³⁷

Other news is more pedestrian, as in “Calving and lambing is in full swing—and all going good,” but Tatsey soon returns to humor for the larger percentage of his commentary, often relying on his enemy-friend Stoles Head Carrier to serve as comic foil: “Stoles Head Carrier was put up in city jail Sunday night. The boys inside were watching Stoles being searched and nothing much. He picked a pint from the overlap of his belly.”³⁸

The various ways Tatsey finds to accomplish his task of policing the Blackfeet community are a rich collage of elements of the town crier, comedy, humor, inversion, minimalization, incongruity, and Freud’s notion of drive reduction operating all at once and on different levels, as needed. Of all these elements, perhaps inversion is the most notable in this instance—we simply do not usually think of humor melded with journalism as being such an integral and effective part of police work. Although perhaps we should.

Tatsey's writing might be construed as emphasizing the stereotype of the dysfunctional American Indian, however, it is similar to Welch's rhetorical choice to portray alcohol use in *Winter in the Blood* and *The Death of Jim Loney*. In the fullness of time, Welch's choice has been very effective in terms of urging readers to consider the reasons why some Indians drink rather than the simple fact that they do. Lawrence Gross points out a similar strategy in his excellent article "Humor and Healing in the Nonfiction Works of Jim Northrup."³⁹ Gross observes that Northrup published a monthly column on Native American issues in the *Duluth News Tribune* and also publishes a nationally syndicated newspaper column, *Fond du Lac Follies*, both works that strongly emphasize the healing power of humor.

Another important contemporary Indian performer is Vincent Craig, creator of *Muttonman Discovers the Smithsonian*, a look at the pathos and humor of life in the Navajo Indian community. In addition to stand-up comedy, Craig is a singer-songwriter who writes cowboy ballads, protest songs, and social and political satire. In an interesting parallel with Tatsey, Craig served as the Navajo Nation's chief probation officer. Based in Window Rock, Arizona, he traveled vast stretches of New Mexico and Arizona performing his official duties as well as spinning tales and jokes based on his life and work.⁴⁰

Although general discussions of American Indian humor are helpful, local and specific examples are also important in order to help avoid the old stereotype that all Indians are the same. What most people perceive about American Indians is an extension of what they already know, which plays a significant role in what they are able to extract from material originating in other cultures. To make the transition to realities of both sides of cultural difference means accepting those elements of American Indian experience offered by those who have taken the opportunity to speak and have been recognized as having the authority to do so. The work discussed above offers an opportunity to be sensitive to those elements of their experience that can take us beyond our own already received ideas about what it means to be an American Indian.

NOTES

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