The Transformative Spirit of Indigenous Humour: Redskins, Tricksters and Puppy Stew

Katelyn Copage

Initially, I intended to focus this documentary critique on a topic more directly related to my thesis as this seemed to be an efficient use of time and writing, and I had already jumped head first into the food decolonizing world of online literature. This topic, however, of exploring the different aspects and application of humour, kept revealing itself to me; it feels like this is the relationship a strong part of me wants to research right now.

I've recently become more familiar with the literature of Marie Battiste, who introduced me to the concept of a Learning Spirit, and how to nourish your own Learning Spirit. Strengthening my understanding of humour seems to be the best way for me to nourish my shrivelled Learning Spirit at this moment in time. For the past few weeks, I've been trying to learn as much as I can about the relationship between Indigenous peoples and their traditional foodways as a foundation for future thesis research, and it has been a heart wrenching few weeks, and I don't feel ready to write about that just yet.

Redskins, Tricksters and Puppy Stew starts out with Drew Hayden Taylor narrating over video clips of what appears to be a road trip, "What's another name for a Native vegetarian?" Taylor asks his audience; I'm sure my sister Ashley, a long time vegetarian,

has heard this joke before. "A very bad hunter."[1] Cue laughter. Taylor then asks the most thought-provoking question which will be the theme of the documentary: "...what exactly is Native humour? Like a fart in the wind, you know it's there, but where did it come from?"[2]

Created and narrated by Taylor, an Ojibway writer, playwright and humourist, this documentary follows him on his journey up the "river of laughter" in his searches for answers, or at least, a better understanding of what Native humour is. Taylor converses with many Indigenous comedians throughout the film, and I found a common thread between all of their responses that has seeded itself within my heart and I can't shake it: the spirit of humour is incredibly transformative. Indigenous peoples experience (use) Humour as a tool for (re-)education, to reclaim our histories, teachings, and ultimately identities as Indigenous people. Humour provides a revolutionary platform to have difficult but necessary conversations reaching towards achieving any kind of genuine reconciliation. Humour brings us closer to one another through the shared experience of laughing.

Before I begin with the first subsection, I would like to put forth a disclaimer. I believe it would be a complete bastardization of Humour for me to make any grand conclusions on how Humour permeates Indigenous peoples at large, this documentary critique provided me with an introduction to understanding how other Indigenous people understand the Spirit of Humour. Instead of your typical academic paper, where research is done and conclusions are made, I feel as though I will have no conclusions at the end of this documentary critique other than a greater

[1] Drew Hayden Taylor @ minutes 0-0.21
[2] Drew Hayden Taylor @ minute 0.23

understanding of humour as a tool for healing, individually, communally, and nationally. But perhaps this is a too-soon conclusion; so, let us begin with the revolutionary platform humour provides Indigenous (and non-Indigenous) peoples.

Revolution Through Resistance, Reclaiming, and Re-education

Humour is a radical and compelling illustration of Indigenous revolution by means of resistance and re-education. By reclaiming white-washed stereotypes and histories for ourselves, we are re-writing history. Well, nobody is really re-writing history, we are just finally adding perspectives other than the colonizers: creating a more robust and truthful understanding of history. A more accurate description would be filling in the perspectival gaps within history.

Through humour, the narrative of who is laughing at who is changing. For a long time, Indigenous peoples have been the butt of the white man's jokes. But now, we are changing that narrative to laughing at and with ourselves, and one another. Multiple persons Taylor approached in his film mention the concept of Native humour being either a coping mechanism or a survival technique Indigenous nations have used to cope with the shitty hands they've been dealt. According to Sharon Shorty, a Northern comedian, Native humour "a lot of the time, it depends on the chaos. If you look at our history, we've been through a lot of chaos as People, and sometimes chaos makes us laugh."[3]

When Taylor asked actor, director, and comedy improv instructor Herbie Barnes, "what is native humour?" he expressed ideologies similar to Sharon's: "I think it's an exploration of, uh, I

[3] Sharon Shorty @ minutes 39.07-39.16

find, a lot of the Native humour is an exploration of the dark side, like, 'come over to the dark side, Luke.' But it is, a lot of our humour stems around our tragedies that happened, um, we joke about that and it's part of, partly our survival technique. Um, so I think that that's a big part of what it is, we uh, we look at um, we don't, we don't only laugh at the guy who slips on the banana peel, but it's a lot funnier if he breaks his leg, I think, for us.[4]

The driving forces of the Dead Dog Café certainly support this concept of humour as exploring the darker side of Native life. Three "Indians" hosting a radio show from a café which serves black lab to some seems controversial enough – Westerners really don't like the idea of you eating their dogs, especially not their purebred black labs. On top of that, you have three Indians covering controversial Indigenous politics and problems through humour in a way which made these issues very accessible to the every-day ignorant Canadian. Tom King said several times in this documentary that most of the letters the Dead Dog Café received were from non-Indigenous listeners expressing gratitude to the show for opening their eyes/minds to the realities/struggles of Indigenous people living in Canada.

Sarcastic Indians and contentious politics are a recipe for comedic healing and revolution.

Creating Safe Space to Talk about Difficult Topics

Almost all of the candidates in the documentary made reference to humour as being a safe space to talk about difficult topics within; a space where Indigenous people can talk about issues that affect their lives and for non-Indigenous persons to gain genuine

[4] Herbie Barnes @ minute 28.35

insight and knowledge in an inviting manner, to bridge that unknown cultural gap. There is an underlying assumption that anyone who is non-Indigenous and laughs at an Indigenous joke is racist, but once permission to laugh at these topics/issues has been granted, at an appropriate time and place because it is not always appropriate to laugh, there is truly incredible healing space created.

Floyd Favel Starr, also known as Jasper Friendly Bear on the Dead Dog Café, expressed his belief that people appreciated the content of the show because it takes a not-too-serious look at politics and things people would consider to be problems: "people are too afraid to touch Native issues because of political correctness, but because of Tom's writing, it gives them the opportunity to laugh without being called rude or ignorant.[5] Which is important in considering relationships between Indigenous and non-Indigenous Canadians. I echo what Shorty said earlier; that there is comedic relief to be found in most chaos, and as Indigenous peoples and nations, we have experienced unspeakable, frequent, and continued chaos. Humour can transform chaos into a more bearable experience or memory; humour creates space for healing to begin.

Non-Indigenous peoples need that safe space to uncomfortably laugh; not a laugh that is from pity or superiority, but a laugh that is derived from a fuller understanding. Almost a laugh at themselves from not understanding previously. From realizing the stupidity of humans have forced Indigenous nations into such oppressed and impoverished circumstances. As Tom King sees things, he is dealing with cultural humour, and "occasionally he holds that mirror up to White Canada and says "see? this is what it feels like.""[6] And we need that – everyone needs to be reminded of

[5] Floyd Favel Starr @ minute 12.02
[6] Thomas King @ minutes 23.13-23.23

how foolish humans can be; otherwise we take ourselves to seriously and get too full of ourselves.

Permission to Cross the Cultural Bridge Laughing

The first video footage we, the audience, sees is of Don Burnstick, who has a long, dark-haired mullet and is wearing a ribbon shirt, and it looks like he is talking to a crowd of Indigenous and settler folks: everyone looks like they are having a pretty enjoyable time. There are strips of green, yellow, then red across the area where his collar bones are, and green, yellow, red hangs in upside u's along either shirt section across his chest. "And I wanna let the Caucasians know here, my white relatives, that you can laugh at my jokes," he says in a serious tone. "I'm gonna tell some Native jokes and you can laugh, I'm not gonna get mad. I'm not gonna come over there and scalp you guys. No, we don't scalp white people no more. See, we stopped scalping white people when we realized their hair falls out anyway."[7] And as effortlessly as that, Burnstick has brought up some very controversial topics and people were able to laugh about it, together – the gap has been bridged.

Don Kelly talks about how he can feel the room tense up when he introduces himself, to a largely non-Indigenous audience, as an Ojibwe comedian: people clench themselves up physically wondering what to expect next – so he has a standard, introductory joke to dissolve some of the tension from the unknowns throughout the audience. His standard joke is saying that he's thought about introducing himself by using his Indian name as his stage name. Unfortunately for him, his Indian name is "Runs Like A Girl" so "Don Kelly" seemed to be the better option.

[7] Don Burnstick @ minute 1.13-1.36

After this silly joke, the audience seems to relax, as if they are all of a sudden now let off of the racial PC hook: this silly joke makes them feel safer, like they aren't about to be lectured on Native/non-Native relations or Treaties or be made examples of. There is an ease of anxiety when non-Indigenous peoples are given permission to laugh at something Indigenous.

Smoke Signals is one of the greatest Indigenous films that I have ever watched. This movie was an integral part of my childhood, to a point where my siblings, cousins and I still do our best Thomas Builds-the-Fire impression whenever we get together. Smoke Signals was the first First Nations written, directed, and technically created film of its kind – finally the world had a comedic First Nations film created by those it was making fun of, as opposed to dry and damaging stereotypes of Pocahontas and ancient Indians.

It was very interesting to watch this movie with my partner, who is a non-Indigenous non-practicing Jew from Prince Edward Island; he would laugh uncomfortably and un-occasionally because he couldn't tell it if he was watching a comedy or an incredibly racist movie about reservations in Canada. It wasn't until after I told him it was a comedy and completely Indigenous directed, produced, and edited that he seemed to feel more comfortable laughing.

There are a lot of Indigenous stereotypes expressed in this movie; all of the partying and drinking, the fry bread, the stereotypical and mystic storytellers, the rez car, the no-where-to-be-found Indigenous father, the stoic buffalo hunting Indian image, rez mannerisms and sayings – it's all there. These are topics that most non-Indigenous persons do not touch with a 50 ft. pole due to their likeliness of affecting people negatively. But these topics/issues are

presented through so much appreciation that it warms my heart to watch this film, and I imagine it does for others as well.

This film allows people who have never experienced life on a reserve to "become an insider" for an hour and 23 minutes, in a safe and comedic atmosphere, gaining a better understanding of some (on-reserve) First Nations issues; while simultaneously allowing those who have lived rez life to appreciate aspects through a celebrated and humourous lens. This film is a powerful counter-narrative to most film representations of First Nations peoples and the reserves we live on in Turtle Island.

Laugher Brings People Closer Together

Don Burnstick: "My fix is watching them people laugh, watching them wipe their eye, watching them point their fingers and say, "hey! That's you!" you know?" Like, there's...

Drew Hayden Taylor: "Or like a, like the recognition!"

Don Burnstick: "Yes, yeah!"

Drew Hayden Taylor: "it's like, I know what he's talking about!"

Don Burnstick: "and, and it's not just like, our people, but like white people, you know, you know uh, Asian, Blacks, you know, African-Canadians, all these..."

Drew Hayden Taylor: "mmm, yeah, true humour is universal."

Don Burnstick: "Yes! And, and again, I'm not a trained actor, I'm not like, uh, I didn't go to comedy school or theatre school or anything like that, I just really believe in the characters. I believe, I, I make a commitment to what I'm doing and I just go for it."[8]

[8] Don Burnstick @ minute 32.45-33.17

One of Herbie Barne's improv students had this to say about Native humour:

> "humour is transforming - it can take you to another place –good, bad, ugly, things you wanna hide, or things you wanna celebrate. Because, uh I come from a tradition where even in ceremony, where that is the most crucial, most serious part of our lives, there's joke telling. There's people playing the Trickster, showing their comic wit. And I think that that is distinctly Native because I would not find that in a Catholic church or a Protestant church, you know. They weren't doing that when I visited the Vatican – they weren't cracking jokes and having a good time. So, because our stories are transforming, humour is one of our elemental tools that we've used throughout our experience. And I don't see us as just being an oppressed people – we're a People who experience things and we talk about them."[9]

An unforeseen consequence of colonialism has been the banding together of Indigenous nations in retaliation and self-preservation. Something we all have in common, Indigenous and non-Indigenous, is our ability to laugh at life. Sometimes life is hard on us, and sometimes life is hard on others; sometimes we make mistakes, and some people are just hilarious. Laugher is a language most humans can relate to and see similarities to others through. In Don Burnstick's video about native women's laugh, he at one point says "you all laugh the same!" He was specifically referring to Native women and their laughs, but I think the same can be said about humans beings across this earth. We all laugh, and we all need to find ways to laugh at chaos and things that hurt, it helps us heal and to move on from that pain.

[9] Female Improv Student, I couldn't find out her name @ 45.42-46.46 minutes

Don Burnstick has a really hilarious bit completely dedicated to how different types of people laugh. He does an impression of the stereotypical Native woman laugh and by god, does he ever get it right.[10] He walks you through the native woman laugh, to which there are five steps. "You all laugh the same [native women], don't matter what tribe you are. First, she throws her head back and makes a sound, "ahh!" Move number two ~ they will give you one clap. Thirdly, the laughing woman will lean forward or sideways (and the person beside them has to push them back over). Move number four: the laughing woman than tries to grab whoever is closest or push back, laughing. And lastly, the laughing woman will point at whatever she is laughing about.

I can relate to this perfectly! I can picture my Aunties, especially my Aunty Sharon, laughing like this. This is the recognition Taylor and Burnstick are talking about. Maybe not exactly in the exact order that Burnstick presents them as, but I know those moves he is talking about. I've seen them in my family members and our community at large. Burnstick talks about his appreciation for being able to bridge a cultural gap between non-Indigenous and Indigenous peoples with laughter ~ "yeah, we're different but let's look 'n' let's laugh, you know."[11]

Reclaiming Words and Stereotypes

One of the running jokes that Don Burnstick is famous for is his Redskin series. Redskin is certainly not a term you hear today in civilized conversation, as it has a history of being used to degrade

[10] Don Burnstick's 5 Moves of Native Women Laughing. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=LZk8djys204 @ minute 1.25
[11] Don Burnstick @ minutes 3.04-3.14

and dehumanize Indigenous skin colours and most Natives to Turtle Island will be offended if you use this outdated term, especially when referring to them. Burnstick, however, uses this term in a series of jokes in order to reclaim the identity behind the term, just temporarily, as having a more humourous effect and less of a shameful connotation. Burnstick "jumped into that redskin, into that racist stereotype and twisted it and made it funny."[12]

His first redskin joke that people laughed at was, "if you know how to fillet baloney, you might be a redskin,[13] which has expanded into a series of admittedly hilarious bits. If you answer yes to any of the following statements, then you may be a redskin:

- if you use your probation officer as a reference, you may be a redskin;
- if you go to KFC to celebrate Thanksgiving, you may be a redskin;
- if the most confusing day in your community is father's day, you might be a redskin.

(Re-)Education

My world has been completely blown open in respect to Indigenous knowledges this past year and like there is within any diverse field of education, there are a variety of knowledge gardeners[14] - who present themselves through different faucets and with different priorities. Chelsea Vowel is a Métis activist and scholar who uses humour to her advantage in her growing body of literature. Her use of dry and sarcastic humour throughout her book *Indigenous Writes: A Guide to First Nation, Métis and Inuit Issues*

[12] Don Burnstick @ minute 3.23
[13] Don Burnstick @ minute 2.28
[14] - a concept introduced to me by Elder Albert Marshall

in Canada I found particularly relatable, easy to read, and educative, and I believe this is primarily due to her use of humour as a teaching tool, particularly when she was addressing myths that have become widely accepted by non-Indigenous populations.

There are also Indigenous scholars such as Eve Tuck who take a no-laughing-matter approach to Indigenous education, by stating that the decolonization of Canada needs to begin with the transferring of Indigenous territories rightfully back to the nations from which they were stolen or dispossessed.[15] Neither voice is more important than the other, and both are needed to reach out and educate as many people as possible. We, as Indigenous Peoples across the world, have begun telling our own stories using our many voices once again.

Burnstick: "Now there's this whole humour release that's coming out now, there's this, with our people and the entertainment business and it's so refreshing, you know, cause many white people think we're constipated and we're serious and we're gonna set up roadblocks..."

Taylor: "The stoic Indian."

Burnstick: "...the stoic Indian. And we're just like, we're gonna set the roadblock, and you know, do all this kinda stuff, and uh, I like breaking it, you know."[16]

Through the use of humour, Indigenous peoples now have a platform to educate Non-Indigenous people about their struggles and histories using their own methods, as well as educating their own

[15] Eve Tuck and Wayne Kang, "Decolonization is not a Metaphor" in *Decolonization: Indignity, Education and Society.* 1:1, 2012.

[16] Don Burnstick @ minutes 31.48-32.01

people. Our stories have been being told by folks other than us literally since contact, and it is well past the time for us to reclaim our pasts, presents, and futures.

Educating through humour has a more positive impact and long-lasting effect on learners; humour makes learning fun and enjoyable, and that is what people remember. When I look back on my public education, what I remember most is not trigonometry or Shakespeare ~ I remember the lessons I found enjoyable. Like I mentioned at the beginning, Marie Battiste introduced me to the concept of a learning spirit, which as an Indigenous student, demands that my worldviews be embedded throughout all components of my education. Nourishing one's learning spirit could almost be understood as a counter to cognitive imperialism, which is when Indigenous knowledge is continually omitted or ignored in the schools, and a Eurocentric foundation is advanced to the exclusion of other knowledges and languages.[17]

Teaching with Trickster

Part of combating and countering whitewashed versions of Indigenous knowledges is the re-teaching of characters non-Indigenous persons don't have a clear-cut style of their own to compare to. When trying to explain the Indigenous Trickster character to non-Indigenous people, Don Kelly said "they want to see him as almost a Christ-like figure, ya know, never screws up, always wise, and that's not how the Trickster is in our eyes. You know, Nanabosho, whenever he's feeling a little too proud or whenever he's ahead of the game, that's when he falls into, eh a,

[17] Marie Battiste, *Decolonizing Education*, p.26

uhhh, a field of manure 'er something, you know, something weird happens."[18]

> Trickster tales were cautionary tales primarily, I mean, you told tales of a, a coyote or about Trickster to let people know that this kind of behaviour was unacceptable. That, uh, you shouldn't do these kinds of things, you should not let your uh, uh, let your appetites get out of control, and if you did, you know, this could happen to you.[19]There are a lot of Native writers who use Trickster or Trickster figures in their prose and poetry and, and drama, it's a, it's a natural thing I think for us to gravitate towards, and it's one of those things, I think, that sort of marks out the culture, in a minor way, in a minor way, but we can use in our literature.[20]

Humour to Honour their Elders

Up North of the 60th parallel in Whitehorse, Yukon, Jackie Bear and Sharon Shorty have come up with a unique way of honouring their Elders. Through the creation of *Suzie and Sarah,* these two women put on their best impressions of Elders for groups of Elders.

Both Jackie and Sharon were raised by their grandmothers, which is pretty common/traditional, and when they got together, they had similar habits to older ladies, just making lots of tea and bannock. While they were roommates, their grandmothers were also roommates in the old folks home where they lived. One day, after both of their grandmothers had passed into the Spirit world,

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[18] Don Kelly @ minutes 29.45-30.08
[19] Thomas King @ minutes 30.09-30.29
[20] Thomas King @ minutes 29.26-29.44

they were really lonely and feeling the loss of their grandmothers and started roleplaying them as a means of remembering them. Through humour, these two women are honouring the memory of their grandmothers and other Elders like them. Sharon's brother, who had witnessed the first recounting kitchen table activity of honouring of their grandmothers, encouraged them to get their hilarious act out there to the public for others to enjoy and they've been spreading humourous honourings ever since.

They have Elders outfits they wear when they perform as Suzie and Sarah, some of the items were gifted to them from Elders who came to see their show. Sharon talks about a skirt she received from an Elder once; the Elder came up to her after she had seen *Suzie and Sarah* and didn't like Sharon's skirt, so she gave Sharon one of her own to wear for future shows. All of the clothing has a history, which means a lot because it's really from the Elders they are honouring and remembering.

Jackie shares with the camera how she was approached once after a show by a woman whose eyes were brimming with tears, "You remind me so much of my Auntie, and I miss her so much. Thank you. I miss her so much, but you just brought her back to me; thank you.[21] "When Suzie and Sarah started until now, we've gathered history along the way like a skirt from a certain Elder because she didn't like the last skirt I had. Or a sweater from a certain rummage sale from an Elder, so they all, it just all has its own history and you know, it means a lot because it's really from them."[22]

Oh, The Places You'll Go, with Humour

[21] Jackie Bear @ minutes 37.23-37.28
[22] Sharon Shorty @ minutes 25.5626.12

So, this documentary and all of the people sharing their opinions throughout have got me thinking "what are the benefits of humour? Specifically in regards to Native humour?" Thomas King has a great answer, and I think he is hitting the beneficial nail right on its head:

> "You can get in the front door with humour. You can get into their kitchen with humour. If you're poundin' on the front door, they won't let you in. They may gather all the kids 'round on to watch on the front stoop, you know, makin' a fool out of yourself sometimes. Uhh, which doesn't mean that I don't believe in, you know, that sort of confrontational activism but it's just not me, it's not what I'm good at. You know, humour is what I'm good at – I'm better at humour." A cameraman says to him, "It's more releasing." To which Tom continues, "Yeah, well, it makes me laugh too, you know, I mean, it's, it's those things that hurt in life, those, those things that continue to hurt about being Native in North America. You know, I can handle those through humour – I can't handle those through anger because I get angry about something and it just gets away from me. It just consumes me. And so I've got to keep coming back to humour as my, sort of, my safe position, and I think I make more of an impact. I mean, a lot of the letters we get on Dead Dog Café are from non-native listeners who say, you know, this show really makes me think about what it's like to be Native in Canada, or what it's like to be, you know, uh uh, white in this country and the kind of privilege that just accused to you simply because you are from that particular racial group.[23]

[23] Thomas King @ minutes 23.54-25.04

Using humour as a teaching tool gets you in through the front door and sitting at someone's kitchen table, whereas using anger or hatred as a teaching tool only creates more problems and excels negative situations and consequences. You can get to someone's heart through humour, and you can reach into someone's pain. Indigenous ways of knowing are organic with an emphasis on reciprocity and humour. These ways of knowing are both cerebral and heartfelt.[24]

Closing Thoughts and Continuation

Humour has been used as a mean of coping with chaos and a great technique of survival when colonial life became too overwhelming in the past, and a means of revolution in the present. Humour educates and honours and creates space where everyone is welcomed to laugh at life's misfortunes. The Spirit of Humour is transformative – it can transform pain into healing, it can educate those who are ignorant in an enjoyable and impactful way, it can honour those who have passed on to the Spirit World, it can bridge cultural and individual gaps.

As per usual, I've written a lot and talked myself in many circles and don't have a grand finale to offer to anyone who is reading this. It doesn't seem appropriate for me to make any grandiose conclusion regarding the Spirit of Humour in relations to Indigenous peoples as this is the first time I've really sat down with it and introduced myself to it, and vice versa. From what I gather, humour is an essential element within Indigenous cultures as it

[24] "Margaret Kovach, Emerging from the Margins: Indigenous Methodologies." In L. A. Brown, L.A. & Strega, S. (Eds.). *Research as Resistance: Critical, indigenous and anti-oppressive approaches* (p.28). Toronto: Canadian Scholars' Press.

marries many other strong characteristics of Indigenous cultures together with the guiding principle of transformation.

Transformation, now more than ever before, is critical in achieving reconciliation between nations.

Wela'lin; Msit No'kmaq..

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Katelyn Copage is from Sipekne'katik in Nova Scotia, and is studying for her Masters in Critical Studies in Education, at UNB, Fredericton. Her research interest are in Indigenous curriculum, and decolonizing food.

No correspondence information was provided.