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Reichenau i.M., im März/March 2010

1. Introduction

In the winter term 2007, I attended a literature course with renowned Canadian writer Ted Blodgett called ‘The Canadian Prairie Novel’, the reading list of which also contained a work by a Native writer, Thomas King. The book was called *Green Grass, Running Water*, and I found it so funny and intelligent, so full of witty criticism of colonial structures that I still regard it one of the best books in my collection. The thing that struck me most was his use of a character I didn’t know before: The Trickster, a figure from Native North American mythology that was totally different from any other clowns I had ever encountered in literature before.

Roughly one year later, when I had to decide on a topic for my final paper, I remembered King’s novel and developed the idea of investigating the humour of North American Indian authors. Together with my tutor, Prof. Carmen Birkle, I narrowed my approach down to three authors: Thomas King, Drew Hayden Taylor and Tomson Highway.

In this paper, I will take a close look at several novels and plays written by these authors, focussing on what methods they use to make us laugh and what topics they are addressing with their humour. My initial thought was that they most likely use problems in modern-day Native communities, such as alcoholism and the atrocities of the past as a basis for their jokes. But is this all or is there more to it? The second part of this paper is devoted to answering this question.

At first, however, I will give a short overview of the different approaches of explaining humour, a task that sounds much easier than it actually is, and the most important stages in (white) American literary humour as well as works by Native authors. A thorough report on the traditional forms of Native North American humour, especially the character of the Trickster will provide a sufficient theoretical background for understanding the humour of the authors in question.

My thanks for helping me write this paper go to Prof. Carmen Birkle for her learned tips and eagle-eyed correction skills, to the employees of Vancouver Public Library for providing me with plenty of material which sometimes wasn’t easy to find, to Ted Blodgett for introducing me to Thomas King and thus, to Native North American humorists as such and

last, but not least, to Mr. Christopher ‘Boss’ Woolgar of London, GB, for proof-reading the early chapters of this paper.

2. On Humour

2.1 Terminology

Whenever a writer deals with the indigenous peoples of the North American continent, one problem must be addressed before starting the actual inquiry and that is the question of how to refer to those peoples. Mary Ahenakew in the Smithsonian Institution publication *Do all Indians Live in Tipis* from 2007 claims that the terms ‘American Indian’, ‘Indian’, ‘Native American’ and ‘Native’ are “all [...] acceptable.” However, she continues, “the inclusive word Indian [...] says little about the diversity and independence of the cultures.” She identifies the terms ‘American Indian’ and ‘Indigenous Americans’ as the most appropriate since they are “now preferred by many Native people,” even though, one should call them “by their specific tribal name whenever possible” (Ahenakew, 2).

For the topic of my paper, it is very important to find a term that I can use to refer to both U.S. ‘Indians’ and Canadian First Nations. I have therefore decided to use a slight variation on the preferred term in the United States and to refer to them as ‘North American Indians’ or, abbreviated, ‘N.A. Indians.’ Whenever I have to use the adjective, I will follow Ahenakew’s suggestion and use the word ‘Native.’ Whenever I use the term ‘Indian’ alone, it is to emphasize, for example, a stereotypical or historically outdated standpoint. Therefore, I will put the word in inverted commas whenever I have to use it in this sense. In case it is used without inverted commas in a quotation, I will leave it this way, however.

Another point I would like to make at the very beginning is that I do not distinguish between North American Indians from the U.S. or Canada. For once, the indigenous peoples knew no national borders, which makes them insignificant for my research. Secondly, as I will show, most scholars agree that there are certain traits of humour that apply to all or most Nations among North American Indians. My goal is to identify them and to analyse their use in the works of three different authors, two Canadians and one U.S. American, Thomas King,

whose stories are predominantly set in Canada which is why it is fair to claim that the focus of this work will be on Canadian works.

2.2 In Search of a Theory of Humour

What is humour? What is it that makes us giggle, chuckle, jeer, cackle or, to speak in the language of the internet generation, ‘rofl’ (roll on the floor laughing)? No-one really knows. Many scholars have dealt with this problem, from psychoanalyst Sigmund Freud to philosophers and sociologists, none of which has come to an entirely satisfying conclusion. As early as 1939, Milton Wright wrote a whole book on *What Is Funny – and Why?* But, at the very beginning of his work, he states the following to express the difficulty of his endeavour:

But with humour there doesn't seem to be any explanation that everybody is pat. You try to pin it down, only to have it either evaporate or pop up in the most disconcerting places. (Wright, 3)

Wright and all these scholars agree on the fact that a theory of humour is hard to come by since what we find funny depends on so many combined factors at the same time, and only very rarely, humour is universal. Barry Blake gives an example:

If you want to get a laugh from people of virtually any culture, show someone all togged out in a fine white costume and then have them slip and fall in the mud. [...] Laughing at someone's misfortune seems to be universal, and the bigger the accident the greater the potential for humour. (Blake, 3)

Although this is certainly true, it is far from guaranteed that what one person finds funny, would also amuse another one. For example, jokes at the expense of people of a certain skin colour or at the expense of those belonging to a certain ethnic group might be funny for a member of the majority group but most definitely not for the butt of the joke. This one and other limitations make it hard to find a universal tool for describing humour. The only thing that all people who have ever dealt with humour on a theoretical level agree on is that “together with the power of speech, the mathematical gift, the gripping thumb, the ability to make tools, humour is a specifying characteristic of humanity” (Nash, 1).

So, much wiser people than the author of this paper have already tried to cope with this problem which is why I will not venture into formulating my own theory but only give a short

summary of what I consider the more interesting ones on the subject, those aspects which help me in my discussion of Native North American humour.

Linguist Walter Nash is one of those brave people who have attempted to coin a theory of humour. In the preface to his book *The Language of Humour*, he reflects on his first thoughts when confronted with the task of writing a book on humour:

I have been struck by the complexity of the subject – by the realization of what we are required to know, what social competence we must possess, what intellectual operations we may have to perform before we can grasp even a simple joke. I do not mean that you have to be Wittgenstein before you can grapple with a pun; only, that if you are about to converse with wits you must have your wits about you. (Nash, xi)

Nevertheless, Nash did not give up and completed a book of 180 pages on not only humour as such, but the language of humour, thus trying to conquer the subject on a linguistic level. Although concentrating on words, phonology and structure, he provides a multi-disciplinary theory of humour as a framework for his further studies. He formulates three “principle references” that the “act of humour” has. First, he identifies

- (a) a ‘genus’, or derivation, in culture, institutions, attitudes, beliefs, typical practices, characteristic artefacts, etc. (Nash, 9)

This means that every joke has to feature some information that the reader and joker share. This information can be historical, cultural, religious, behavioural etc. If the readers do not understand the context the joke is set in, they have no chance of understanding it unless the joker explains it which, as everyone knows, destroys the best joke.¹ An example of a joke that relies on shared cultural knowledge is given by Barry Blake: “What did Stevie Wonder’s partner do after they had had an argument? Move the furniture around” (Blake, 24).

In this example, both participants in this joke must share the knowledge of Stevie Wonder being a pop star and of him being blind.² Coming back to Nash’s theory, part of this first hypothesis is the assumption that there is

an executant, who fixes the rules, and a respondent, who accepts the conditions offered, and paradoxically allows himself to be duped in order to enjoy the superiority of his insight. (Nash, 5)

¹ Cf. Nash, 2-4.

² Cf. Blake, 24.

The listeners to a joke put themselves in a certain state of mind where they are ready to accept scenarios that are very unlikely to happen in real life. This divergence between what is possible and impossible in real life has to be accepted in order to understand a joke and to make it humorous in the first place. According to Nash, this breach is most likely expressed through language, as explained under (c)³. Secondly, however, he says that a joke must have

(b) a characteristic design, presentation, or verbal packaging, by virtue of which the humorous intention is indicated and recognized. (Nash, 10)

Everyone is familiar with phrases like “Hey, have you heard this one?” or “That reminds me of a funny thing that happened to me today.” Nash calls such lines “forewarning signals” that indicate that what is to follow might or most definitely will be funny. They are a signal for the intention to joke, and Nash claims that without this “sort of contract between executants and respondent, laughter is compromised” (Nash, 6) since jokes could be misunderstood, especially if they are of a satirical or cynical nature. Nash’s third point that makes a joke funny is

(c) a locus in language, some word or phrase that is indispensable to the joke; the point at which humour is held and discharged. (Nash, 10)

Here, Nash shows his linguistic background, underlining the importance of two things. Firstly, a word or phrase as the “centre of energy [on which] the whole matter of the joke is fused, and from which its powers radiate” and the assumption that “the language of humour dances most often on the points of some dual principle, an ambiguity, a figure and ground, an overt appearance and a covert reality.” He claims that every joke inherits a certain “two-sidedness” of language, like ambiguity or polysemy (Nash, 7).

Rather surprisingly, this last one of Nash’s theories corresponds closely to the semantic explanation of humour formulated by Arthur Koestler in 1964 who suggests that “humour is created when two incompatible frameworks are brought suddenly together” (Koestler quoted in Mulkay, 39). Another scholar of semantics, Victor Raskin takes this assumption a little bit further when he says that

a joke is an ambiguous text which gives rise to a specific kind of semantic opposition. To claim that these [frameworks] contained in jokes are ‘opposite’ is not merely to suggest that they generate some vague semantic divergence or incongruity. [They] must be opposite in a very special sense.

³ Cf. Nash, 5.

So, it is not enough for the frameworks of a joke to be opposite in just any way – they have to diverge in a specific way in order to be funny. Raskin thinks that the “basic semantic opposition employed in humour is that between real and unreal or between actual and non-actual.” He further divides this opposition into three different possible settings:

- (a) A contrast between the actual situation occurring in a joke and some non-actual situation which is incompatible with the actual setting of the joke.
- (b) An opposition between the normal state of affairs and some abnormal, unexpected state.
- (c) A contrast between some possible or plausible situation and one much less plausible. (Raskin quoted in Mulkay, 41-42)

The essence of Raskin’s theory is that this contrast between the real and unreal or actual and non-actual makes a joke funny. The linguist Nash believes that this contrast lies in the language of the joke, in its words and phrases. The truth probably lies somewhere in between, and a complete theory of humour still remains to be found. However, one thing is certain. Throughout all cultures, ages and languages, humour is always present but never predictable and never fails to surprise. It’s quite possibly a good thing that there is no absolute theory of humour since knowing absolutely everything about it would destroy even the best joke ever told or, as David Sloane puts it:

part of our response to humour, irony, implication, allusion, nonsense rhyme [etc.] may lie in relationships buried within the experience that are hard to externalize without seeming absurd. And indeed, perhaps this is why explanations of jokes appear so lame. (Sloane, 251)

What does remain after the study of various theories of humour? Not much more than a few things that seem to be absolute: Firstly, all humans have a sense of humour which sets us apart from all animals. Secondly, what is funny and what isn’t depends highly on the individual listener or reader and their imagination. Thirdly, humour seems to evolve from a certain opposition or ambiguity in the subject, a contradiction between something real and something unreal or between something plausible and something implausible. This particular concept is used by Native humorists a lot, as I will show later on. Fourthly, performer and listener of a joke have to share certain background information without which the joke wouldn’t make sense. For me it remains to find out how these concepts, written by and surely based on Euro-American contexts, fit into the works of North American Indian authors.

2.3 Forms of Literary Humour

However, as I am dealing with pieces of written literature in this paper, let me shortly reflect on how humour can be used in language. Barry Blake has written a highly readable and accessible book on the language of humour, *Playing with Words*, published in 2007. He differentiates between various ways of using humour in the English language.

Firstly, he identifies “Laughs in the Lexicon,” certain words that sound funny or let us think of something amusing. Among these are compounds such as “underground mutton” for “rabbit,” blends such as “Labradoodle” for a cross-breed of a Labrador and a Poodle or “Giraffiti” for “Vandalism spray-painted very, very high.” This also includes euphemisms like “unlawful deprivation of life” for “killing,” alliterations like “bible-basher” for a person who believes every word in the holy book, and rhymes such as “gender-bender” for people who “combine characteristics of both sexes” (Blake, 64). Funny names like “Fats Domino” or “Jack the Dripper” also belong to this category.⁴

The second major form of literary humour Blake mentions are puns which he calls “the most common basis for humour” (Blake, 68). Puns are usually made using homophones, words that “sound alike” but have different meanings, and homographs which are words that are “spelled alike” but mean different things. What is meant by this is best explained with one of his own examples:

I’ve got a telescope. Would you like to look at Venus?

Yes, as long as I don’t have to look at Uranus.

The funny part here clearly is the word Uranus which is “homophonous with ‘your anus’ and the basis of innumerable jokes” (Blake, 73). Puns also work with phrases rather than just single words, as this example shows: “Police station toilet stolen. Cops have nothing to go on.” Here, the funny part is the double-meaning of “to go on” as “having no clue” versus “to go to the toilet.”⁵

Another category is grammatical ambiguities. It is basically the same concept, but this time the whole sentence is ambiguous, not just a single word or phrase. The sentence “Lawyers give poor legal advice” shows how this works. The interpretation of the sentence

⁴ Cf. Blake’s explanation of the humor of words in Blake 54-67.

⁵ Cf. Blake’s explanation of the humor of puns in Blake 68-80.

structure determines the meaning, whether the lawyers are giving advice to poor people or giving bad (poor) advice. This can also be triggered by co-ordination as in “Lowest prices and service” in which it is “not always clear exactly what is being co-ordinated” (Blake, 88), in this case leaving room for interpretation on the quality of the service.⁶

The next form of humour according to Blake would be jokes, which come in classic ‘story-line’ form, having three parts, “with a punch line in the third part” (Blake, 95) or as ‘Question’ jokes. Examples of these jokes are so well-known to everyone that they need not be explained here. Other jokes include blonde jokes, cannibal jokes, dumb jokes and funny ‘nonsense’ definitions such as “coffee” for “a person coughed upon.”

Also belonging to the family of jokes are oxymora in “which the modifier in a construction appears to contradict the modified” (Blake, 109). Typically, an adjective contradicts a noun as in “deafening silence” or “timeless moment”. These are not per se funny but used in a satirical way, examples such as “airline food” or “honest politician” have provided armies of stand-up comedians with abundant material for their gags. Another highly interesting form of jokes are signs which are not intended to be funny at all but can turn out to be a hoot when read the right way. A classic example from a restaurant is “If you don’t like our waiters, you should see the manager.”⁷

Blake’s eighth major form of humour is ‘wit’ which is sometimes used interchangeably with ‘humour’, although being a much narrower concept than the latter. He explains wit as “cleverness with words, usually humorous, but not always” and quotes Kermit the Frog who once said “A hangover is the wrath of grapes” as a prime example (Blake, 119). Kermit’s wit shows in both his profound knowledge of literature, deliberately misquoting the title of a John Steinbeck novel and by giving it a wholly new, funny meaning. This form of humour can be found in many works by Native authors, but more on that later.

Errors are Blake’s last entry in this abundant list of forms of humour. These include slips of the tongue and mispronunciations such as spoonerisms, named after alleged inventor Reverend Archibald Spooner who is said to have turned “down train” into “town drain.” Accents and lisps also belong in this category and everybody knows the infamous jokes on Chinese people and their inability to pronounce the English ‘r’. More recent ones, called

⁶ Cf. Blake’s explanation of the humor of grammatical ambiguities in Blake 81-94.

⁷ Cf. Blake’s explanation of the humour of jokes in Blake 95-118.

'English' – jokes, make fun of Japanese people having trouble pronouncing "I" and substituting it with 'r' which results in phrases like "good fright" instead of "good flight." Cockney English, Australian English, and all sorts of accents belong in this group, as well. Misinterpretation is always good for a laugh, too. These are most often due to a phonetic problem as in "Everlasting is thy rain" instead of "reign." Misspellings have probably entertained (or annoyed) every language scholar, including the author of this paper. The 'best' examples must be incomprehensible restaurant menus or bad translations of the same. Lack of logic is another great laugh and many a U.S. president has come to questionable fame because of illogical comments such as this one by George Bush, Sen.: "I stand for anti-bigotry, anti-Semitism and anti-racism."⁸ In my opinion, this category should also include gullibility and the humorous results thereof.

This concludes Barry Blake's summary of the most common forms of literary humour but, as my research on Native humour has shown, it doesn't provide a satisfying basis for my analysis of North American Indian humour later on in this paper. Of course, Blake focuses a lot on language, especially funny words and phrases, but I think it fails to mention a few forms of literary humour that might not be exclusively found in utterances, words and phrases but are nevertheless used extensively, especially in Native literature. Some concepts, cannot always be found in the words themselves, but work on a higher, structural, contextual or intertextual level and this is what is missing in Blake's summary. First, I want to mention mockery, a concept that is defined as "something that makes a system, organization etc. seem stupid or useless" by the *MacMillan English Dictionary* (915) and is used by many Native authors for it is an integral part of traditional Native humour, especially through shameless exaggeration. Connected with mockery is mimicry, a technique that was used by traditional clowns in the past and is one of the favourite techniques of playwright Tomson Highway. Defined as the copy of "someone's voice, behaviour, or appearance in order to make people laugh or to make someone feel annoyed or embarrassed" ("Mimicry", 902), it is a welcome tool for many Native humorists to undermine colonial structures, as I will show in the later parts of the paper. Parody, "a literary or musical work that copies a serious work in a humorous way" ("Parody", 1030) is also missing from Blake's list, but especially this concept is very important since many Native authors use it to explore the limits between (colonial) written literature and (Native) oral storytelling. Also missing are humorous fights and

⁸ Cf. Blake's explanation of the humour of errors in Blake 54-154

struggles, spoken or physical in which characters lightly insult or mock each other, another concept highly popular among Native writers, hence the tradition of teasing in N.A. Indian communities. This short amendment to Blake's list should provide a proper framework for my analysis of the novels and plays later in this paper.

To conclude this short insight into the rules of humour, let me shortly state the forms of humour I will focus on in my analysis of Native North American humorists. Firstly, I will investigate the traditional forms of mockery, mimicry, teasing, self-deprecation and survival humour and how they are used in a modern framework. Naturally, the character of Trickster will be mentioned several times in this context. Secondly, I will look at how these authors use the humour of language, particularly funny words and witty remarks to make their point. Thirdly, situation comedy and slapstick humour will be reflected on, and, again, Trickster will play a major role in this.

3. The Stoic Indian: White North American Perception of North American Indian Humour

In order to understand the humour the wit and the irony, but especially to have a grasp on the background of many jokes by North American Indian authors such as Thomas King, Drew Hayden Taylor, and Tomson Highway, we have to take a close look at the dominant North American culture's opinion on indigenous peoples. I will investigate the ways by which common stereotypes have evolved over the centuries, paying special attention to the stereotype of the 'stoic Indian' and its development.

As a matter of fact, various sources tell us that Native peoples have used humour for centuries for very specific purposes. But have white people noticed that, and if so, what have they thought about it and what is modern white peoples' perspective on Native humour? White people do, after all, constitute the dominant culture on the North American continent and, as I have shown before, they shape the circumstances of life for the Native peoples up to the present day. For my further analysis of the works of Native authors it is therefore essential to understand the mainstream perception of North American Indians.

When white people talk or write about N.A. Indians and their ways, the outcome is most often utterly stereotypical. Ignorant of what N.A. Indians really were like, white invaders, later intensified by literature, photography, shows and films, have created an ‘imaginary Indian’ who still lurks behind most white North American perception. Margaret Atwood, arguably the best and most renowned female Canadian writer, summarizes the different stages of white North American perception of Native Americans throughout the centuries:

There were Indians and Eskimos seen as closer to Nature and therefore nobler, as closer to Nature and therefore less noble, as savage victimizers of whites and as victims of savage whites. (Atwood, 243)

Sadly, it is still a common belief that “Indians are stoic, totally lacking in humour” (Vangen, 188). As a prime example, Stephen Leacock, who was one of the most renowned and respected North American scholars on humour, claimed that the ‘Indian’ is

probably the least humorous character recorded in history. [...] To crack the enemies’ skull with a hatchet was about the limit of the sense of fun of a Seneca or a Pottawottomie. The dawning of humour in such races [sic!] turned off sideways and developed into the mockery and the malice which are its degenerated forms. (Leacock, 1)

Such are most early accounts on Indian humour written by white people, spectacularly ignorant and downright racist. If they granted North American Indians any humour at all, only

savage irony and morbid humour did sometimes enter the picture as a kind of self-flagellation device for whites, but on the whole Natives were treated by almost everyone with the utmost gravity, as if they were either too awe-inspiring as blood-curdling savages or too sacrosanct in their status of holy victim to allow any comic reactions to them or by them. (Atwood, 244)

Mirjam Hirsch makes clear that although “North America’s indigenous people have been using humour for centuries, [...] Native humour has remained unnoticed by most settlers [...].” According to her, it was and still is commonly believed that “Indians [...] never laughed” (Hirsch, 99).

3.1 The Days of Colonization: The ‘Bloodthirsty Savage’ versus the ‘Noble Savage’

When Margaret Atwood speaks of ‘Indians’ that are “closer to nature and therefore less noble” (Atwood, 243), she clearly refers to written pieces from the early days of North American exploration in the 15th- and 16th-century colonizers that depicted the North

American Indians as primitive and moronic savages. Naturally, accounts on their humour are hard to come by in this context. Although humour did, of course, exist among the Native people, it

has escaped most historical and literary accounts, because the recorder did not perceive the gesture as humorous or because they did not appreciate the humour. (Vangen, 188)

The European invaders indeed completely ignored Native humour, since it didn't fit into their perception of what an Indian 'had to be like.' Therefore, the observations of those explorers are dominated by accounts on Indian 'primitiveness.' The early explorers, Jacquelin Kilpatrick explains,

took back stories of wild savages that fit neatly into the preconceived notions the Europeans had of what a savage would be. This was the beginning of the 'Indian' invention. (Kilpatrick, 1)

The most famous and celebrated of all explorers, Christopher Columbus, writes in his journals that "these people are very poor in everything," and Amerigo Vespucci "described Indians as indecent, immoral, and cannibalistic" (Columbus and Vesupcci quoted in King, *Truth*, 70-71).

Only Alberto Cantino, who 'examined' fifty men and women on orders of Gaspar Corte Real who captured them in 1505, reports that "their manners and gestures are most gentle; they laugh considerably and manifest the greatest pleasure" (Cantino quoted in King, *Truth*, 71), which seems somewhat difficult to believe and, above all, implausible. If one considers the fact that they had been kidnapped from their homes and shipped over to Europe where they were about to be 'examined' for 'scientific' purposes under what must have been inhumane circumstances, it seems much more likely that they were desperate and disoriented.

Although the overwhelming majority of accounts on Native life concentrate on their 'savagery,' there are in fact some people who admit that N.A. Indians have indeed a good sense of humour. Nevertheless, the stereotype of the humourless Indian seems to be so persistent that the Smithsonian Institution felt obliged to answer the question 'Why do some people think "Indians" do not laugh or smile?' in its publication *Do all Indians Live in Tipis?* (2007). I will discuss this question in greater detail later on, but first let us take a closer look at the time of the exploration of what is today Canada and accounts on Native humour from that period.

Many pieces of writing from the exploration of the Americas in the 15th and 16th centuries say basically the same when it comes to First Nations People, and the writings of the great explorers of Canada are no exception. One of the most important figures in early Canadian history was Jacques Cartier, who explored most of the St. Lawrence region of North-Eastern Canada and is presented as one of Canada's greatest heroes to school children up to the present day. In the journal of his voyages, however, his perception of Native people revolves around the words 'savage' and 'primitive,' and he doesn't write a single word on the humour of the savages. The closest account he gives us is when he writes about their "great joy" when receiving gifts. Most of his comments on their behaviour, however, report their being "wild and savage" or "wonderful thieves" (Cartier, 10, 25, 26). Thomas King ironically comments on the latter by pointing out that Cartier "capped off his second voyage kidnapping ten Indians and taking them back to France with him" (King, *Truth*, 71-72).

Very similar are the observations of Samuel de Champlain, the other great explorer of Canada, during his journeys from 1603 to 1616. To give just one example, he writes that the 'Indians' were "great liars," only showing "great joy" when receiving gifts such as hatchets or knives. In spite of this, he also reports that "all these people are of a very cheerful complexion" and that "they laugh for the most part" (De Champlain, 86, 207). However, in the same manner as Cartier, he fails to report *what* they were joyful about. The reader gets the impression that they spend their time dancing about, laughing for no particular reason apart perhaps from enjoying being alive, generally behaving much in the way of a panting, whining dog welcoming his owner who presents him with a 'goodie' (in this case, presents). He doesn't waste a thought on the existence of irony, wit or in fact any kind of complex humour among the N.A. Indians. To the Europeans of that time, "Native people were incapable of complex thought and emotion, much less an intricate combination of the two such as humour" (Nuttal, 62), as Arwen Nuttal explains.

De Champlain and Cartier were writing in accordance with the common European opinion on the Native peoples of North America, namely that they were underdeveloped primitives that needed a guiding hand (preferably white, Christian) in order to reach a 'civilized' stage of development.

As we have seen so far, the explorers and early settlers of North America saw the 'Indians' as primitive, humourless, yet somehow innocent peoples. But, according to Thomas

King, it was nothing compared to the picture created by the Puritans of the 17th centuries. In order to suit their religion that he views as “militaristic in nature” and their “theory of land acquisition and usage that was individualistic and private,” N.A. Indians were “seen as impediments to progress and affronts to faith” (King, *Truth*, 74).

The Puritans believed that the lands in North America were a gift from God, given to them to establish a community that would fight the war against the “Devil’s mercenaries.” So the “Puritans set about creating stories that were needed to carry the day” (King, *Truth*, 74), stories that would justify their intent to wipe out the Indigenous peoples. Although King’s account is obviously (and understandably) biased, the historical view on the Puritans does not paint a much nicer picture either. It simply tries to make us understand the Puritans’ motives in context with the historical and cultural events. Sacvan Berkovitch explains that the Puritans saw themselves as the “chosen people” as opposed to the “Indians,” whom they considered their “antagonists”:

For the Puritans, [the ‘Indians’] were primarily the villains in a sacred drama, counterpart of the heathen tribes that Joshua conquered, children of the Devil who tempted Christ in the desert, forerunners of the legions of darkness. (Berkovitch, 17)

However strange this may seem to our modern perception and contrary to the other settlers, the Puritans didn’t kill North American Indians in order to steal their land. On the contrary, they were “decrying the [...] materialism of colonists who staked out new ground in the interior.” Their mission was to live a God-fearing life and that even included ‘saving’ the ‘Indians’ from the Devil’s grasping hands. Interestingly enough, they did not (at first) force North American Indians to adapt to their culture and religion. Instead, the Puritans sincerely believed they could convert them “by example, not by evangelism,” since “God would make the Indians recognize their own moral inferiority.” As comparably nice and gentle an approach this may seem, they were not exactly patient if their subjects didn’t budge. When the Puritans discovered that the North American Indians remained “proud and insolent” they applied a rather different policy – “lawful war and death [or] for those who were passive, civil and religious instruction.” Both ways would save them from the Devil’s claws and would mean a “victory for God’s people” (Segal and Stineback, 29-37).

For me, being a devoted Atheist, the whole time of the Puritans and how they dealt with the North American Indians is yet another example of how religious beliefs can lead to great

tragedy, “the astonishing capacity of myth not only to obscure but to invert reality” (Berkovitch, 18). On the other hand, I cannot begin to understand the circumstances of those people’s lives and upbringing and therefore have to remain impartial towards their actions in connection with the N.A. Indians.

Historian Douglas Leach, an expert on the relations and military struggles between Native peoples and colonizers, wrote in 1958 that, in the late 1800s, they were presented as a “graceless and savage people, dirty and slothful in their personal habits, treacherous in their relations with the superior race ... fit only to be pushed aside and subordinated” (Leach quoted in King, *Truth*, 75).

A historian of that time, Benjamin Trumbull, went so far as to accuse the ‘Indians’ of cannibalism in his *History of Connecticut* from 1797. Being a Puritan preacher himself, he contributed to the anti-Indian propaganda and claimed that they captured a white man and

tore him from limb to limb. Barbarously cutting his flesh in pieces, they handed it round from one to another, eating it, singing and dancing round the fire, in their violent and tumultuous manner. (Trumbull quoted in King, “Truth”, 75)

It is not a big surprise to learn that humour never found its way into these accounts – it was unthinkable that a people so savage and bloodthirsty could ever develop something as civilized as humour, except, perhaps, a sinister laugh when standing above a freshly slain settler.

However, simultaneously to the notion of the ‘Bloodthirsty Savage,’ inferior to the white man, emerged a rather different, competing idea, in which Natives were seen as “closer to Nature and therefore noble,” as Margaret Atwood says (243). However, “only occasionally” could Native people be noble, as Kilpatrick observes. “The Noble Savage usually existed in the singular” (Kilpatrick, 2). As a group, they were usually depicted as bloodthirsty ‘heathens.’

But as time went on, the view of the ‘Noble Savage’ became more and more popular, coexisting with the notion of the ‘bloodthirsty’ one. In a time of political struggles, unemployment and poverty in Europe, the seemingly simple and harmonic life of the ‘Indians’ seemed a more achievable, for some observers, even preferable life. Leslie Monkman quotes A.O. Lovejoy who describes this phenomenon as

the discontent of the civilized with civilization or with some conspicuous and characteristic feature of it. It is the belief of men living in highly evolved and complex cultural condition that a life far simpler and less sophisticated in some or all respects is a more desirable life. (Lovejoy and Boas quoted in Monkman, 28)

3.2 The 19th Century: The ‘Vanishing Indian’

In what could be called the ‘romantic’ stage, the ‘Indians’ were thought of as a race that had a divine relationship with nature and was at the same time doomed to extinction. Thomas King explains that this

particular span of time is known as the American Romantic Period, and the Indian was tailor-made for it. With its emphasis on feeling, its interest in nature, its fascination with exoticism, mysticism, and eroticism, and its preoccupation with the glorification of the past, American Romanticism found in the Indian a symbol in which all these concerns could be united. Prior to the nineteenth century, the prevalent image of the Indian had been that of an inferior being. The Romantics imagined their Indian as dying. (King, “Truth”, 33)

So, the ‘imaginary Indian,’ for this is how this entirely invented picture of N.A. Indians is called, saw its continuation in the Romantic period in North America. However, now, he was a dying entity, although in his “disappearing from the stage of human progress, there was also a sense of nobility” (King , *Truth*, 33). This was the time when famous tales of single male, heroic ‘Indians’ were written, the best-known of which must be Chingachgook, in the *Last of the Mohicans*, James Fenimore Cooper’s novel from 1826. Its protagonist is the archetype of the dying Indian, mourning the vanishing of his people, a melancholic old chief, and one who rarely smiled or laughed. In writing novels like this, Thomas King claims, the North American writers of the early 19th century, “created a literary shroud in which to wrap the Indian. And bury him” (King, “Truth”, 33).

Yet, the ‘bloodthirsty Indian’ was far from dead. With the rise of the ‘Dime novels’ in the late 1800s, he made a ‘triumphant’ comeback. The ‘Indians’ would “come into the stories to slaughter a few people before swiftly and dramatically dying at the hands of the hero” (Kilpatrick, 9).

The 19th century saw portrait painters like Paul Kane from Toronto travel onto the prairies to capture images of ‘Indians’ “before [they] vanished [...] on canvas.” From 1845 onwards, he painted innumerable romantic images of North American Indians which he had

“manipulated to suit the demands of [the] conventions,” the convention that they were doomed, that they were “eradicated by the spread of white settlement” (Francis, 18-23). And then there was, of course, *Buffalo Bill’s Wild West Show*, a spectacle that although featuring real Native actors, “presented an Indian who was aggressive and blood-thirsty” and certainly not funny (Francis, 94).

More recently though, the stereotype of the stoic Indian was intensified by the era of still photography at the turn of the 19th into the 20th century, when white photographers travelled the prairies and mountains to capture images of the ‘dying race’ before they would forever vanish. In fact, as Thomas King observes, the ‘vanishing’ of the Natives

was a common concern among many intellectuals and artists and social scientists at the turn of the nineteenth century, who believed that, while Europeans in the New World were poised on the brink of a new adventure, the Indian was poised on the brink of extinction. (King, “Truth”, 32-33)

In a ‘heroic’ endeavour, photographers went out onto the prairies to capture the ‘Indians’ before they would all be dead. Of course, they didn’t consider helping them for their extinction was seen as a natural, inevitable process, determined by laws of Social Darwinism. Arwen Nuttal explains how these photographs contributed to that stereotype:

Rarely does one find the smiling face of an Indian among the hundreds of photographs taken in the late 1800s and early 1900s. (Nuttal, 63)

One could, rather cynically, argue that the images could be showing the truth since the ‘Indians’ of that time surely didn’t have much to laugh about. The real reason why most of them pull faces that seem like they were carved in stone is that they

were staged to fit the stereotypes of the photographer and his audience: the Native subjects were given traditional dress to wear (even if it was not from their culture) and posed with muted stares. (Nuttal, 63)

The most famous of these photographers was Edward S. Curtis who published more than 2200 photographs of N.A. Indians which he had taken during 30 years of travelling the continent. Curtis was, as Thomas King puts it, “fascinated by the idea of the North American Indian, obsessed with it. And he was determined to capture that idea, that image, before it vanished” (King, *Truth*, 32). Humour had no place in such an image. For Curtis, the ‘Indians’ had to be aware of their cruel fate and had to be sad about it. And it had to show in the images; therefore Curtis staged them in a way that explains why his subjects didn’t smile:

In truth, many of them were clamped from behind to keep them perfectly still, and the photography session included an explosive flash. Since many could not speak or understand English, the process could be traumatic. (Nuttal, 63)

Treated like this, it is more than understandable that those poor people didn't laugh – who would if they were put in other people's clothes, forced to wear a wig and violently held still while given commands in an unknown language? And the outcome was just what Curtis wanted – 'Indians' with melancholic faces, mourning the fate of their (dying) people.

Thomas King compares Edward Curtis' 'Indians' to those featuring in his favourite pieces of his postcard collection. One of them shows a Native man on a horse, the other one a group of five N.A. Indians standing together. What is peculiar about these images is that "the solitary man on his horse is identified only as a 'Cree Indian,' while the group of five is designated as "Native Indians [...]." None of the people shown on these pictures were identified by their actual names, which shows that a good part of the 'Imaginary Indian' included a marginalisation of the Native peoples, for

to reveal them as actual people, would be, I suppose, a violation of the physical laws governing matter and antimatter, that the Indian and Indians cannot exist in the same imagination. (King, *Truth*, 36)

The colonists were not interested in the 'Indians' as individuals because it meant having to deal with 'real' people. Instead, they created the 'Imaginary Indian,' a projection of certain qualities they wanted the 'Indians' to incorporate, an image of a non-personal, dying, yet noble savage, and imposed this image onto the few N.A. Indians that were left.

The idea of 'the Indian' was [...] fixed in time and space. Even before Curtis built his first camera, that image had been set. His task as he visited tribe after tribe was to sort through what he saw in order to find what he needed. (King, *Truth*, 37)

To end this section, let me make it clear once more that the characteristics that made an Indian for the white people of this time included neither humour nor laughter. On the contrary, in the historical period of colonization, the most common belief was that North American Indians are stoic, having no sense of humour whatsoever. Even later, in the late 1800s, when they were no longer viewed as 'bloodthirsty' but 'noble, yet dying,' humour did practically never occur in any accounts.

3.3 Stereotypes Continued: The 20th Century and Beyond

So far, I have investigated the roots of certain stereotypes, especially that of the ‘stoic Indian,’ from the early stages of North American history to the 19th century and its romantic, ‘Imaginary Indian,’ doomed to extinction. But do these images in any way affect modern-day white North Americans, and are they really contributing to today’s stereotypical image of ‘Indians’?

In this context, Hollywood and its representation of ‘Indians’ is worth mentioning. The ‘Hollywood Indian,’ as this stereotypical figure is commonly known, is usually shown as the “stone-faced [...] broken-English-speaking nemesis of the western cowboy” (Nuttal, 63), who either slaughters white settlers or joins them to help them ‘conquer’ the new world. Jacquelin Kilpatrick identifies three basic categories of stereotypes of Native people in film which basically correspond to the ‘traditional’ misconceptions created throughout the centuries. First, there is the “mental stereotype,” meaning that “mental acuity has not generally been the celluloid Indian’s strong suit.” Secondly, the “sexual” stereotype comes into play when “a lustful savage [attacks] the white woman, requiring that he be killed immediately” or when “an enormously attractive [Indian princess] must die before any real damage is done to the purity of the gene pool.” The third category of “spirituality” deals with the notion of the ‘Noble Savage,’ the “perception of an inherent Native closeness to earth” (Kilpatrick, xvii).

Either way, the typical Hollywood Indian is never smiling, let alone laughing. Especially

during the silent film era (1908-1929), Indians were portrayed as horse-riding tribal warriors of the Plains, harassing White settlers,

John Price observes. According to him, one of the stereotypes created or, in fact, intensified by these films and the TV series is the picture of N.A. Indians being “humourless, taciturn and speaking in simple languages” (Price, 200). The reasons for this are rather simple, as Price continues to explain:

The movie story was told by White American producers and directors to a White North American audience, assuming and building the plot from anti-Indian attitudes and prejudices. (Price, 201)

Native directors and audiences were practically inexistent and the dominant culture produced what its members wanted to watch. Those films did nothing other than reaffirm the

stereotypes of their audience by showing ‘Indians’ as “savage and at an early stage of development, and therefore rightly vanishing as ‘Indians’ were exterminated or assimilated into White society” (Price, 202). Jacqelin Kilpatrick, on the other hand, points out that

although the long-standing stereotypes of noble and bloody savage were always present, in the very early films, the noble image prevailed whereas the bloodthirsty image became more popular toward the end of the silent film era. (Kilpatrick, 21)

Movies such as *The Vanishing American* (1925) “illustrated the noble but doomed Native stereotype, the brave warrior who loses the Darwinian struggle for survival” (Kilpatrick, 30).

During the silent film era, the never-laughing, ‘stoic Indian’ was expressed by continually showing them folding their arms, as Price stresses. He further points out that this perception of ‘savage’ ‘Indians’ “was [...] derived from the popular Wild West literature of the nineteenth century” (Price, 203), a genre made popular in Germany and Austria by Karl May (1824-1912), a man, as is widely known, who never set foot on the North American continent. His novels and especially the film versions of the 1960s and 70s are responsible for a whole generation of Germans and Austrians who have a romanticized view on N.A. Indian life, a fact that is repeatedly made fun of, particularly in the plays of Drew Hayden Taylor.

The overall tone of Western movies did not change much with the invention of sound films, however. The old patterns were simply adapted to the new medium, as Kilpatrick explains:

The signs that accompanied the Indians of the silent film, the scowling face and rigid body, were carried over to the sound western as the ‘natural’ pose of a Native American. Rarely were Indians heard, and when they were, they were depressingly devoid of humour [...]. (Kilpatrick, 36)

This was the time when John Ford made his infamous westerns, often starring John Wayne. One of the best-known is *Stagecoach* (1939) in which “Indians appear [...] as dangerous villains” (Kilpatrick, 53). Interestingly enough, not all movies that were shot in this period were utterly stereotypical. Jeff Chandler’s *Broken Arrow* (1950), for example, featured an “undeniable human [...] American Indian man [who could] speak articulately, with humour, and with some force” (Kilpatrick, 59).

In Germany, Karl May's stories were put on the big screen with great success in the 1960s and 1970s, an era that also brought us TV-series such as *Bonanza*. This particular series was not openly opposed to North American Indians but contributed its share to the 'Imaginary Indian.' In the episode 'Sense of Duty,' for example, Ben Cartwright escorts an "Indian rebel leader" (played by a white actor) to prison, only to find himself surrounded by a band of aggressive 'Indians.' He eventually is saved by a white guy who "seems to understand the Indians better than the Indians" (Erickson on www.answers.com, May 6, 2009), a classic display of superiority-thinking. Films and TV series that showed N.A. Indians in a decent, non-stereotypical way were the exception up into the turbulent late 1960s and early 1970s when some underground directors began to "ironically perpetuate stereotypes of the very figures they seek to present as countercultural" (Anderson, 142).

One would assume that this changed in the 1990s with movies like *Dances with Wolves*. But unfortunately, the one-dimensional, stereotypical Hollywood Indian is still alive and well and Kevin Costner's epic film is anything but devoid of this when we remember that the "Pawnees are not allowed to surface as anything but viscous killers" (Killpatrick, 124). Arwen Nuttal points out that

even in more contemporary times we can find the stoic stereotype in characters such as Magua, in *The Last of the Mohicans* (1992), or Kocoum, *Pocahontas's* Native love interest in the Disney version of the myth (1995). (Nuttal, 63)

Having seen the above-mentioned movies, I agree with Nuttal and would go even further by emphasising that in *The Last of the Mohicans* (1992), the villain Magua is by no means the only 'stoic Indian.' The 'heroic' ones, Chingachgook and Unkas, give perfect examples of this group as well. There are one or two scenes where they let out a smirk or smile, but most of the time they wear a rather melancholic, almost dolorous expression, especially Chingachgook, who is without doubt portrayed as the last of a 'dying race.' Thankfully, all is not lost and

recently, Native writers and directors have been able to introduce audiences to the richness of Native humour, and even to a few insider jokes. (Nuttal, 63)

Nevertheless, as Drew Hayden Taylor points out, the "dominant culture's willingness to enjoy, appreciate and accept the unique Native sense of humour" still leaves a lot to be desired. He observes that white people, even those who are usually open-minded, don't

“expect Native people to be funny, let alone laugh at themselves” and therefore are often puzzled by his plays, which all have a strong focus on humour.

When going to a play written by a Native, white audiences really want to see problems – housing problems, alcoholism, domestic violence, the kind of things they usually associate with Native people. They want to see “searing insights into Aboriginal existence, or tragic portrayals of a culture gone wrong [...]” (Hayden Taylor, “Seeing Red”, 21). Even though white North Americans today are much more aware of Indian issues and generally less biased, the idea of a Native play that is funny just for the sake of making people laugh seems, to many people, an alien concept.

Drew Hayden Taylor reports that on a performance of his play *The Bootlegger Blues*, a work which (according to the author himself, I disagree) has “no socially redeeming qualities whatsoever” and which is “simply a celebration of Native humour”, the predominantly white audience’s “response to the first fifteen minutes of the play was silence.” He claims that the audience was “afraid to laugh, or uncomfortable with the prospect of laughing at Native people, regardless of the context.” On the one hand, they were surprised that a Native play makes fun of Native people and at the same time weren’t laughing because they were unsure of its political correctness, instead of “[giving] in to the healing powers of humour.” Thankfully, Hayden Taylor happily reports that after about twenty minutes the silence went away, and “finally, the politically correct non-Natives were laughing at the Native actors doing the Native comedy” (Hayden Taylor, “Seeing Red”, 21-24).

Hayden Taylor seems to have a positive outlook on the issue of Native humour and its appreciation by a white audience when he reports that by the end of this particular performance of *The Bootlegger Blues*, “the whole audience was enjoying the play.” They had learned that

everything they had seen in the media wasn’t always true, the fact that Native people weren’t continually depressed, suppressed, and oppressed. Yes, they found out, they have a sense of humour and a joy for life.

What is more, six years after this performance, he saw a performance of his new play *alterNATIVES* and was amazed to notice that the audience “laughed from the moment the lights went down,” and that in “a scant six years, colour-denied people had learned it’s OK to laugh at Native comedies” (Hayden Taylor, “Seeing Red”, 24-25). This change of perspective

partly happened because of “the change in perceptions brought about by broadcasting,” Hayden Taylor says. He points out that a number of humorous television and radio programs which have been produced over the last few years, such as Thomas King’s *Dead Dog Café*, have contributed to a wider acceptance of Native humour.

Despite all this, as I found out in numerous conversations with my friends and co-workers in Vancouver, parts of the dominant population (at least in Canada) still perceives North American Indians in a stereotypical, biased way, and by no means not just the white people. I can vividly remember an argument I had with a black co-worker of mine in which she accused the ‘Natives’ of being a bunch of ‘Drunks, drug addicts and thieves.’ Coming from a member of the black community, this comment left me especially baffled and showed me that there is still a lot of work to do.

4. Teasing, Irony, Education, the Trickster and More: Exploring Native Humour

In the preceding chapter I have pointed out that ignorance dominated most white people’s conception when it came to Native humour throughout the history of the colonization of the North American continent. By means of biased literature, photographs, and films they have created a fake image of Native Americans that came up to white people’s perception of that ‘Indians’ should be like – sometimes sad, sometimes heroic and noble in the Romantic period, mostly savage and bloodthirsty as in the early stages of colonization, but always lacking even the slightest sense of humour.

As a matter of fact, humour has always been, and still is, used for various purposes by the indigenous peoples of North America. Drew Hayden Taylor has summoned a great number of Native authors and put together a book called *Me Funny* (2005) which deals with Native humour like no one before and which will be extensively referred to in this section. Yet, many writers have dealt with N.A. Indian humour before.

Gerald Vizenor, one of the most renowned Native writers of North America and expert on the character of the Trickster, “locates a comic spirit at the centre of Native cultural

identity” (Vizenor quoted in Ryan, 4). Some scholars go as far as to claim that “humour has been the key to Aboriginal communities’ survival” (Fagan, 24).

But what defines Native humour? What makes it special? What were its functions in traditional Native communities and how is it used by modern Aboriginal writers? Allan J. Ryan points out that there is a “distinct comic and communal attitude [that] can legitimately be labelled ‘Native humour’” and summarises its properties to

frequent teasing, outrageous punning, constant wordplay, surprising association, extreme subtlety, layered and serious reference, and considerable compassion. (Ryan, 12)

4.1 Maintaining Communal Harmony

Perhaps the most important function of humour in Native communities was, and still is, its power to “reinforce the social norms of the tribal or family group” (Nuttal, 61). In ancient tribal communities, it was very important that individuals didn’t gain too much power or take themselves too seriously, for this would have jeopardised the balance of the whole community.⁹ In this sense, humour also serves as a means to suppress conflict, says Kristina Fagan. In particular, the elders in a tribe use this ‘socially cohesive’ humour to tell their people not to take themselves too seriously or not to elevate themselves over other members of the tribe.¹⁰

Humour was used to show the individuals their place in the group and the environment. Fagan goes on to explain that

a Native community is continually being built and challenged, and humour can play a role in both these processes. [...] humour is deeply social: a shared laugh is an affirmation of norms, attitudes and assumptions in common. (Fagan, 25)

The specific type of humour used to perform this ‘social control’ was teasing. In simple words, the members of a tribe would tease each other to point out that someone had broken the rules of the society. Mirjam Hirsch explains:

Rather than embarrass members of the society publicly, people would tease individuals they considered out of step with the consensus of tribal opinion. Gradually people learned to anticipate teasing and began to tease themselves, as a

⁹ Cf. Graveline’s account on the communal powers of humour in Graveline, 68.

¹⁰ Cf. Fagan’s account on the communal powers of humour in *Me Funny*, 26.

means both of showing humility and of advocating a course of action they deeply believed in. (Hirsch, 103)

Using this method, the people would learn the norms and rules of the community and enjoy a good laugh at the same time. Don Kelly, perhaps the finest and best-known Native stand-up-comedian in Canada, gives a good example of Native teasing humour in a modern age:

two guys [are] walking together. When one of them slips and falls, the other one rushes over to help him, frantically asking: 'Are you okay? Are you all right? Let me help you up.' Meanwhile, across the street, two Native guys are walking. One of them slips and falls. The other guy laughs hysterically, then rushes over and helps the first guy up. The first guy probably contemplates a lawsuit, because odds are, if there are two or more Indians together, one of them's a lawyer. (Kelly, 62)

Kelly's example is not only a good demonstration of the teasing qualities of Native humour, but also of their strong self-deprecatory tendencies, making fun of their own communities and, in this particular case, of members who frequently get involved in crime and therefore require a lawyer's help.

Traditionally, however, it was very important that these jokes didn't harm anyone; they were meant to tease, not to hurt. According to Thomas King, Native humour is all about community, a non-excluding kind of humour, and one whose purpose is to keep the people together,

not the kind of ad hominem humour you hear on late-night talk shows, [...] where individuals are targeted and the audience is encouraged to laugh at them, at their expense.

This technique can only work as a means of social control if it includes people, for "humour is only truly funny when it is inclusive, [...] humour that excludes is, in the end, a weapon" (King, "Performing", 170). If it were exclusive, it would clearly have the opposite effect and would tear the community apart. Nevertheless, and one has to be extremely careful not to present Native communities in such a way, they were by no means a 'lost paradise.' Teasing frequently got out of hand, became exclusive. Fagan argues that "the full realization of community is impossible," that there are always "ideas that are different or people who do not fit in." Therefore, Native communities, like all others, sometimes pile all that goes wrong on a "scapegoat, the victim of humour" (Fagan, 38).

Many North American Indian writers address this problem in their work, as they show “community norms and remind us of the limits of and resistance to these norms.” For Fagan, this unstable balance of rules and the breaking of the same “offer these writers an effective way to maintain such a balance, both affirming and critiquing their communities” (Fagan, 38-44).

Other methods of making the people of a nation familiar with the norms of the same are jokes or humorous stories. Some of these have a clear ‘educational’ purpose. Interestingly, Native teaching rejects the direct, frontal approach to which we Europeans are so accustomed, and favours one that “encourages people to observe and interpret on their own, allowing them to see multiple possible meanings.” Accordingly, these jokes and stories are “rarely interpreted.” Most of the time, Kristina Fagan continues, such stories would “indirectly explore troublesome or contradictory areas of life” and can have several “possible ‘lessons’ condensed in a joke, none of which represent *the* lesson” (Fagan, 30).

Fagan underlines this point by telling the traditional Innu story of Wolverine and Bear, in which Bear is tricked and killed by Wolverine who, craving Bear brain, transforms himself into a maggot and enters Bear’s head through the eye socket. After having eaten the brain, Wolverine is too fat to get out and has to watch other animals eating the rest of his prey. He has to wait until he is thin enough to get out again, being hungry once again.¹¹

This story contains more than just one ‘lesson.’ First of all, there is the easily tricked Bear at whom the listeners would laugh. But Wolverine himself is the one who would get most of the laughs – “his behaviour in the story is inappropriate and he gets his comeuppance.” Tricking a prey is against the traditional Native way of hunting which involves a certain ‘cooperation’ between hunter and game. Wolverine’s way is “dishonest and therefore immoral.” His “greed and impatience” are other reasons to make fun of him, since he is ultimately hungry again and all his efforts were in vain. The Native people who listened to stories such as this would indirectly learn that greed, impatience, and trickery are unacceptable for the community. Fagan makes clear that it is the contradiction between “excess, enjoyment, rule-breaking and disorderliness” that the “comic characters embody” and the “sense of moral and social order” in these stories that makes them funny. It is this spot where “individual freedom and communal norms” meet that made the N.A. Indians both

¹¹ See Fagan’s retelling of the story of Wolverine and Bear in *Me Funny*, 32.

laugh and learn at the same time (Fagan, 31-35). The most central character in such stories is the Trickster, a creator – destroyer figure with whom I will deal in more detail in the following chapter.

Coming back to humour as an institution of communal harmonisation, it was also used in tribal ceremonies as John Lowe reports:

Ritual clowns were an integral part of most [...] Indian cultures, forming a comic counterpoint to sacral events. The clowns were privileged to ridicule, burlesque, and defile even the most sacred religious festivals. Dressed outrageously, frequently in rags and masks, they would mimic the serious kachina dancers, stumbling, falling, throwing or even eating filth or excrement, setting up rival fake-Gods and ‘worshipping’ them in an exaggerated fashion, only to beat them a few seconds later. (Lowe, 193-94)

These clowns even employed sexual humour, grabbing spectators in the genitals, but the overall point of them making fun of the rituals was to make them seem less serious and threatening for the participants.¹²

4.2 The Trickster

If there is one character that can be found in the humorous stories of virtually all the First Nations of North America, it is the Trickster. He is, as Mirjam Hirsch explains, an “unrealistic, expressionistic and supernatural figure, half hero, half fool” (Hirsch, 108). He can change his gender and his form, and appears in the stories of the First Nations of North America in various different forms – as “Raven, Bluebird, Nanabush, Napi, Glooscap, Wisakedjak, Hare, Coyote and many other names” (Hirsch, 108). Coyote is by far the most prominent one. His stories are told “from the Arctic down to Mexico and across the continent from ocean to ocean” (Erdoes and Ortiz, “Introduction”, xiii).

We can find his counterparts in all parts of the world – Loki in Norse mythology, Till Eulenspiegel in Germany, Reynard the Fox in France or even Zeus in ancient Greek myths, a selfish deceiver who could – just like Trickster – change his form to engage in innumerable, mostly erotic, adventures. But none of these characters is as central to a whole set of myths, educational stories and religion as Trickster is for N.A. Indians. What’s more, he differs from these characters in many ways. In ‘Old World’ Trickster stories, the character is usually male

¹² See Lowe’s account on ritual clowns in Wiget, 194.

and human, whereas in Native American tales he is always an animal, underlining Native Americans' close relationship with nature, although he can take the form of a human if he thinks it will be advantageous to him. Another thing that sets him apart from his European counterparts is the fact that he is much more than just a fool who plays tricks on other beings. He is also a powerful creator and stars in numerous creation myths. As

Old Man Coyote [he] makes the earth, animals and humans. He is the Indian Prometheus, bringing fire and daylight to the people. He positions the sun, moon, and stars in their proper places. (Erdoes and Ortiz, "Introduction", xiv)

The important thing here is the achievement itself, as well as how it is accomplished. People familiar with European creation myths would maybe imagine him creating sun and moon with his hands and positioning them on the firmament. In fact, the tale goes that he and his companion Eagle steal a box containing sun and moon from the first people. First, Eagle carries the box in his claws because he knows of Coyote's untrustworthiness. After a while though, Coyote convinces Eagle that he will take good care of the box and not open it, and Eagle hands it to him. But Coyote wouldn't be Coyote if he could curb his curiosity. So he opens the box and sun and moon fly away and take their positions.¹³ This example shows what makes Trickster/Coyote special. He doesn't have a plan for his doings; he is powerful but possesses all the bad traits that humans have.

In practically 'showing off' these bad traits, "he teaches humans how to live" (Erdoes and Ortiz, "Introduction", xvi). Trickster stories teach the people how to (or rather how not to) behave in the group and are still an essential means of maintaining harmony in Native American communities. In these stories, Trickster's unacceptable behaviour is used to

destabilize the individual who wishes to see her- or himself as 'better,' more powerful than others. The human who wishes to forget his or her dependence on other life forms as he or she exerts 'power over' or superiority is challenged through humour. (Graveline, 68)

Trickster constantly strives for power, deceiving people and animals, but he never thinks about the consequences, and his hilarious failures warn people from copying his behaviour. "His general irresponsibility," as Jarold Ramsey puts it,

allowed the 'good citizens' of the tribe to affirm the systems of norms and punishments that Coyote is forever comically running afoul of – at the same time

¹³ See Erdoes & Ortiz' retelling of 'Sun and Moon in a Box' in Erdoes & Ortiz, 4-6.

that they could vicariously delight and find release in his irresponsible freedom.
(Ramsey, 19)

He personifies the core characteristic of Native humour, namely its contradictory quality, the vague equilibrium between the norms of the community and their violation. He can be

good and evil, male and female, human and animal, creative and destructive, sacred and profane. He/she is the creator and the destroyer, the humorous rogue, the clown, as well as the cynical, malicious swindler and impostor [...]. (Hirsch, 108)

He is, as Lenore Keeshig-Tobias says, “like every single member of a Native community and like none of them – all at the same time” (Keeshig-Tobias, 6). He is not a perfect being; he incorporates all good and bad traits of ‘humble’ people. He makes mistakes and creates. He “is admired for being a risk taker, rule breaker, boundary tester, and creator transformer,” and his “less admirable character traits – such as gluttony, deception, narcissism, cruelty and wanton sexuality” (Keeshig-Tobias, 6) were used in humorous tales to teach the community what makes acceptable social behaviour.

John Lowe tells us about the purposes of Trickster tales in the life of ancient Native communities, focussing on their “crucial performance aspect [...] in winter, when the people gathered in the lodges after the growing season was over.” Some stories would centre on bodily functions that go wrong as a symbol of all things that do likewise, for which Trickster was made responsible. He uses his enormous penis in many outrageously scandalous events. He “eats laxative bulb, then breaks wind and defecates with hurricane-like force, charges his rectum to stand guard and beats it for disobeying.” As with the gods of ancient Greece and Rome, his ‘erotic’ adventures often involve adultery, rape and even child abuse. Richard Erdoes reports that he would, for example, immensely elongate his penis to throw it over a river and make love to a female on the other side. “He is married, but that certainly doesn’t prevent him from fooling around” (Erdoes and Ortiz, “Introduction”, xv-xvi).

Interestingly, despite their notorious nature, such stories were also told in the company of children and women. The reason for this might be that although the content of the stories was somewhat controversial and explicit, they never were “what white Americans would call pornographic. An earthy innocence surrounds [them]” (Erdoes and Ortiz, “Introduction”, xx). And so, these stories were used to instruct not only men but also women and children,

supporting “the norms they rupture, while providing comic ‘release’ from societal pressure” (Lowe, 195).

One of Canada’s most renowned Native playwrights, Tomson Highway, puts the Trickster at the core of Native mythology when he says:

In the same way that Jesus Christ stands at the very, very centre of Christian mythology, we have a character in our mythological universe, in our dreamlife as a people, who stands at the very centre of that universe, and that character is the Trickster. That little guy, man or woman [...] who essentially straddles the consciousness of Man and God, translates reality from the Supreme Being, the Great Spirit, to the people and back and forth. Without the spiritual health of that figure I think Indian people are completely screwed. (Highway, “Native Voice”, 3)

Even though he might show similarities to Jesus Christ as the centre of mythology, I have to criticize Highway for assuming – by comparing Christianity and ‘our mythology’ – that all people from the ‘Western World’ share the same, Christian, religion. In doing so, he ignores the large groups of believers of different religions, not to mention the considerable number of atheists who don’t hold any religious or mythological beliefs whatsoever. It is, however, true that, “Transformation and trickery are his hallmark, [and that Trickster] bears aspects of the divine,” as John Lowe argues (194). He is not only involved in various creation myths, but also as a somewhat clueless handyman, the “engineer of the Columbia River and the inventor of Salmon Fishing and its rites” (Ramsey, 17). He in fact lives in “a timeless world and is apparently immortal although he does die (only to be resurrected) in some tales.” Trickster is, Lowe continues, “between God and man, and as such is both link to God and a comic butt who mirrors man’s own failings and glories” (Lowe, 194-195).

Gerald Vizenor warns us not to make too many connections between western thinking and the Trickster tales. He says that some want us to believe that the Trickster is “equivalent to a used-car salesman and if you don’t watch out [...] you’ll be tricked out of your money.” Vizenor argues that this way of seeing Trickster as an evil deceiver who is only interested in his own well-being is too Eurocentric. He argues that

that’s not a tribal Trickster idea; that’s a consumption thing and that’s tricks for evil purposes and domination. A Trickster doesn’t seize power; he doesn’t control power in tribal cultures, [...] he never maintains an army, he never has established a university, [...] he’s not trying to establish a nation or a state or an automobile agency.

Vizenor encourages us to see Trickster, not as a baddie in the European (Eurocentric) tradition, as a brilliant and selfish super-villain who follows minute plans for world-domination, but as a “comic survivor” (Vizenor quoted in Coltelli, 61), a bohemian who tricks people but never harms them permanently, who has no real plan for all his doings and doesn’t share a single thought on the consequences.

Trickster combines the qualities of teasing and self-deprecation, Don Kelly argues. The Trickster is “a powerful spirit, but he is not Christ-like.” He “would have tripped as he made his way up Calvary or done a first-class spit-take after John baptized him,” Kelly humorously adds. Trickster is a genuine clown – he would

play games with people that make them look silly, that embarrass them. And, in turn, the minute he starts feeling a little too proud, he’ll slip and fall into the dung heap. (Kelly, 62-63)

He therefore provides a perfect tool of teaching people helpful lessons, such as “don’t get too full of yourself” or “don’t take yourself too seriously. There’s only so much we can control, and the rest is nature” (Kelly, 63). These are undoubtedly highly useful lessons for living in a harsh environment that knows no mercy.

Mirjam Hirsch reports that early Western observers, as one would expect, regarded the Trickster myths as paganistic and primitive, ignoring their educational powers and complexity. Some white anthologists have collected and published Trickster stories, but “uniformly followed mid-Victorian standards excluding all the vivid sexual and scatological comedy” (Ramsey, 69). In what seems like a payback, many modern Native writers use the Trickster figure to make fun of European culture and stereotypes regarding North American Indians, as well as problems faced by Native communities. The Trickster is a means to direct the audience’s attention to those issues, without judging or providing simple answers – much like the way in which Native communities of old told their ‘lessons’ to the tribe.

Most modern Native writers have been associated with the character of the Trickster – some, such as Thomas King, use the Trickster in a more obvious way than others - but all of them use him/her/it “to explore border zones between Native and European culture and invite their audiences to see the world in a new way” (Hirsch, 111).

In contrast to traditional Trickster stories, most Native writers of modern fiction make use of the Trickster in a more subtle way, not to teach people proper social attitudes or

behaviour, but to point out that “some aspect of the story will require ironic interpretation,” and to alleviate the pain of suppression or to make fun of white people’s stereotypical views. However, as Allan J. Ryan explains in his book *Trickster Shift*, all this happens in a very quiet, playful way, “the ultimate goal of which is a radical shift in viewer perspective and even political positioning by imagining and imaging alterNative viewpoints” (Ryan, 5).

4.3 Self-Deprecation

Most Native experts agree that another typical element of Native humour is its strong self-deprecatory nature, as I have shortly touched upon earlier. ‘Indians’ love to make fun of themselves, and this technique is employed by virtually every Native writer who deals with humour. Don Kelly says:

Fact is we can laugh at ourselves better than anyone else can. Some of the best (and worst) Indian jokes I’ve ever heard were told to me by Indians. (Kelly, 62)

Modern Native humorists, authors, and playwrights use this kind of humour simply to create a good laugh, or to address controversial Aboriginal issues, such as alcoholism or gambling. According to Ian Ferguson, the purpose of these jokes is “to tell the truth” and they are “focused on the specificity of the Aboriginal way of life [...], the day-to-day stuff that really constitutes our culture.” He claims that they tend to be less accessible for non-Native people, since they sometimes require inside-knowledge about the Natives’ way of living or even their languages. Therefore, Ferguson warns:

If you wind up in the audience of a comedy show featuring First Nations comedians, you might find yourself missing some of the humour.

He continues with an example of what he calls “OUR JOKES”:

Why did the chicken cross the road?

MI’KMAQ: “He was on his way to Burnt Church.”

MOHAWK: “To put up a blockade.”

OJIBWAY: “That is the chicken’s inherent right.”

SALISH: “It was going upstream to spawn.”

CREE: “Was the chicken running away from residential school?”

INUIT: “What road?”

SLAVEE: “What’s a chicken?” (Ferguson, 128-132)

Jokes like this require knowledge about the different tribes, their history, their ways of living, their philosophies and myths, a knowledge that most white Americans lack. The Mi’kmaq’s answer, for example, would require knowledge about the ‘Burnt Church Crisis’ over fishing rights between the Mi’kmaq and the Canadian Province of New Brunswick in the late 1990s.

But not all of these jokes are as inaccessible as the last one. Most deal with Aboriginal issues with which everybody is familiar. Drew Hayden Taylor provides an almost endless repertoire of such jokes in his work:

Q: Did you hear about the Native guy who moved out east?

A: Yeah, he heard there was no work out there. (*Me Funny*, 143)

Unemployment is a serious problem among Aboriginal people. Hayden Taylor tries to deal with this in a humorous way that is also accessible for a non-Native audience, which is characteristic of his whole work.

4.4 Survival Humour

As mentioned earlier, some Native scholars and writers consider humour as a means to cope with the less enjoyable things in N.A. Indian life, especially with the atrocities committed by the white colonizers in the past. Jean Graveline points out that “our Ancestors embraced humour as a sacred and necessary part of our struggle and survival” (Graveline, 67), and Kristina Fagan argues that “Humour is often shown as offering a sense of relief and an acceptance of circumstances in the face of danger or tragedy” (Fagan, 26). Kate Vangen explains that humour “blends in Native literature to mediate an otherwise tragic vision and to provide hope for further struggles against oppression” (Vangen, 189). The indigenous people of the past would, for example, laugh about bad luck in hunting, or use humour to alleviate the suffering during illness. Ritual clowns and shamans would “both draw what is feared into the open, enabling people to cope with it” (Lowe, 194). In doing so, the sick were helped to fight their illness as the hunters were helped to accept bad luck as an event of nature that they cannot change.

But when people write about humour as a means of coping, they seldom deal with the existential struggles of N.A. Indians of the old days but most often talk about times of suppression by the white colonizers. Drew Hayden Taylor, usually a defender of the view that Native humour has always been a part of their culture, suggests that

Native humour comes from five hundred years of colonization, of oppression, of being kept prisoners in our own country. With legalized attacks on our culture, our languages, our identities and even our religion, often the only way left for Native people to respond was in humour. Humour kept us sane. It gave us power. It gave us privacy.

Hayden Taylor quickly makes clear that only “a good portion of Native humour springs from a sense of survival” (*Me Funny*, 69).

Coming back to humour as a means of coping: Don Kelly reports that “people often apply this same theory to Jewish comedy.” However, he thinks that the two theories of Native humour we have heard about so far “cancel each other out.” There is the theory that humour has always been part of Native culture (hence the educational stories) and the theory that it evolved as a reaction to the cruelties committed by the whites, that Natives “developed humour as a reaction to a history of being dispossessed, disenfranchised, discounted and dismissed.” It seems somewhat short-sighted to believe that a culture that lasted thousands of years could do so without humour, and that only the coming of the white men and the suffering of Native people led to the development of humour. What’s more, it even confirms the stereotypical perspective of the ‘stoic Indian’ I have explained earlier. Since there is vast evidence that supports this view, I agree with Don Kelly who believes that

humour has always been there, in ourselves and in our culture. Perhaps the last couple of centuries have sharpened and honed our wit, but laughter has echoed across Turtle Island for centuries. (Kelly, 63-64)

However, the times of the great injustice the N.A. Indians had to endure remains one of the most commonly used topics of Native comics and writers. But it is nowhere near the only one they employ. Mirjam Hirsch argues that

contemporary Native authors skilfully employ subversive humour as an artistic strategy, both to heal from, and to understand, historical and personal trauma and to fight the adversity they face. (Hirsch, 104)

Modern Aboriginal writers, although dealing with the cruelties of the past, concentrate on the more recent problems of Native communities, such as alcohol and drug abuse, “forced

integration, foster parenthood, benighted government policy, environmental destruction and attempted annihilation” (Hirsch, 104). They do so using their unique kind of humour, teasing and deprecating each other and their communities.

4.5 Humour as a Weapon

Despite its generally harmless and inclusive nature, Native humour can get exclusive, even aggressive when it comes to making fun of white people. Drew Hayden Taylor sometimes uses this kind of humour in an attempt of some sort of ‘payback’ to the white colonizers, a humour that has, as he says, “barbs and sharp teeth attached, to provide protection and refuge.” In this sense, he praises the use of politically incorrect jokes by Native comedians since “rare is the joke that has no victim.” However, the fact of the matter is, as I will explain in the chapter dealing with his works, he does not really offend anyone but rather plays with our stereotypes. Yet, he defends aggressive humour, arguing that it depends on the place groups hold in society who can and cannot make politically incorrect, aggressive jokes. He pictures

a graph with an x-axis and a y-axis. On the x-axis are people from marginalised backgrounds, with the most suppressed or oppressed at the bottom, gradually working their way up the ‘socially accepted’ ladder – let’s call it the Ladder of Status – to the top [...] where the male honky proudly surveys the graph, no doubt complementing himself on discovering and culturally appropriating it.

He continues to argue that the ones at the top of his imaginary grid cannot make jokes at the expense of those at the bottom, but that “[...] those at the bottom can make those higher up the social ladder the butt of their jokes” – hence his making fun of the dominant white culture in most of his works. However, he quickly adds that humour can also “work sideways,” thus including the self-deprecating qualities of Native humour. He underlines this by giving the example of a joke Thomas King had told him: “How many Indians does it take to eat a rabbit? Two - one to eat it, the other to watch for cars” (Hayden Taylor, “Whacking”, 70-71). He rightly says that if a white person told this joke, it would have been unacceptable but because it was Thomas King, well-known Native author and humorist, it was perfectly ok. Ian Ferguson calls these jokes “IN JOKES”, jokes that are

told by Indians when non-Natives (and this [...] refers to White People) are in the room. These jokes tend to be a little self-deprecating, and they often have a political edge to them. (Ferguson, 125)

These jokes are often, but not necessarily, aggressive, yet they make white audiences think about Aboriginal issues that are associated with the dominant White culture. Ferguson gives some examples of such jokes:

What do you call that outfit you're wearing? A...sports...jacket? Is that a traditional design?

What were Custer's last words? 'These Siouxs are killing me. (Ferguson, 126)

The first of these examples is self-explanatory; the second one needs some clarification. Ferguson adds that "it's helpful to know that many First Nations people have difficulty pronouncing the *sh* sound, and would say 'shoe' and 'Sioux' the same way" (Ferguson, 126).

However, few of these jokes are really 'aggressive' and only a very ignorant, overly proud white person would feel offended by them. In the end, Native humorists want to make their audience (which also includes white people) think, not scare them off. Therefore, Native humorists use jokes that tease members of the dominant culture, make fun of their ways of dealing with N.A. Indians, but insist that "no one is meant to feel uncomfortable" (Ferguson, 125-126). In the best tradition of Native humour, dating back to the instructive teasing of ancient tribes, modern comics pick on white culture in a way that

the insultee is not threatened, and in fact feels a sense of mastery because he understands the incongruity and also appreciates being selected as someone savvy enough to know the convention. (Lowe, 198)

To sum up, we have seen that the stereotypical view many white people still hold is, like most stereotypes, completely unfounded. N.A. Indians have always and still employ humour for various purposes among which self-deprecating and teasing for educational purposes are the most 'traditional' ones. The Trickster plays a central role in mythology and educational stories which are sometimes outrageously funny. Modern Native authors use the Trickster as an actual character, mediating between mythological and real worlds, like Thomas King in *Green Grass, Running Water* or as an underlying force that disturbs the world of the characters like Drew Hayden Taylor in *Berlin Blues*. They also use classic puns, wit or jokes to make us aware of our own stereotypes or of the problems modern N.A. Indians face in a

world dominated by white culture. More about that later on, when I deal with the three funniest Native authors today.

5. The History of Humour in North American Literature

5.1 (Colonial) American Humour in Literature

Most people would agree on the following statement: “British people have the darkest, most morbid humour in the world.” In fact, it might be true that humour from different countries diverges in certain ways. British humour is said to be very dry and dark, French humour subtle and creative. Whether these assumptions are just stereotypes or not, if asked about their own ‘national’ humour, most Brits would probably say something like the above. But what about a distinct *American* humour? Modern-day Europeans might think of *The Simpsons*, *The Late Night Show* or *American Pie* but probably couldn’t pin down specific properties of American humour. And even Americans themselves such as David Sloane become highly confused when trying to specify it:

Whether or not American humour is different qualitatively from other nations’ humour is a vexed and vexing question [...]. Germany’s Baron Munchhausen represents the tall tale as fully as Babe the Blue Ox, Paul Bunyan or Mike Fink, king of the river [...]. The Good Soldier Svejk of the Czech Republic is certainly close enough to Bill Mauldin’s G.I. Joe of World War II fame [...].

Nevertheless, he and many more have identified types of humour Native to (White) North America. As a rule, he claims that “as our humour tells us, we are moral risk-takers and frontiersmen – or at least we wish to see ourselves that way” (Sloane, 1).

If we believe Nancy Pogel and Paul Somers, the core characteristic of American Humour lies in the ambiguity of subjects that I have explained earlier on. They claim that “American literary humour has always embodied the fundamental contradictions of our national life” (Pogel and Somers, 1). My opinion is that this cannot be claimed as a distinct feature of American humour. Humour everywhere in the world deals with the peculiarities of national life for everything else would be absurd and would contradict one of the main preconditions of a joke, namely shared knowledge on the subject by performer and listener.

In order to find out if those people are right and a distinct American Humour actually exists, let me give a short overview of the history of literary humour in North America. In its early years, Steve Allen explains, “artistic expression generally reflected the fact that the colonies were culturally dependent on Europe” (Allen, xi). And humorous writing was no exception – it largely imitated, as Nancy Pogel and Paul P. Somers claim, “English neoclassical models” (Pogel and Somers, 3). However, they continue to point out that these years also brought forth the first distinct American art form, the “tall tale,” which was not always intended to be funny but sometimes involuntarily so, such as *Dr. Samuel Sewall’s Diary* from 1674 which is also one of the first accounts of the first truly American humoristic character, the Yankee.¹⁴

Playing a more important role in the development of American humour, according to Pogel and Somers, were jest books and almanacs, which featured the first “recognizably American comic stereotypes to replace the English ones.” The “most influential” of these almanacs was published by Benjamin Franklin in 1733 under the title *Poor Richard’s Almanac* (Pogel and Somers, 3). This work featured what Franklin called “Prudent Maxims and Wise Sayings” such as “God heals and the doctor takes the fees” (Franklin, 12). Further contributions to American Humour by Franklin include tall tales and political satire but he will be most remembered for his several (stereotypical) comic personae such as Polly Baker, Poor Richard, and Father Abraham.¹⁵

The same concept can be found in Washington Irving’s *History of New York* from 1809, which he published under his pseudonym Diederich Knickerbocker and in which he profoundly satirized figures like “William the Testy, [his] interpretation of Thomas Jefferson” (Pogel and Somers, 3). Another one of his works, *The Sketch Book*, featured one of America’s most famous gothic tales, “The Legend of Sleepy Hollow,” in which we can find a very popular Yankee character, Ichabod Crane.¹⁶ Irving and others used comic characters to play “with [the] amusing contrast between America as a reality, on the one hand, and mythical lands – Arcadia, Utopia, El Dorado [...] on the other hand” (Blair and Hill, 14). Rather than aiming for a cheap laugh, they showed the gap between the illusion of America as a land of ‘milk and honey’ and the grim reality. Irving’s story can be seen as “an early high point in reputable humour,” exemplified by “greedy and gluttonous Ichabod Crane” who breaks the

¹⁴ Cf. Pogel and Somers’s summary of the history of humorous American literature in Mintz, 1-3.

¹⁵ Cf. Pogel and Somers’s summary of the works of Benjamin Franklin in Mintz, 3.

¹⁶ Cf. Pogel and Somers’s summary of the works of Washington Irving in Mintz, 3-4.

silence of the romantic rural town of Sleepy Hollow with his arrogant attempts at establishing himself “as the master of the Van Tassel estate” by marrying Katrina (Blair and Hill, 165-166).

As a rule, however, during most of the 1800s, American humour was characterised by

regional peculiarities [that] attracted the attention of Americans [...]. Despite subtle gradations, the Yankee, the backwoodsman, the New England bluestocking, the New York Dutchman, and the Southern aristocrat were all distinguishable from one another, and one fairly persistent contrast good for laughs pitted the Eastern seaboard against the back settlements. [...] It was custom, it would seem, to exaggerate the beauty, fertility, the affluence, or the other superlative qualities of a region until claims soared into tall tales. (Blair and Hill, 158)

Thus, the early 1800s, especially the aftermath of Andrew Jackson’s election for presidency, saw the rise of two rivalling fractions. The first one was comprised of the so-called “Down-East” humorists, whose main target was the “sort of backwoods Yankee who supported [Jackson]” (Pogel and Somers, 4). Among these writers was Thomas Chandler Haliburton from Nova Scotia whom “many writers have called [...] the father of American Humour” (despite being Canadian) and who has created another famous Yankee named Sam Slick, arguably one of the best-known funny characters from early American literature. Typically, the humour of the Yankee lies in his character being “shrewd, philosophical and unbeatable – appearing as a peddler or a horse trader, or soldier, sailor or tinker,” reports Leacock (71), himself another Canadian but nevertheless a specialist on North American humour in general. This kind of Yankee humour featured distinct regional backgrounds and characterization and was very popular well into the 1860s.

On the other end there were the southern humorists, a school that developed in the Old Southwest. These writers were “experimenting with the use of the vernacular and alternative narrative methods but with less overt commentary” (Pogel and Somers, 5). Among the best-known stories of the Old Southwest is Augustus Baldwin Longstreet’s tale of Davy Crockett, a real character from U.S. politics whom Longstreet ridiculed using political hyperbole. Mike Fink, another historical figure, a frontiersman and boatman on the Mississippi, was portrayed by several authors. Usually, this meant outrageous tales of “drunkenness, recklessness, racism, male chauvinism, violence and sheer cruelty” such as a tale about his spectacular ability to “gulp down a gallon of liquor in twenty-four hours and neither stagger nor slur a syllable” (Blair and Hill, 115). But perhaps the single best-known story of south-western

humour is *The Big Bear of Arkansas* by Thomas Bangs Thorpe, published in 1845, a tale of a highly exaggerated and absurd bear hunt, told in (mock) oral narration.¹⁷ What made the humorists of the Old Southwest different from their northern counterparts was that they were “self-consciously, defensively, southerners; they were professional, often lawyers and they were gentlemen, conservative Whig gentlemen, who felt superior to their backwoods neighbours” (Pogel and Somers, 5-6).

The time of the Civil War saw the creation of “the wise fool of the regional humorists,” such as Charles Farrar Browne’s Artemus Ward, who is “sharp and always trying to get ahead” (Pogel and Somers, 7). Browne would use his alter ego Ward whom he portrayed as a travelling showman (Browne would even hold ‘lectures’ under the name of Artemus Ward) to make fun of specific cities or regions. “He makes out that the showman is just about to arrive! He’s in Cincinnati, he’s in Tiffin, he’s in Toledo, and, wherever he writes from, it means a crack on that town”, Stephen Leacock reports. “Apart from [these] local hints”, Leacock continues, “the form of the humour of these early sketches [...] depended very largely upon bad spelling” (Leacock, 94), which was mysteriously perceived as very funny in those days. Ward and other comic personae, Pogel and Somers write, were also used as propaganda instruments in the American Civil War. Among them was Petroleum V. Nasby, the creation of David Ross Locke, and an “unregenerate coward, hypocrite and racist” who deserts to the Confederate Army (Pogel and Somers, 7). Nevertheless, Ward, Nasby and others, commonly summarized under the term ‘Phunny Phellows,’ survived the war and contributed significantly to American humour for years to come. Their greatest achievement, according to Blair and Hill was that they brought

laughter to a far larger audience than their predecessors had. [...] And by coining cynical aphorisms and whacking away bravely at sentimentality and pretentiousness, they helped express and popularize new attitudes and beliefs in the postwar years. (Blair and Hill, 299)

The late 19th century was characterised by the rise of the “local colourists,” somewhat successors to the south-western humorists. Among these were Harriet Beecher Stowe and her *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* of 1852 and Joel Chandler Harris with his Uncle Remus stories of 1881. However, also much more ‘serious’ authors wrote humorist pieces in these years. Henry David Thoreau and Herman Melville used humour extensively, even killjoy Edgar Allan Poe produced “burlesques, parodies and examples of black comedy.” Arguably the most

¹⁷ Cf. Blair and Hill's critique of *Big Bear* in Blair and Hill, 200-213.

significant funny books of the late 1800s were, however, *The Adventures of Tom Sawyer* of 1876 and *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* of 1884. Written by Samuel Clemens, better known as Mark Twain, these books “earned [him] a place in the very top rank of American writers, humorous or otherwise” (Pogel and Somers, 8-9). Stephen Leacock suggests that Twain’s humour was based on his ability to “see things as they are and have the art of language to say what they are” (Leacock, 124).

Interestingly enough, the early 20th century saw a brief comeback of the tall tale, when comic character Paul Bunyan entered the stage. Most often portrayed as a lumberman, but also as a farmer or oil field worker, Bunyan, a giant from birth starred in innumerable articles, columns, plays, and even radio shows. To give but one example of his legendary undertakings, he “tossed in his sleep and knocked down four square miles of timber” (Blair and Hill, 389), and all this when he was just a toddler. Portraying fictional characters as giants was no new concept in American literary humour – all the other great heroes such as Mike Fink and Davy Crocket (the fictional, not the real characters, of course) boasted about their enormous height long before Bunyan entered the scene.

Beside this singular phenomenon, a new humorous character that would “shape [...] American Humour for years to come” entered the stage. The “little man” was created by the writers of the magazine *The New Yorker*, first published in 1925. Corey Ford, Phyllis McGinley, Ogden Nash, and Clarence Day wrote funny autobiographical stories published under *Life with Father*, and Robert Benchley achieved great success with his “normal bumbler,” a guy who is “incapable of coping with one crisis after another: tying a necktie, opening a bank account, riding an elevator etc” (Pogel and Somers, 13).

However, *The New Yorker* didn’t have a monopoly on funny stories at that time; full-fledged novelists were also dealing with humour. John Steinbeck’s first major success, *Tortilla Flat* of 1935, was a humorous book, and William Faulkner published a number of novels that used comic exaggeration and mock oral narratives such as *The Sound and the Fury* of 1929 and *As I Lay Dying* of 1930. (Pogel and Somers, 15)

In the post-WW era, humorists found a new butt for their jokes in the “development of suburbia [...] where the man in the grey flannel suit hung his hat and briefcase.” Examples from this period would be Max Shulman’s *The Zebra Derby* (1946) or Peter DeVries’ *Comfort Me with Apples* (1956) (Pogel and Somers, 15).

From the mid-1960s onwards, black humour emerged although, as Pogel and Somers stress, the “concept was not new; there were European precedents” (Pogel and Somers, 15), and it also had been used before by writers such as Poe, Melville, and Twain. Nevertheless, it produced some great pieces such as Joseph Heller’s *Catch 22* from 1961, or Ken Kesey’s *One Flew Over the Cuckoo’s Nest* from 1962. Most likely, it reflected the menace of the cold war era. Moreover, the black humour of the 1960s also influenced Samuel Beckett’s Theatre of the Absurd.¹⁸

One of the most profound American literary humorists of the second half of the 20th century is Philip Roth. His works such as *The Great American Novel* from 1972 show great humour in the tradition of the Old Southwest, “characterized by irreverence, profanity, physical discomfort, scatology and even obscenity,” combined with “most outrageous extravaganzas [that] seemed believable by peppering them with concrete details” (Blair and Hill, 480). Other writers that shaped 20th century American humour include the following: Thomas Berger who “ushered in the era of dark humour” with his *Little Big Man* from 1964; John Irving whose works such as *The World according to Garp* (1978) are “filled with comic scenes that act as a counterbalance [tragedy]” and Kurt Vonnegut Jr., a “satirist and black humorist [who makes] clever jibes and observations about human behaviour” in his books such as *Timequake* (1997) (Nilsen and Nilsen, 120-124).

If we take a look at all these famous examples from American Humour over the centuries, one element seems to stick out and might be considered as the defining characteristic: the humour of character. From Sam Slick to Huckleberry Finn, from Ichabod Crane to Davy Crockett – single characters that are used to make fun of local mannerisms or to satirize national politics can be found in almost all stages of American Humour. Stephen Leacock writes that it is

characteristic that as American Humour deepened in complexity and widened in scope it developed in higher and higher forms the humour of character. By this is meant the humour that bases its contrasts and incongruities in the peculiarities – the inconsistencies of character. (Leacock, 173)

And it can be said without any doubt that this tradition has been carried over into the 2000s. TV examples such as Homer Simpson or Peter Griffin from *Family Guy* underline this, and there is hardly any humorous book that doesn’t pick on funny characters such as

¹⁸ Cf. Pogel and Somer’s account on American Black humour (15-16).

backwoods hillbillies or snobbish New Yorkers, although the American humour of today is much more than just that. Nevertheless, it will be interesting to see whether or not classic elements of North American (colonial) humour can be found in works written by Native authors and, if they appear, how they deal with them.

5.2 Native American Humorist Authors

Native Americans share a long tradition of a very distinct kind of humour, although this fact has gone widely unnoticed by the early settlers and still is mostly ignored by modern-day white North Americans. Consequently, indigenous humorist literature only recently raised attention among literary scholars.

Admittedly, written literature by N.A. Indians in general has a short history. The indigenous tribes of North America didn't know writing until they made contact with the Europeans, and therefore the stories (including the funny and educating ones) were passed on to the next generation orally. As I have explained earlier on, they had a great number of mythological, educational, and just plain funny stories to tell, and whoever tries to devalue this technique of preserving tales shall be reminded of Plato's account on the practise of writing down knowledge:

If men learn this, it will implant forgetfulness in their souls; they will cease to exercise memory because they rely on that which is written, calling things to remembrance no longer from within themselves, but by means of external marks. What you have discovered is a recipe not for memory, but for reminder.
(Plato quoted on <http://myweb.tiscali.co.uk/wordscape/museum/plato.html>
January 5, 2009)

I have quoted this not to make a judgement on the value of written or oral literature but rather to remind ourselves not to hastily denounce ways that don't correspond to that with which we are accustomed. If we do so, we are no better than the explorers of the New World who perceived the Native peoples as primitive savages.

To come back to the topic of this chapter, we can track down the first examples of humorist Native literature in the late 19th and early 20th century. As Bernd Peyer reports,

a very distinctive school of American Indian literary humour developed in association with the newspaper boom in Indian Territory during the second half of the nineteenth century. (Peyer, 116)

At this time, many Native American journalists and writers commented on territorial and international events in sarcastic and ironic letters and articles in such newspapers.

One of these writers was the Muskogee nation member Alexander Lawrence Posey (1873-1908), who wrote about seventy letters, accounts of mainly territorial events, most of which were reported by the imaginary “Fus Fixico.” “Using a partly imaginary and partly historical set of conservative and seemingly naive Cree characters,” Peyer continues, “Posey was in the position to mock, criticize, or promote practically every facet of Indian Territory politics.” In his letters, he made frequent and often hilarious use of “allusions to the Bible, classical history, and Euro-American literature,” (Peyer, 116-117) a technique that, as we will later see, has become a tradition among Native American writers up to the present day.

John Lowe argues that Posey modelled his “Fus Fixico” (meaning ‘fearless bird’) letters on Finley Peter Dunne’s ‘Mr. Dooley’ letters that were published in American newspapers and ridiculed American prejudices towards Irish immigrants. Dunne and Posey reacted to “popular cartoons and songs of the period which cruelly caricatured ‘Indians’ alongside other ethnic groups.” Interestingly, Posey would sometimes publish his work under the name Chinnubbie Harjo, which is the name of a Trickster/shape shifter figure in Muskogee mythology. Seeing himself as a Trickster shows when he uses “nonstandard English, mixing tenses and negatives freely,” thus turning norms around, playing on form, “bringing disparate elements into configuration” – hence Trickster’s function as disturber-creator (Lowe, 199).

Another one of these early humorists was Cherokee writer William Penn Adair Rogers (1879-1935), who focused on world events rather than territorial ones. His strikingly sarcastic style is shown in his reference to himself as “part-Cherokee with enough white in me to make my honesty questionable.” He made fun of Andrew Jackson for driving Cherokees out of Georgia and North Carolina and Puritans for “being very human. They would shoot a couple of Indians on the way to every prayer meeting” (Rogers quoted in Peyer, 118).

The second half of the 20th century saw the emergence of a great number of Native North American authors. Perhaps the best-known is Gerald Vizenor, Jr., who didn’t only write innumerable short stories and novels but also significant works on the aboriginal experience and its political and social implications. Vizenor is an author who uses the character of the Trickster extensively. Trickster appears as narrator, as an influence on the narrative structure or disguised as imagiNative figures in his stories such as *Wordarrows* (1978) through which

he “playfully expose[s] verbal ironies as they try to maintain a balance in the complicated terrain of urban America.” Another technique used to humorous effect by Vizenor is playing with names, a method that can also be found in Thomas King’s *Green Grass, Running Water*. In *Darkness in Saint Louis Bearheart* (1978), Vizenor portrays a “group of tribal clowns” who go by the names of “Charles Lindbergh, President Jimmy Carter, [and] Chief Bigfoot.” He creates a mythical, surreal environment where “tribal myth is interwoven with contemporary politics to create a Trickster allegory about liberation and survival” (Blaeser, 262). Vizenor’s

puns, word play, and wild imagination in the tradition of the tribal Trickster create stylistic and fantastic views of the intersection of modern American experience and tribal consciousness. (Ruppert, 180)

Works like *Griever: an American Monkey King in China* (1987), in which he sends a traditional tribal Trickster to China to disrupt official China and to “liberate the people,” or *Heirs of Columbus* (1991) which features a “descendent of Columbus [who] discovers that his DNA contains healing powers” prove his vivid imagination and talent to play on and ridicule the sometimes hurtful events of the past. (Ruppert, 181-182)

In 1984, another strong voice of Native North American humorous storytelling reached the surface. With the publication of *Love Medicine* (1984), Louise Erdrich established herself among the most renowned writers of Native fiction. The daughter of Ojibway and German parents who grew up in Wahpeton, North Dakota,¹⁹ “brought to the forefront a humour that was lacking in many of the other popular Native writers” (Ruppert, 179). Her work such as *Tracks* (1988), *The Bingo Palace* (1994) and *The Antelope Wife* (1998) can hardly be called outrageously funny but always include a certain Trickster spirit and have been

noted for [their] striking symbolic episodes, [their] use of oral tradition, [their] unique characterization, and [their] humour. (Ruppert, 179)

A true funny man is Sherman Alexie, who writes about “the grave themes of ongoing colonial history and its personal effects in Indian country” (Moore, 297). Alexie writes novels, short stories, poetry and has even directed two films – *Smoke Signals* in 1998 and *The Business of Fancydancing* in 2001. His works of short fiction such as *The Lone Ranger and Tonto Fistfight in Heaven* (1993) or *The Toughest Indian in the World* (2000), feature

¹⁹ Cf. Rainwater’s account on Erdrich’s childhood in Porter and Roemer, 271.

a vitalizing sense of humour and the friction of irony [and Alexie] affirms a sense of subjective will and humanity in his characters that helps set them free in their colonial context. (Moore, 299)

Another one of Alexie's major topics is alienation, he portrays North American 'Indians' "wandering in a sea of loss" after almost everything has been taken from them by the white invaders; after finding themselves in a world dominated by white culture. They find themselves "looking for islands of human connection." David Moore argues that this "haunting lack, this loss, is the dark side of Alexie's comedy, reflecting in relief the larger horrors of cultural genocide" (Moore, 304). In *The Lone Ranger and Tonto Fistfight in Heaven* (1993), Alexie deals with serious issues affecting Native life such as "alcoholism, alienation, and broken dreams". But he also made both Native and white audiences laugh "at such parodies as a T-shirt advertising 'Fry Bread Power' and 'The Miracle of the Fry Bread,'" which are sold after the main protagonist's mother "magically feeds a crowd twice as big as she expected," a clear parody of the Bible story of Jesus dividing the bread to feed the hungry crowd (Nilsen and Nilsen, 28).

As shown by these examples, Native American humorist writing is by no means a modern phenomenon – in fact it has a tradition that dates back more than one hundred years. Remarkably, in making fun of the cruelty and suffering in Native American history and through their self-deprecating nature, they show a striking similarity to modern Native fiction. However, the most significant works of Native humour began to emerge in the mid-20th century and continued to rise throughout the late 1900s and early 2000s. The last few decades of the 20th century belonged to two masters of Native American humour: Drew Hayden Taylor and Thomas King, the first of which owes much of his success to Tomson Highway, one of the first writers who brought Native humour to the theatre stage. These three outstanding authors will be dealt with in the following main part of my paper.

6. The Humour of Drew Hayden Taylor

The first North American Indian author whose work I would like to investigate is Drew Hayden Taylor. The man who calls himself a ‘Blue-eyed Ojibway’ was born in 1962 on Curve Lake First Nations, a small Indian reserve in central Ontario, without ever knowing his (white) father, an experience he later funnily reworks in his plays. Early in his life he developed a liking for literature, especially “very boyhood kind of stuff and oddly enough, the entire series (24 books I believe) of the *Tarzan of the Apes* series by Edgar Rice Burroughs,” which he liked because he could identify with the “fish-out-of-water existence of Tarzan, the ultimate outsider in his environment” (Hayden Taylor quoted in Moffatt and Tait, 72). Being a white-looking Indian, his life on the reserve was not always easy; Taylor says that “the darker you are, the more acceptable you are” in his book *Furious Observations of a Blue-eyed Ojibway Part 3* (104). The notions of the ‘authentic Indian’ and the ‘hybrid Indian’, meaning a N.A. Indian torn between the world of the dominant (white) culture and their heritage, should become major themes in his books. Yet, most of the time, “it was a fairly happy existence where I climbed trees and [...] at the appropriate age, was shocked to discover most of the girls on the Reserve were my cousins” (*Furious Observations*, 107). He left the Reserve at the age of eighteen and went to Toronto to study radio and television broadcasting. He then “lurched from contract to contract as a production assistant” (Hayden Taylor quoted in Moffat and Trait, 73) until he started writing articles and scripts for the TV series *Beachcombers* when he was 24. In 1988, he received a call from Tomson Highway who asked him to take the post of a playwright at the Native Earth Performing Arts group, of which Highway was the artistic director at that time. He studied the works of Highway and started writing his own plays shortly afterwards. As of today, he has published eighteen plays, one novel, five anthologies and a number of articles on Native issues. He also directed a TV documentary on Native humour called *Redskins, Tricksters and Puppy Stew* in 2000.²⁰

Arguably his best-known work to date is the Blues Quartet which consists of 4 plays which I will discuss individually over the following pages: *The Bootlegger Blues*, *The Baby Blues*, *The Buz’Gem Blues*, and *The Berlin Blues*. Like most of his other works, these plays

²⁰ Cf. Taylor’s life story in Moffat and Trait 72-74.

can be seen as situation comedies, rather light entertainment for Native and Non-Native audiences. But that is just half the story, as Robert Nunn explains. At first glance, these plays might come across as pure entertainment and especially the author himself regularly advertises them as such, but underlying is a notion of “not adopting mainstream cultural forms but mimicking them” (Nunn, “Mimicry”, 96). Nunn argues that through using the dominant white culture’s institution of theatre, Native plays get dangerously close to simply adapting to white culture. Instead, he goes on, Hayden Taylor celebrates the hybridity of white and Native cultures and, at the same time, mimics both using various techniques such as exaggeration, when highly stereotyped characters (white people desperately wanting to become ‘Native’ or N.A. Indians who behave like Whites) from both cultures get involved in sitcom-like situations. He also frequently uses ridiculous phonetic compounds of Native and quintessentially colonial words as another means of exaggeration. Very often, he also employs the mythological character of the Trickster and his role as creator-destroyer.²¹ However, in his works, Trickster never appears as an actual protagonist, but disguised in the disruptive tendencies of one or more ‘human’ characters, as I will show later on. Furthermore, Hayden Taylor’s work is full of Native humour, with characters frequently teasing each other or laughing away atrocities of the past, the so-called ‘survival humour’. Mostly, however, as Nunn continues, his plays are “particularly interesting as hybrid crossings of Native and popular culture” (Nunn, “Mimicry”, 101). Keeping this in mind, let’s investigate the first play of this highly enjoyable series.

6.1 The Bootlegger Blues (1991)

The first book of the series which is about an elderly Native lady who bootlegs a considerable amount of beer in order to raise money for the church has much in common with the U.S. American sitcom. One-liners, hilarious dialogues, marriage problems, everything is there. Hayden Taylor himself was not quite sure if it would be a success since

nobody had ever seen a full-scale Native comedy. We were scared, because we didn’t know if it would be funny—we didn’t know if people would appreciate it, because up until that time, the vast majority of Native plays were dark, angry, and accusatory toward the white population. (Hayden Taylor quoted in Dāwes, 16)

21 Cf. Nunn’s account on hybridity and mimicry in Hayden Taylor’s plays 96-120.

Nevertheless, it was a huge hit and a perfect example of Hayden Taylor's sense of humour. The play was first published in 1991, a time of great tensions between Whites and N.A. Indians, climaxing in the struggles at Oka in 1990. Mohawk activists stood up against the Canadian army in the attempt to save their land from being turned into a golf course.²² In this time of unrest there came Hayden Taylor's comedy and

allowed for many an opportunity to break the tension and ease into a reconsideration of Native peoples." Taylor's *Bootlegger Blues* purposely lacked any overt political agenda (though subtext really political statements cannot help but abound), but rather professed to celebrating Native survival by celebrating one of the many things that Native people have done so well with over the centuries: express themselves from a base of humour and laughter. (Young, 129)

The play is set during a powwow somewhere in central Ontario where Martha, a devoted Christian, is providing food for the guests. The whole play is cantered around alcohol and that becomes clear in the very first scene, where Hayden Taylor ridicules the common modern-day stereotype that all N.A. Indians are alcoholics:

MARTHA: It's all the fault of that old fool, Marjorie. She told me (In a shrill, nagging voice) "You can't have a dinner for Indians without selling beer, they'll go crazy." Crazy fool, she ain't been the same since she got hit with the ball at that baseball game. (*Bootlegger*, 10)

By calling the lady who made the utterance 'crazy fool,' Martha instantly refutes the assumption that all N.A. Indians are alcohol addicts. At the same time, Hayden Taylor mocks the fact that alcohol was brought to the N.A. Indians by the white people by mentioning the American institution of baseball which is, in turn, held responsible for Marjorie's erroneous thinking.

Martha's daughter Marianne is married to David, a perfect example of an Indian who has 'gone white,' appearing with "a stuffed t-shirt with an overly developed sense of office and life protocol. He is an Indian yuppie" (*Bootlegger*, 15). In the other *Blues* books, Hayden Taylor usually makes fun of white people trying to imitate Native behaviour (or, what they think it constitutes), but in this book it's the other way round. David is utterly 'un-Indian,' dressing in running gear, speaking of reports and computers he needs for his job at the band council. He is obsessed with property and protocol; everything has to go according to plan. When he addresses his wife about a broken typewriter, a hilarious sitcom-like dialogue begins:

22 Cf. Hayden Taylor's accounts on Oka in Däwes 8-9.

DAVID: Can you guess where I have just been? [...] The community centre, Marianne. And you know what I found there?

MARIANNE: A dead body draped over the stove, with a knife deep in its back, and a cryptic message scrawled in blood.

DAVID: A broken typewriter. The band's broken typewriter. [...]

ANDREW: Lighten up, David, nobody dies from a broken typewriter.

DAVID: They do when it's band property. Remember what happened to Fabian last year?

MARIANNE: But that's different. You just don't decide to party in a cement mixer. That's stupid.

ANDREW: He did end up as a damn good war memorial though. Where were you anyways? (*Bootlegger*, 34-35)

David has removed himself so far from Native identity that he doesn't even get the jokes in his wife's and her brother Andrew's answers. He has become a 'white Indian,' so influenced by white culture that he has totally lost his aboriginal identity, and his wife struggles in vain to arouse some 'Indianess' in him. When Marianne flirts with fancy dancer Noble (a reference to the 'Noble Savage' of white imagination), however, he gets jealous, and at the very end, chases his wife and the dancer down the streets with a Camaro (clearly a symbol of colonial North America) loaded up with the bootlegged beer:

DAVID: Looks like my job will be waiting for me when I get back. Marianne, here I come. Noble, out you go.

ANGIE: Isn't that terribly romantic?

ANDREW: Delivering beer?

ANGIE: Why is it men never understand true romance?

ANDREW: It gets in the way of good sex. (*Bootlegger*, 87)

The developing romance between Andrew and Angie can be seen as a winking salute from the Trickster. Being the younger brother of Marianne, Andrew is overflowing with hormones (again, a typical sitcom teenager) and can barely hold himself back when he meets Angie. Through his behaviour, he also reflects a 'Tricksterish' sense of sexual desire, which Ryan calls "wanton sexuality" (Ryan, 6), and this also fills the air in this incident that unveils the story of Andrew's nickname 'Blue':

ANGIE: One hot summer you were in quite a rush to go play baseball. In your hurry to do up your pants, you accidentally caught a certain part of your anatomy in the zipper of your blue jeans. [...] by the time they unjammed it, you were blue, and a nickname was born.

ANDREW: It was either that or “Stubby”

ANGIE: And when you were 14, there was that little incident with the magazines under your bed... (*Bootlegger*, 22)

They go on to mock and tease each other with a truly Native sense of humour until they are revealed a horrible truth by Martha, namely that they are cousins and that it is therefore impossible for them to become a couple. However, Martha, being an elderly lady gets all the names and relations mixed up in her mind and Marianne relieves Andrew by telling him that they are merely cousins by marriage.

Andrew also shows Trickster-like behaviour when he is confronted with the 143 cases of beer his mother illegally purchased and stocked in his room:

As Andrew approaches the room, atmosphere music slowly comes up. It should have the same feel as “Chariots of fire” or “2001: A Space Odyssey” [...] An entire wall of his bedroom is covered with 143 cases of beer, stacked in neat rows.[...] He looks to the heavens.

ANDREW: Thank you! They’re all here, all of them.

Andrew shakes a case of Canadian, creating the telltale sound of bottles rattling.

ANDREW: The national anthem! (*Bootlegger*, 39)

He is brought back into reality by Martha but soon develops (with his sister Marianne) the idea to bootleg and sell the beer. At first, he thinks he is joking around with his sister but when his mother actually decides to do it, he changes his mind since he is training to become a constable on the reserve. Like the Trickster, he didn’t think of the consequences of his comments at first.

All in all, the play is, as Robert Nunn puts it, a “hybrid crossing of Native humour and the conventions of situation comedy” (Nunn, “Mimicry”, 101). The situation is the problem with the beer and all characters are somehow involved in it, yet all of them are also entangled in subplots. It is, much as Hayden Taylor has planned, a celebration of the Native sense of humour, with lots of teasing, Tricksterism, debunking of stereotypes by exaggerated display and self-deprecating, which is especially obvious in the way the issue of alcohol is broached.

When Martha picks up the phone to take orders for the beer, Hayden Taylor repeatedly mocks the stereotype of alcohol-addicted ‘Indians’ and Martha’s Elder status at the same time:

MARTHA: (On the phone) Ahneen, Lester. (Pause) No. (Pause) No! I will not sell you any beer, Lester. You’re my brother and one of my rules is I refuse to sell to any of my brothers. (Pause) Eddie don’t count, with a wife like that, he needs a beer. [...] (*Bootlegger*, 63)

MARTHA: (Answering the phone) Ahneen. Young William, what can I do for you? (Pause) Three cases?! You should be ashamed of yourself, young man, spending money on all that beer. You’ve got three children in that household to look after. (Pause) I don’t care if only one is yours. You behave or I’ll report you to the police. (*Bootlegger*, 73)

Martha’s rather unorthodox understanding of her role as an Elder, on the one hand illegally selling beer and on the other hand giving advice on alcohol to the callers, is a first hint at Hayden Taylor’s attempt to get the Elders down from their elevated position, a theme that he will pick up in *The Buz’Gem Blues*, when we meet Martha again.

6.2 The Baby Blues (1999)

Following *The Bootlegger Blues*, this play is set on another unspecified reserve somewhere in central Ontario, where a number of characters assemble for a powwow. The event itself is a mere background for the struggles between the characters and within themselves. Robert Nunn claims that “the play has the insistent driving logic of sitcom: keep ‘em laughing, make the lines funny” (Nunn, “Mimicry”, 102).

Similar to virtually all of Hayden Taylor’s plays, this one is full of stereotypical characters. First, we find Noble, the fancy dancer from *The Bootlegger Blues*, who gives the play its name by performing a country song called ‘Baby Blues’ in front of his tent in act one. He has grown older and has troubles dealing with it when confronted with his younger and more dynamic colleague Skunk:

SKUNK: [...] How old are you?

NOBLE: Thirty-eight. Got a problem with that?

SKUNK: Hey, no man, thirty-eight’s cool, my father’s almost thirty-eight, but isn’t that a little old to be doin’ fancy? [...]

NOBLE: Hey, I’m a rebel. Don’t forget it. Too old...

Angrily, wanting to show his fitness, NOBLE bends over and picks up the metal poles from his ancient tent. Almost instantly he groans, in obvious pain. SKUNK rushes to his aid. (Baby Blues, 25-26)

This little playful fight between the two dancers resembles a classic sitcom struggle, especially the end where Noble hurts his back in bending over, a slapstick element that works with every audience. This is also one of the first incidents where we witness cross-cultural mockery. On the one hand, Noble is a proud dancer who wants to (apart from making some money) express his heritage by dancing at the powwow. On the other hand, his “ludicrous struggle to deny that he is aging is aligned with white culture’s obsession with staying young.” Throughout the play, however, he gradually accepts his age which is “aligned with Native acceptance of what the Creator gives you” (Nunn, “Mimicry”, 102-103).

Another thing he has to accept and the main storyline of the book is the revelation that he is the father of Pashik, a 17-year-old rebellious girl whom he repeatedly tries to hit on during the play. He is confronted with the fact in true sitcom style:

NOBLE: [...] You must have been just a baby the last time I was in town. But there was this beautiful girl I met, you’re probably related to her.

PASHIK: What was her name?

NOBLE: Geez, that was so long ago. What a great week we had together. [...] No, wait... I remember her name now. Nice guy, almost forgetting her name? Jenny... it was Jenny.

The smile fades off PASHIK’s face and is replaced by shock as she leans away from NOBLE

NOBLE: What? Did I say something wrong?

It is a moment before PASHIK can bring herself to speak. Her voice is hesitant and scared.

PASHIK: Dad?!

The fateful word slowly sinks into NOBLE’s consciousness. He falls to the ground, dazed. The lights go down. (Baby Blues, 51-52)

Again, we are reminded of innumerable sitcom moments where fateful facts are revealed to the characters in a comical way, most often ending with one character becoming unconscious. When Noble meets Jenny for the first time after the incident, we witness what is perhaps Hayden Taylor’s greatest gift. Despite the fact that single parenthood is a serious problem among North American Indians, he doesn’t make us feel concerned by, for example,

letting Jenny and Noble have a lengthy argument with accusations. Instead, he loosens the situation up with a dialogue that serves as an example of the aboriginal tradition of teasing:

JENNY: You look so ... different.

NOBLE: You lost the glasses.

JENNY: contacts. You don't have a mustache any more.

NOBLE: Tent fire. You've put weight on.

JENNY: You've let your hair grow.

NOBLE: You've gotten old.

JENNY: You've gotten ugly

NOBLE: Just like the old times, huh? [...] (*Baby Blues*, 58)

Noble makes a few hilarious attempts to flee the reserve but Jenny 'encourages' him to stay by removing some vital parts from his car. In the end, Noble agrees to staying and even becomes quite close to Pashik. A good deal of Noble's changing of mind he owes to Amos, the wise old man of the story.

Amos runs a snack stand that becomes some kind of central meeting point in the play. All the people who have problems with themselves or other characters turn to him, first just to get a snack and a pop, later openly seeking advice from him. Among other delicacies, Amos serves "Fortune Scones" at his stand and Hayden Taylor uses them to

make great fun of whites in search of authentic Indianness, confronting the white search for the true (that is, vanishing) Indian with thoroughly hybrid real Indians. (Nunn, "Mimicry", 103)

Robert Nunn claims that whenever whites search for authentic 'Indians they really want to see an image of what they think 'Indianness' is and that is, most of the time, the 'vanishing' Indian which I have explained earlier on. A character who presents this in a hilarious way will be dealt with in the next paragraph. But now back to the "Fortune Scones". Made from Bannock, Amos sells the Scones with philosophical, seemingly 'authentic Indian' sayings in them. Those sayings, however, are not authentic at all but come "from a wonderful hodgepodge of sources and [are] often playfully labelled as wise" (Nunn, "Mimicry", 103). Examples of these examples of modern Native wit, a form of humour Blake would call "cleverness with words" (Blake, 119) include:

Check the authentic Native totem-pole for a ‘Made In Korea’ label. (*Baby Blues*, 49)

Beware of unusually colored snow. (*Baby Blues*, 73)

Life is a circle. Try not to get lost. (*Baby Blues*, 61)

Amos is a truly wise man and helps almost every single character with making the right decisions. But he certainly is not an ‘authentic Indian’ in the sense of the romantic notion of popular culture. One character in the play, despite having only the best of intentions, is desperately searching for this romantic ‘Indianness’ and puzzled not to find it among the Natives. Summer is an anthropology student who speaks Ojibway and Mohawk fluently (and is very good in Cree) and is surprised to find out that Amos and Noble are less fluent than herself:

SUMMER: [...] Do you speak Cree?

NOBLE: Me? No. But I can hold my own in Ojibway and I’m still working on my English. Amos?

AMOS: I know a dabbling of Mohawk but I’m actually much better in French. (with a teasing wink) Voulez-vous coucher avec moi? C’est soir?

NOBLE. In school, I picked up some Latin from the priests. I thought it was kind of fun. In vino veritas.

SUMMER is flabbergasted by all this. This is not what she expected.

SUMMER: Wait a minute. This isn’t how it’s supposed to be! (*Baby Blues*, 38)

What makes this dialogue so funny is the obvious expectation Summer has and the “opposition between [her] normal state of affairs and some abnormal, unexpected state” (Raskin quoted in Mulkay, 41-42). Summer can’t believe that everything she imagined and learned about ‘Indians’ is a fake image, and she repeatedly utters outrageously exaggerated lines that display her image of ‘Indianness’ like this one from act one where we encounter her talking into a tape recorder:

SUMMER: [...] Oh, how beautiful, simply so beautiful. Just smell that wood smoke, the bacon frying – what a pity I don’t eat meat. Oh, listen to the children of nature playing, being one with the lake. [...] Here I am, surrounded by trees, flowers, grass, squirrels and Native People. Tree to tree, First Nations, Aboriginal people in their natural environment. (*Baby Blues*, 11-12)

Many things surface in this hilariously surreal quotation. First, we again find the theme of hybridity in her typically white behaviour of living a healthy life as a vegetarian while

worshipping the Native frying of bacon over a wood fire. Secondly, and most importantly, we find the notion of the ‘romantic Indian’ exaggerated to the max. In fact, she goes as far as putting the N.A. Indians on one level with the environment, seeing them as a part of nature, of the landscape even. This view was very popular in the late 18th and early 19th centuries. Instead of condemning her, however, Hayden Taylor mocks her view in a light manner, making us aware of our sometimes romantic images of North American Indians. However, in one of his other books, *Furious Observations of a Blue-eyed Ojibway Part 3 (2002)*, he applies a slightly more aggressive kind of humour on this particular subject:

I am curious at what it currently takes for a non-Native to call themselves a Native person. Must you take Ojibway 101? Show a marked preference for French braiding your hair? Learn how to kill a deer with a corkscrew? Make bannock with your elbows? Maybe we have allowed it to be too easy to join the Aboriginal bandwagon. [...] I just find it a little odd and slightly annoying that thousands of years of culture and tradition can be appropriated for the cost of a marriage license (if that). (*Furious Observations*, 118)

Back in the play, Summer has to pay, representative for all the white people who try to ‘go Native,’ as she repeatedly gets ridiculed by the Native men. They exploit her naivety to their advantage such as Skunk in this scene:

SUMMER: Excuse me but, if you don’t mind me asking, where are you going with the towel. A sweatlodge maybe?

SKUNK: A swim

SUMMER: Oh.

Summer looks disappointed and SKUNK catches this. His attitude changes.

SKUNK: ...Ah yes, ... I’m going for my ... morning purification ... cleansing swim, in the lake ... Mother Earth’s lake ... the tears of Mother Earth.

SUMMER: Really?!

SKUNK: Yes, I do it every morning ... to greet our brother the sun. [...] If you want, you can join me. If you’re into that I mean.

SUMMER: Oh yes, yes. I’d be honored. Is it permitted?

SKUNK: I don’t see why not but I must warn you, in order to reveal yourself to the world, you have to be ... completely naked. (*Baby Blues*, 14-15)

Skunk gets her to go for a nude swim with him and thus reveals his Trickster nature. We witness him playing the Trickster once or twice again in the play, but this is the most significant scene. Very much the traditional Trickster, he takes his chance when offered an

opportunity to fulfil his (sexual) desires by tricking someone and also shows the strong sexual nature of traditional Native trickery. The fact that she later leaves him alone in the lake to chase an eagle in order to get one of its feathers only underlines this notion. In the end, the Trickster usually loses everything he gained by using his deceptive powers.

The Trickster also shows up in the disguise of Amos who himself mocks the unsuspecting Summer. However, rather than to take advantage of her, his sole intention is to make fun of her view of the ‘authentic Indian:’

AMOS: There is something you have to understand about Native people. Just because we’re proud of who and what we are, doesn’t mean we can’t appreciate the rest of the world out there. [...]

SUMMER: Oh, you are so wise.

AMOS: (*aside to NOBLE*) They love stuff like this. (*to SUMMER*) So you understand? (*Baby Blues*, 38-39)

Amos plays the wise Elder, who he undoubtedly is, but not in the way Summer likes to see him and thus ridiculing her outdated stand. In the end, Summer is so overwhelmed by his wisdom that she decides to go on tour with him to powwows and conventions all over the country.

The story ends with another scene that resembles sitcom conventions and thus summarizes the style of the whole play. After Amos got together with Summer, after Noble made peace with his daughter and Jenny, they sit together and reflect on the past events when they are confronted with yet another shocking truth:

AMOS:[...] In fact, I used to know a beautiful Ojibway woman up that way [...].

NOBLE: Wonder who she was?

AMOS: Boy, that must have been back, oh, in the mid-fifties, I’d say. [...] I often wondered what happened to Margaret Blackfish.

NOBLE turns around with a big wide-eyed expression on his face. He peers closely into AMOS’s eyes.

NOBLE: Dad?!

NOBLE passes out again, soon followed by AMOS. The lights go down.
(*Baby Blues*, 93)

To sum up, *The Baby Blues* has two major themes it addresses with humour. Despite forming the framework for the play, single parenthood and fathers who don’t care for their

offspring, exemplified through the story of Noble and his 17-year-old daughter Pashik (and Noble's own father Amos), are not the major topics of this work. Authentic 'Indianness' and hybridity must be seen as central. Hayden Taylor uses his comical talents to great extent when he lets his Native characters (in true Trickster style) mimic Summer's false image of 'Indianness' and when he makes fun of the hybrid identity of modern N.A. Indians. In the words of Robert Nunn, Hayden Taylor makes use of "the mutual 'contamination' of Native and popular culture, [...] a golden opportunity for the disruptive and explosive energies of the Trickster" (Nunn, "Mimicry", 109).

6.3 Buz'Gem Blues (2002)

This book marks the third instalment in Hayden Taylor's Blues Quartet, and he had, as he writes in the foreword, two reasons to write it. The first one was to play on the "almost hero worship of the Elders in our communities" that he observed during his travels. He achieves that by getting them involved in love stories since he realized that "romantic relationships [among the Elders] seem to be [...] a foreign concept to us non-Elder types" (*Buz'Gem Blues*, "Foreword", i). But it is not as easy as that. The play seems to avoid 'serious issues' at first glance, but "even light comedy can be subversive" (Nunn, "Gotta", 45), and so Hayden Taylor stresses a second reason of this work which becomes clear only a few lines into the first act. It was to "highlight and celebrate the fabulous aboriginal sense of humour." Instead of writing "about being oppressed," he wanted to "take the audience, both Native and non-Native, on a fun-loving and enjoyable trip into the hearts of our communities" (*Buz'Gem Blues*, "Foreword", ii). Despite his comments, it is, once again, not so easy and I cannot help but identify some serious issues behind his humour.

We come across two Elders in this book – the first one being Martha, the Ojibway widow from the *Bootlegger Blues*, who is about to attend a conference of N.A. Indians at an unnamed university. Accompanied by her daughter Marianne, the feisty Christian lady was invited to lecture on her Native language. Amos, the foodstand owner from *Baby Blues* who is preparing the food for the guests, is the second Elder. In the course of the book, we witness Martha and Amos slowly developing feelings for each other. Hence the title of the play (Buz'Gem is Ojibway for 'girlfriend' or 'boyfriend'). Amos falls for Martha's wit. She has a

seemingly endless repertoire of genuine aboriginal humour, as exemplified by her opinion on her task of teaching the Ojibway language:

MARTHA: Just be natural and myself, huh? Do I get extra money if I breathe too? Ojibways do that too, you know. Goodness, my parents could have made a lot of money at these things. When I was young, the government tried to beat the language out of us. Now they're payin' us to speak it. [...] Want me to say something in Indian? Aabiish teg zaakimoogaming? (Where is the washroom?)
(*Buz'Gem Blues*, 14)

This can be seen as an example of 'survival humour', 'laughing away' the atrocities committed by the invaders, in this case the practice of taking children away from their families, putting them in residential schools or foster homes, where they would be forced to speak only English, a fate Martha might have faced, we don't know. Hayden Taylor here makes use of the healing powers of humour. But not all of Martha's jokes deal with such serious issues. She also shows one of the other major characteristics of North American Indian humour, the tradition of teasing each other, when she has a hilarious argument with Amos after calling him a "Nodweg," a Mohawk who steals little girls:

AMOS: I have never stolen any children, let alone any Ojibway ones, though that wouldn't be remarkably difficult since their mothers are always somewhere playing bingo!

MARTHA: (coldly) You leave bingo alone.

AMOS: Or what? You'll wrap me in birchbark and pelt me with wild rice?

MARTHA: Well, I think I better leave before someone blockades the doorways.
(*Buz'Gem Blues*, 73)

These runts are good examples of what Ian Ferguson calls "OUR JOKES" (Ferguson, 62), jokes that are more easily understood if you are a North American Indian yourself. Only white people with a profound knowledge of the different tribes and their history will know that Ojibways are famous for using birchbark and that Mohawks have a reputation of blockading streets to make their problems public, as happened in Oka in 1990. In the preface to this play, Hayden Taylor writes that he wants to address both Native and non-Native audiences but with jokes like these, he might get a little off course. On the other hand, only interested and informed white people will watch a play like this, and he uses jokes like this only very sparingly.

Coming back to the storyline, the Mohawk widower Amos and Martha “discover a mutual attraction that instantly makes them regress into love-shy teenagers” (Nunn, “Gotta”, 48) and finally come together while doing the “alligator dance.”

There is only one problem for the two Elders: For most of the play, Amos, who is well into his 60s, is still together with Summer, the 25-year-old student of anthropology from *Baby Blues*, who never stops pointing out that she has one 64th Native blood. This is undoubtedly a reference to the Canadian/U.S. government’s policy of putting Native people into categories, corresponding to their amount of Native blood. As a continuation from *Baby Blues*, she is still searching for her identity desperately trying to ‘go Native’ but she earns little more than ridicule. She speaks Mohawk and Ojibway fluently and “[loads] herself with necklaces, bracelets and rings” (Nunn, “Gotta”, 46). She worships Amos and tries to please him in the kitchen with her rather odd creations that show the biggest theme of the whole Blues Quartet: hybridity. She mixes Native and western culinary traditions which results in things like “chokecherry parfait, chocolate moose, salmon shakes, beaver curry or marinated venison on a wedge of whole-wheat toast” (*Buz’Gem Blues*, 21-67), witty word-plays that make us giggle when we think about the actual meals. Through the character of Summer (especially her miniscule amount of Native blood and her attempts at ‘going Native’), Hayden Taylor also raises the question of what makes a N.A. Indian, a question that is existential for many among the indigenous peoples, since the amount of funds they receive from the Canadian/U.S. government highly depends on their amount of Native blood:

Is it nature or nurture? Is it time spent on a Reserve, or a simple matter of blood quantum as is popular in the States? Maybe it’s the inherent ability to fascinate anthropologists. Or perhaps the indefinable combination of the three? (*Furious Observations*, 79)

Again, he doesn’t judge or accuse anyone; he just explores and mocks white attempts at ‘going Native’ to find their own identity. Quite the opposite happens with another character, “The Warrior Who Never Sleeps.”

Helping and welcoming the guests of the conference, “Looking ultra-Indian,” this character talks in a ridiculously exaggerated, ‘Indian’ way, every sentence uttered sounding like a line from a Karl May film. This is Hayden Taylor’s way of taking on the “conventional ways of representing Aboriginal people, especially the notion of ‘the authentic Indian,’” as Robert Nunn (47) puts it. Wearing a stolen Mountie Jacket as a “symbol to show our

oppressors that I am not frightened of them [and to] show my contempt for my enemies and to demonstrate my bravery” (*Buz’Gem Blues*, 29), he incorporates conventional ‘Imaginary Indian’ qualities and the stereotype of the protesting, road-blocking Indian freedom fighter. Here, hybridity comes into play again. Being torn between his former identity of a geek and his Native heritage, he chooses to present himself as a full-out Indian yet he ends up sounding “suspiciously like white culture’s (especially Hollywood’s) notion of how Natives talk” (Nunn, 47).

Marianne doesn’t buy his masquerade for a second and ridicules him on a regular basis by alternating his name into “Warrior who never looks before he leaps,” “Warrior who likes sheep” or “Warrior who’s not very deep” (*Buz’Gem Blues* 48, 62, 80), only some of a number of running gags that punctuate the story. Seeing his authenticity put to the test more and more, the Warrior

is forced to acknowledge just how hard it is to keep this up, eventually breaking down and admitting that he constructed this persona as a way of escaping who he was: a young Native geek (a ‘neek’) (Nunn, “Gotta”, 47).

In one of the funniest scenes of the play, The Warrior reveals his real name of Ted Cardinal and his real identity and the kind of things he used to be interested in:

WARRIOR: I didn’t like myself. I was tired of being a nobody. The butt of jokes. A geek.

MARIANNE: Oh come on, every kid thinks they’re a geek at some time. It’s part of being a kid.

WARRIOR: Then you tell me. It came to me one night as I worked away in my room, compiling the world’s first Klingon/Cree dictionary. (*Buz’Gem Blues*, 85)

Cree culture and the colonial institution of Star Trek clash against one another, and he feels the need to choose between them, being unable to combine the two, serving as an example for many young N.A. Indians who find themselves unable to combine the two opposing concepts. Of course, he is also saved by love in the end. Summer, whose real name is Agnes Ducharme, is also forced, by Marianne and Martha, to face her real identity. He and Summer meet and fall in love, two people who found themselves after facing the reality of who they really are.

Let’s come back to the story of the book and the last remaining character. Professor Thomas K. Savage (is Hayden Taylor mocking his friend and fellow author, Thomas King?)

is a professor of anthropology and about to study the sex life of the Natives in what he calls “An In-depth Analysis of the Courting, Love, and Sexual Habits of the Contemporary First Nations People as Perceived by Western Society. Volume One” (*Buz’Gem Blues*, 11). His name, of course, hints to the outdated view of N.A. Indians as savages and suggests that it was in fact white people who behaved like moronic barbarians. He also introduces the book by presenting his new project to his fellow colleagues and closes it with an account on his findings, clearly a critical joke on colonial authorities, trying to control the world of the ‘Indians’. He attends the Elders’ conference to interview the guests about their sex life. By presenting him as a classic, ignorant anthropologist, the author ridicules the way the first anthropologists (and even some modern ones) studied the ‘savages’. How they wrote about their ‘subjects’ is shown in this example from the very first scene of the play, when Professor Savage speaks to his fellow scholars:

This is a Native person. Study him for a moment if you will. Tonight’s lecture will be the first in a series where I will be taking you on a journey into the deepest, darkest part of aboriginal society. A place few non-Natives have dared to tread. It is a place of only rumours and conjecture, of mystery and adventure. It has taken many years to build their trust and confidence but finally, I will be able to complete my research about these fascinating people. (*Buz’Gem Blues*, 11)

Savage presents the Native person as an anonymous subject, more like an image than a real person. This clearly reminds us of the ‘Imaginary Indian’ of the 17th, 18th and 19th centuries. He puts him up on a screen and invites his colleagues to ‘study him’ as though an image would be enough to do that. Moreover, by using phrases like “darkest part of aboriginal society” where “few non-Natives have dared to treat,” Hayden Taylor leaves no doubt about Savage’s attitude towards the Natives as a dangerous folk who cannot be trusted. His interviews are a monumental failure since none of his ‘subjects’ do as they are told:

Marianne sets out to seduce him; The Warrior Who Never Sleeps drives him to distraction with his ultra-Indian replies; Martha challenges his own loveless life; Amos drives the challenge home. (Nunn, “Gotta”, 48)

This leads to hilarious dialogues, a technique where Hayden Taylor’s talent shines most bright. When the professor tries to interview The Warrior Who Never Sleeps, the outcome is this:

SAVAGE: Okay. What is your address?

WARRIOR: That is a misleading question. I live where the sun shines. Where the rain falls. Where the wind blows. I am there. Where the aboriginal voice cries out

for vengeance... where Native people gather for ceremonies ... where the drum beats, that is my home.

SAVAGE: Colorful, yet annoying. Let's try something else [...] (*Buz'Gem Blues*, 58-59)

The Warrior's 'ultra-Indianness' annoys him so much that he aborts the interview. But he doesn't have much more luck with the other people attending the conference. One of them, however, has a significant impact on him. Marianne, the single woman who accompanies her mother Martha, flirts with him heavily:

PROFESSOR: Now I've explained about the research I'm doing

MARIANNE: Admit it. That's just some excuse to talk dirty to me.

SAVAGE: Maybe you misunderstood ...

MARIANNE: Try not to use too many big words. I'm just an innocent little girl from the Rez.

PROFESSOR: I see, perhaps we ... (*Buz'Gem Blues*, 44)

In the end, Savage gives in to Marianne's advances and is transformed by love, just like all other characters in the story. No stereotype is too strong to be overcome, and, thus, Marianne and the professor leave the scene together, the professor admitting to his colleagues on the final pages of the play that "we now know less about them than when the project began, I'm sorry to say. I did, however, find out that Ojibway women like being tickled" (*Buz'Gem Blues*, 125).

Summarizing the main themes of this play, we first have to mention true aboriginal humour which becomes evident in the various examples of self-deprecating jokes and running gags that we find all over the story. Apart from Marianne's playing with the name of The Warrior Who Never Sleeps and Martha's mocking of Amos' Mohawk heritage, there is also a constant rumour among the guests about the "Indian Miss World" who is expected to attend the opening ceremony. Everybody has heard a different story about her outrageous achievements. Here is what the characters say about her:

MARIANNE: [...] Rumor has it she's Seminole from Florida and she wrestled an alligator to win. [...] I always thought about entering myself but I don't think they consider bingo a traditional talent. (*Buz'Gem Blues*, 15)

SUMMER: [...] I hear she's Tlingit from Alaska and won her crown by shooting a caribou at four hundred yards with a .303 rifle. [...] (*Buz'Gem Blues*, 37)

WARRIOR: [...] Part of her talent competition was making a basket from scratch. She's Pomo and I heard it took six hours for her to finish the basket and the judges had to sit and watch her through the whole thing. (*Buz'Gem Blues*, 50)

SAVAGE: Miss Indian World? Isn't that the Pequot lady from the Foxwoods Casino who played blackjack for her traditional talent and won \$24,000? (*Buz'Gem Blues*, 79)

These examples are exemplary for the major themes of the play. Once again, we find hybridity, the merger of Western and aboriginal cultures which turns out to be a major problem for both sides. Hayden Taylor doesn't judge whether this is an achievable thing or not; he rather plays with it to raise our awareness and to entertain us. Then there is the rather more serious theme of gambling which is a big problem among many N.A. Indians. But again, the author only leads us to it; he doesn't go deeper; he doesn't provide us with an ultimate answer; he wants us to think and laugh, not think and despair.

Not to be forgotten are the love stories in the play, especially the one between Amos and Martha. Lightly ridiculing the Elder's hero-like status in North American Indian societies, Hayden Taylor creates a highly entertaining "romantic comedy [in which] by the end of the play, everybody is paired up" (Nunn, "Gotta", 48). As a final joke, Hayden Taylor ends his play "as Shakespeare's comedies tend to, with all the couples dancing" (Nunn, "Gotta", 49).

6.4 The Berlin Blues (2007)

As I have shown, the plays in this series play on the theme of hybridity interwoven in a bigger main plot. In the most recent one, hybridity sits at the very core of the story and is mocked and ridiculed to the extreme. Rather than hiding in the subtext we get literally hit in the face with hybridity on virtually every single page.

The situation is that two Germans, an architect and a businesswoman, come to Otter Lake Reserve in central Ontario (interestingly, the home of Drew Hayden Taylor) to buy some land and build 'Ojibwayworld,' a theme park offering 'Indian-themed' rides, attractions and restaurants. In the acknowledgements to the book, Hayden Taylor addresses the German people in a teasing way:

I should thank all the German people out there who have a special place in their hearts for Winnitou (sic!) and all other Native related things. This is my special homage to you. (*Berlin*, 5)

In fact, the two visitors are presented as (stereo)typical Germans – cold, strict and efficient and are ridiculed on a regular basis for their romantic and naïve view on Native life, which is mostly based on Karl May stories:

ANGIE: Seems some important people are coming to town. Germans, I think. Remember the last time a busload of Germans came through, they bought the place out. Denise even sold them her dog, claiming it was a breed unique to the Ojibway people.

ANDREW: I remember that dog. It was a German Shepherd. (*Berlin*, 8)

Here, we again meet Angie and Andrew from *The Bootlegger Blues*. They have grown up, Andrew is working as a constable and Angie trying to make some money by selling ‘bucks skin scented shampoo’ and other souvenirs at a tourist shop. Angie hates that, thinking that she contributes to selling out her Native heritage but at the same time says that “reality makes hypocrites of us all” (*Berlin*, 9). And once again, we find hybridity in both their lives. In an environment dominated by white culture they are forced to adapt and make the best of both worlds.

Back to the Germans and their big plan as the centre of the play. They expose their own kind of hybridity when they start talking like Winnetou:

BIRGIT: I am Birgit Heinze and this is Reinhart Reinholz.

REINHART: I bring greetings from the Teutonic people. (*Berlin*, 15)

This is clearly a reference to Karl May and his romantic, imaginary view of N.A. Indians. By calling the Germans “Teutonic people,” Reinhart tries to associate with the Natives in the way he thinks is appropriate – the false image of Winnetou greeting other ‘Indians’ (mostly tanned white people with ridiculous headgear). In the Germans’ ideas of building a Native theme park there we can also observe the topic of the ‘vanishing Indian.’ It is more than obvious that they want to preserve the Native way of life (or, what their image of it is) before the ‘Indians’ ‘vanish’ by totally blending in with white culture. In their behaviour, these Germans also remind us of Summer from *Baby Blues* and *Buz’Gem Blues*, with the exception that only one of them is searching for his identity – Reinhart in the end stays on the reserve.

Where hybridity comes into play in the most obvious and outrageous way is when the Germans reveal their plans for the theme park which offers such attractions as a “Medicine Ferris Wheel,”

Four Directions shuttle service, Turtle Island Aquarium, Whiskeyjack Pub and Bar, hotel Haida-Way, Weesageechak Water Slide, Four-storey teepee video arcade, Wigwam cineplex, ILOP – the International Longhouse of Pancakes, the Okanagan Toboggan, the Shushwap Drop and Shop, the Lakota-palooza and Native themed t-shirts for \$19.99 (*Berlin*, 19, 21, 28).

These are only a few examples of how Hayden Taylor mixes Native and White culture to highly comic effect, much in the same way as we have seen in his earlier plays, by merging Native expressions with names of quintessentially colonial concepts. He does this to make us aware of and to explore the limits of cultural blending. As if that wasn't crazy enough, the plans take downright ridiculous forms, and, almost automatically, Trickster comes to mind since only he can come up with ideas like this one:

DONALDA: [...] What's this section marked Algonquin Park for?

REINHART: It will be just like Jurassic Park but with...

DONALDA: ...Native people. You're planning to clone extinct Native people?!

REINHART: No, no. Think animatronic Ojibways.

DONALDA: Wow. A.I. Artificial Indians. [...] (*Berlin*, 21-22)

Donalda, who works in the office for economic development at the band administration building, is sceptical at first but, like many others, gives in to the pressure the Germans put on her, buying her with money and the prospect of a lucrative job in 'Ojibway World.' This reveals the other big theme of the book – the sell-out of Native heritage, culture and identity. Much more pronounced and serious than in the other three plays, Hayden Taylor criticizes his own people for selling their identity for money. One character who is (at first) reluctant to the Germans' proposals is Trailer, whose real name is Fabian but who has lived in a shabby trailer all his life which is how he has come to his nickname. When he meets the Germans for the first time, he comes across as a poor but happy man who cooks his Kraft dinner in root beer because his water boiler has broken down. He, like the other Native characters, mocks the naïve Germans and offers them his Kraft dinner as "rare Ojibway delicacies" (*Berlin*, 31). Overall however, he is perhaps the most convincing, most down-to-earth character. About 15 years ago, he had a short romance with Donalda (whom he calls "Pretty Gal", her nickname from her teens) and still tries to hit on her in a way that reminds us of Trickster's 'romantic adventures':

ANDREW: Trailer, you've got to stop harassing her at work. At home. At the grocery store. At her gynaecologist's?

TRAILER: That one was accidental. I ... just ran into her there.

ANDREW: I know you're harmless, Trailer. She knows you're harmless. But really, you're beginning to leave the suburbs of the eccentric for a condo in Creepyville. (*Berlin*, 26)

TRAILER: [...] She loves me, she really does. I see it in her eyes every time she slams the door. (*Berlin*, 28)

Just like Trickster, he chases the females (without succeeding) but he doesn't take himself too seriously. However, the Germans finally buy him as well – just like they do with everyone else. The only difference between him and the others is that he only sells his trailer and himself under one condition – that they let him direct and produce “Dances with Wolves – the Musical”. Once again, he shows his Trickster nature – especially when everything goes horribly wrong, but more of that later. Andrew gets a job as the ‘chief of security’, Donalda becomes ‘Chief Cultural Advisor’ (note the use of the word ‘chief’) and wants to be called Pretty Gal now because the Germans like it. Thus, she even sells her name to the Germans who more and more seem like colonizers buying Native land for peanuts and turning the indigenous people into slaves. Even the notoriously rebellious Angie sells out after Andrew proposes to her with a brand-new ring he bought from his first pay check as ‘chief of security’ of ‘Ojibway World.’

In the second part of the play, we meet the characters again after one year of work. ‘Ojibway World’ is almost finished and the grand opening is near. The German plans become more and more megalomaniac when Reinhart reveals his latest creation, a giant dream catcher that is supposed to welcome people at the entrance:

REINHART: [...] it is forty-four meters, forty-four centimeters in diameter. [...]

DONALDA: Why forty-four meters, forty-four centimeters exactly? Some sort of architectural, drafting, blue-printy type of thing?

REINHART: No. It is to honour the number four that your people hold in such high esteem. The four directions. The four seasons. The four parts of the plant. The four races of man. [...]

DONALDA: Oh yeah. Of course. The number four.[...] (*Berlin*, 54)

Again, we find the theme of hybridity in the white person who knows more about North American Indian culture and mythology than the Native person. First introduced into the series by Summer in *Baby Blues*, this topic can be seen as a slight criticism of Hayden Taylor's own people who are forgetting their roots as well as of the romantic view many

white people have about Indian life. He is criticizing N.A. Indians who give in to cultural appropriation, the adoption of one group's culture by a different group, in this case clearly under the pressure of a North American society dominated by white people and their culture.

The major theme of the second part however is Trailer – his transformation into a stressed-out “on-the-edge theatrical producer” (*Berlin*, 56) and his Tricksterism. Without any of the other characters noticing, he goes over the edge with the preparations for his musical. He behaves like an eccentric director, speaking on his cell phone:

TRAILER: Jesus H!!! I can't believe you're doing this to me. This can't be happening! You're ruining me, dude! [...] For the last time, no friggin' mushrooms. If that pizza has one, solitary, piece of fungus sitting there surrounded by cheese, pepperoni and bacon, there will be lawsuits involved. (*Berlin*, 56)

Trailer, the only 100% Ojibway in the play, has become white, all his relaxed style, his poor but happy existence has been ‘poisoned’ by the Germans and their money. Nevertheless, the Trickster is still alive and well in him, mimicking the ‘wrong way’ like the educational character of old times, showing the other protagonists in the play how NOT to do it. Thus, the mischief he is creating slowly leads to disaster. For his show, Trailer comes up with an insane idea and tells Donalda about his latest problems with his actors:

TRAILER: Ah, the scared little actors are afraid of the buffalo.

DONALDA: What buffalo?

TRAILER: For the buffalo stampede. It'll be great. I've got practically every working unionized buffalo signed up for the production. [...] (*Berlin*, 57)

More and more, Trickster works his destructive magic – speaking with animals and using them for his plans. Interestingly, the other characters are so involved in their own problems that they don't see the catastrophe coming. Andrew is arguing with Angie who has changed her mind and set up a one-woman blockade on the street leading to ‘Ojibway World.’ She is livid with the way everybody (including her) has sold out to the Germans and wants to make the best of a bad job. For the moment however, she is alone in her fight but she soon finds a fellow mind:

DONALDA: Hey Angie.

ANGIE: Hey Pretty Gal. (Pause). Did the Germans send you? Am I Poland? [...]

ANGIE: [...] Hey Pretty Gal, why don't you join me? Ojibway World is not the world of the Ojibways. It's some genetically modified, bastardized, hybrid, freak show. [...]

DONALDA: Angie, I renounce Ojibway World!

ANGIE: That's fabulous, Pretty Gal!

DONALDA: No. My name is Donalda. (*Berlin*, 61-62)

Slowly, the protagonists start seeing their mistake and try to save their heritage. Only Trailer/Trickster is still energetic about his 'Dances with Wolves Musical.' He makes phone call after phone call to get more and more buffalo for the great stampede scene. But when he finally reaches a number he considers fitting, a problem appears. The animals seem to dislike him; nature seems to punish Trailer for turning his back on it:

BIRGIT: They are noble but dumb animals. Don't take it personally.

TRAILER: Seriously. The buffalo don't like me. And as an Aboriginal person, that can't be a good sign. I don't mind being ignored by moose, or snubbed by deer. But buffalo...? (*Berlin*, 66)

Trickster's own plans are starting to go wrong – a classic theme of Trickster stories. In his role as creator, Trailer has created the show but he also is a destroyer. Thus, he destroys his own creation by not thinking of the consequences of his idiotic plans, and no-one notices the slow build-up of disaster; no-one stops this lunatic. Being totally ignorant of 'real' Aboriginal culture, Birgit is also blind to what happens and wants to push the park, her 'legacy,' through by all means:

REINHART: Perfection is a difficult state to reach.

BIRGIT: Then put some effort in it. I will have perfection. Mark my words. (*Berlin*, 75)

All her new-age attitude is gone; Hayden Taylor reveals her true nature as a stereotypical 'evil' German - tyrannical, self-cantered, obsessed with (racial?) perfection, including more than just a hint of Nazism. She even has Andrew arrest his own wife Angie, which obviously brings great trouble to his relationship with her. But in the end, Andrew quits his job when she commands him to do something about the disaster that has just happened.

TRAILER: Run! Run! For the love of God, run! [...]

BIRGIT: What's wrong? Calm down. [...]

TRAILER: They're free, you crazy German! They're running amok! Amok I tell you! (*Berlin*, 84)

Trailer's buffalo break out and wreck havoc in the park, trampling everything to pieces. This marks the climax of the book, the event that Trickster has brought upon them. It destroys what has been done wrong and prepares the ground for something new (hence Trickster as creator). Trickster himself however, loses everything he has struggled for. Not only do the buffalo destroy Trailer's trailer and new VW Passat, the Germans also refuse to give him his paycheque. But the other Native characters stick together after witnessing Trailer's failure – here we can see the educational purpose of Trickster stories – telling people how or rather how not to live. They get rid of Birgit by threatening her with lawsuits and decide to build something smaller, more unique on what's left with the help of Reinhart.

To sum up, this play is quite different from the first three in the Blues Quartet. The others play on the theme of cultural hybridity yet employ a humoristic but comparably subtle approach to the subject. *The Berlin Blues*, however, is a non-stop thrill ride that exaggerates hybridity in such extreme ways that it is sometimes overwhelming, especially in the second part. On the other hand, it is the only one that puts a serious issue at the core of the story – together with hybridity, the sell-out of Native values and heritage to foreign investors is Hayden Taylor's major concern. It is also the only one that features an identifiable Trickster and a Trickster story – the destruction of something bad by Trickster to build something new upon it. And as is customary with Trickster stories, Hayden Taylor leaves this one uninterpreted and us with the job of giving it meaning. Thus, he 'teaches' us in the method of his people and tries to make us think about the problems of Native communities.

All in all, the Blues Quartet is a highly enjoyable read; it doesn't condemn the white reader but rather raises awareness of how modern N.A. Indians live, what their problems are and about the fact that their culture today is so intensely mixed with its western counterpart that classic distinctions are rebutted by reality.

7. The Humour of Tomson Highway

As mentioned before, Drew Hayden Taylor owes a good part of his success to another North American Indian writer, Tomson Highway. Contrary to Hayden Taylor, Highway is ‘100%’ North American Indian who grew up “on his father’s trap-line on a remote island on Maria Lake away up in northern Manitoba, [...] in a tent, like all his brothers and sisters [...] on December 6, 1951” (*Rez Sisters*, vi).

Highway was forced into a residential school together with his brother René by the government, an experience he later translated into his work. There, he also had to denounce his first language Cree and learn English. However, Cree has remained his mother tongue and has contributed to a large extent to “his unusual dramatic style.” Denis Johnston identifies three qualities of the Cree language that have influenced Highway’s work: its humorous nature, its visceral nature in the “sense that bodily functions are discussed openly and casually,” and the fact that Cree words have no gender (Johnston, 254). In fact, Highway plays quite significantly on bodily functions just as he does on gender roles in his two most famous plays which feature just one male and just one female character respectively, always played by Nanabush, the Trickster.

In high school, Tomson Highway became a highly skilled concert pianist; afterwards he went to university to study English and music. Instead of following this path, however, he decided to spend the next few years working “with various Native support organizations” (Johnston, 254), with “Native people on reserves, in friendship centres, in prisons, on the streets and in the bars” (*Rez Sisters*, viii). He incorporated the experiences he gained during that time into his work when he started writing plays. Johnston explains that

in less than three years [...] Highway has joined a select group of playwrights whose new plays [...] are treated as significant cultural events by Canadian critics, scholars, and audiences (Johnston, 254)

by publishing two highly significant plays in a short period of time: *The Rez Sisters* in 1988 and *Dry Lips Oughta Move to Kapuskasing* in 1989. Following these two award-winning plays, he also wrote the novel *Kiss of the Fur Queen* (1998) and a number of other plays and short stories.

Tomson Highway's work differs from Drew Hayden Taylor's very significantly, especially when it comes to humour. Hayden Taylor makes use of sitcom conventions, exaggerated characters and situations, funny one-liners that make fun of colonial and Native cultures, and so-called "laughs in the lexicon," hybrid word constructions that represent the problems of hybridisation among young N.A. Indians. Where Hayden Taylor uses self-deprecatory jokes with relatively few hidden messages, most of Highway's humour is much less obvious; it is dark, lingering in the shadows, predominantly working on a sub-textual, mythological level. Unlike Hayden Taylor's, his jokes are not very easily accessible and require much thinking and interpretation. He uses slapstick situations, mockery and mimicry, most often staged by the ambiguous character of Trickster but his situations always carry a dark element. However, Highway's humour doesn't exceptionally often surface on the language level, but rather in what Raskin calls "the basic semantic opposition" between "real and unreal or between actual and non-actual" (Raskin quoted in Mulkay, 41-42), as I will show in my detailed analysis of his work. He "delights in linguistic estrangements and paradoxes" (Johnston, 266). His goal is to "make 'the rez' cool, to show and celebrate what a funky folk Canada's Indian people really are" (*Rez Sisters*, ix). This sounds very similar to Drew Hayden Taylor's intentions, yet Highway uses much more subtle techniques that sometimes leave white audiences struggling to understand his humour.

7.1 The Rez Sisters (1988)

Tomson Highway's first major play won the Dora Mavor Moore Award for "best play produced in Toronto" in the 1986-87 season and is set on the imaginary Indian reserve Wasaychigan Hill on Manitoulin Island in northern Ontario. The cast of characters can be confusing at first as it consists of no less than six sisters and half-sisters, all women living on the reserve, struggling with their own little problems. The only male character is Nanabush, the Trickster, who appears in different guises such as Seagull, Nighthawk and Bingo Master. And then there is the mentally disabled Zhaboonigan Peterson, one of only two characters who can actually see Nanabush when he appears on stage.

But back to the 'Rez Sisters:' The play begins with Pelajia Patchnose sitting alone on the roof of her house, nailing shingles to it. She and her sister Philomena Moosetail chat about the problems in their lives and on the reserve, dreaming about leaving the reserve. When

Philomena “tickles Pelajia on the breasts” and utters “chiga, chiga, chiga” sounds (*Rez Sisters*, 3-4), mocking her sister’s rapid aging, Highway gives us a taste of the typical teasing humour of N.A. Indians, where body parts very often play a major role.

Soon, the women begin talking about bingo, dreaming about winning “THE BIGGEST BINGO IN THE WORLD,” which is allegedly happening in Toronto soon. The name of this event is always written in capital letters, mimicking and therefore ridiculing the megalomania of colonial consumer society by satirically giving it the “effect of an advertising slogan while simultaneously suggesting that the bingo represents something beyond itself” (Hammil, 49), which it indeed does as I will show later on. When their half-sister Annie Cook joins them, they get even more carried away by talking about who won how much in previous events and what they will do when they win the big prize. Here, we can first encounter Highway’s great gift of creating a structure that is in itself humorous. He uses a “tension between [...] two cultural traditions.” The “Euro-Christian dramatic form” he learned in high school and university with its “linear elements” that manifests in the women, “becoming lost by stubbornly following a straight line while circular (Native techniques) signal regeneration” (Johnston, 255). The line the women follow is the desire for western culture consumer items, as Philomena’s:

PHILOMENA:

I’m gonna go to every bingo and I’m gonna hit every jackpot between here and Espanola and I’m gonna buy me that toilet I’m dreaming about at night... big and wide and very white. (*Rez Sisters*, 5)

Philomena not only has desires that are hardly very ‘Indian.’ Highway also expresses his critique on N.A. Indians’ desire for (white culture) consumer items by calling the toilet “very white.” Then there is Philomena’s bowel problem which is the main reason for her desire. Highway’s mother tongue of Cree shows its visceral nature in her being teased by her sisters about her frequent visits to the toilet. But they don’t have much ‘nobler’ desires. Veronique St. Pierre, sister-in-law of all other women, wants to “go shopping for a brand-new stove [...] at Eaton Centre [in Toronto],” Annie Cook desires to go “to every record store in Toronto [buying] every single one of Patsy Cline’s records” (*Rez Sisters*, 35-36), and Pelajia wants to “build [herself] a nice paved road” since she thinks that Nanabush will only return to them if he found a nice paved road to dance on (*Rez Sisters*, 8). The only woman who has a seemingly ‘Indian’ desire is Marie-Adele Starblanket, half-sister of Philomena and Pelajia.

She takes care of Zhaboonigan and is the second character that can see and talk to Nanabush. She wants to use the money to buy herself and Zhaboonigan an island “in the North Channel [...] – the most beautiful island in the world [with] lots of trees and [...] sweetgrass” (*Rez Sisters*, 36). As Faye Hammil puts it, “she alone desires a lifestyle more akin to the traditional Aboriginal existence” (Hammil 51), which explains why she is one of two characters who can see Nanabush, symbolizing her closer relationship with traditional life when compared to the other women who have ‘lost’ contact with their heritage.

The women have a hilarious slapstick argument at a general store, throwing insults at each other in a circular manner until no-one remembers what they are actually fighting about. Philomena is sitting on the John, whose door is frequently open to give her a chance to chime in the grotesque struggle. This scene represents the circular, ‘Tricksterish’ and traditional Native elements of the play, since no obvious linear line is followed. The ‘structural’ humour of this play is revisited when the women ‘march’ to the band office to demand money for their trip to “THE BIGGEST BINGO IN THE WORLD” in Toronto. Again, their blind and stubborn struggle for money is exemplified by this “oddball delegation” (Johnston, 256). During this scene, the women are followed by Nanabush in the guise of a male dancer, “playing tricks and mimicking their movements” (Horne, 135). In his role as mimic and impersonator, Trickster “creates the illusion that he/she is the target in order to critique the actual target audience, and translate it through laughter” (Horne, 135). In this case, there is no doubt that Highway comically uses Trickster to stress the women’s boorish behaviour of struggling for money and consumer items. But there is more to it. After being rejected by the chief, the women take action in a funny collage and raise the money for the trip to Toronto. Nanabush is having “a holiday, particularly with Marie-Adele’s lines of laundry” (*Rez Sisters*, 70), watching the women working, playing tricks on them and mimicking them. The montage itself is also full of mockery slapstick humour which strengthens the grotesque nature of the scene. There are seven drum beats during this scene, every beat increasing the women’s efforts:

Beat six.

Emily goes to cash register and tallies their earnings; she works the register with tremendous speed and efficiency all this beat. [...] Philomena sticks a sign in beer bottles: World’s Biggest Bottle Drive. She now has five babies attached to her. Veronique sticks a sign on her table: World’s Biggest Bake Sale. (*Rez Sisters*, 73)

It seems like all women are doing jobs usually associated with white North American high school kids to raise the money, perhaps a critique of ancient beliefs that saw N.A. Indians as not more advanced than infants. Philomena has one or two babies more attached to her with every other beat as she is raising money baby-sitting; the other ones are selling cakes or beverages. Once again, Highway makes fun of colonial culture's obsession with staging "The Biggest..." of everything. Interestingly, the number seven, represented by the seven women and the seven drumbeats, has high significance, as Dee Horne explains. The shamans of old foresaw the liberation of the North American Indians in the seventh generation after Columbus' arrival. Therefore, Trickster not only mocks the women when mimicking them on the way to the band office, but also "symbolize(s) the seventh generation in which American Indians are liberated;" he is a "comic sign of American Indian cultures and of liberation," for the women's generation is in fact the seventh one. (Horne, 135)

Eventually, the women get the money for the trip together and set off to Toronto. Perhaps the funniest scene of the whole play and a great revelation for the women follows at "THE BIGGEST BINGO IN THE WORLD." There, the women meet Nanabush in the guise of the Bingo Master and suddenly all of them can see him as he "becomes associated with the women's deepest desires" (Hammil, 51). When Nanabush enters the stage as the Bingo Master, "the lights come on full blast:"

The Bingo Master – the most beautiful man in the world – comes running up centre aisle, cordless mike in hand, dressed to kill: tails, rhinestones, and all. The entire theatre is now the bingo palace

BINGO MASTER:

Tonight, ladies and gentlemen, you will be witness to events of such gargantuan proportions, such cataclysmic ramifications, such masterly and magnificent manifestations that your minds will reel, your eyes will nictitate, and your hearts will palpitate erratically. [...] you will see the biggest, yes ladies and gentlemen, the very biggest prizes ever known to man, woman, beast, or appliance. (*Rez Sisters*, 100-101)

In his guise as Bingo Master, through his appearance and shameless mimicry, Nanabush "parodies settler society and its emphasis on consumerism, media (talk shows), and materialism" (Horne, 133) and predicts something big that is about to happen – hence Trickster's role as creator/destroyer.

And indeed something big is happening, but it is not that the women win the big jackpot and fulfil their desires. They lose all their money and, livid about their bad luck in the game, the women storm the stage “attacking the bingo machine and throwing the Bingo Master out of the way” (*Rez Sisters*, 103). In this scene, Highway also satirically “exposes the savagery of Christianity and its civilizing mission” (Horne, 133), when Zhaboonigan shows up “behind the Bingo Master, where a long table has magically appeared with [her] at the table’s centre banging a crucifix [...] the scene is lit so that it looks like ‘The Last Supper’” (*Rez Sisters*, 102). But this is not the only significant metaphor in the scene and the second one is not funny at all. As we have learned earlier in the play, Zhaboonigan has been raped by four white boys with a screwdriver. In this scene, with the help of Nanabush, she attempts to relieve this pain.

The real significance of this last scene is the women’s liberation. Through the whole play we have gradually discovered that Marie-Adele is suffering from inoperable cancer. When Nanabush dances away with her into the spirit world on stage the women learn that “in Nanabush’s world, preparation for death involves [...] a willingness to accept ironic coincidence” (Perkins, 266). Marie-Adele’s relative calmness when facing her own death thus leads the women to accept their own fate and give up their struggle for money. Through their “interaction with each other and with Nanabush,” they “realize their own liberation” (Horne, 136). Trickster has fulfilled his role as creator. Through destroying one of them, he has cleared the ground for something new, for liberation, and all the women “have undergone transformations, now accept[ing] their lives.” (Horne, 136) Here, the circular element of the play shows. It ends with Philomena and Pelajia being on the former’s roof again, just like at the beginning of the play. They speak of the problems on the reserve again and of Philomena’s new toilet since she is the only one who actually won something at the bingo. Thus,

the cycle ends where it began, but on a much more optimistic note as Nanabush dances ‘merrily and triumphantly’ in the background. (Gilbert, 329)

The women accept their fate now; we are assured that Nanabush is still with them and that there is hope for the future.

Though not outrageously funny, there is no doubt that this play inherits a fair number of humorous elements even though they are hidden and sometimes carry a very serious or even dark notion. The funniest element clearly is the women’s stubborn pursuit of western culture values, mimicked and undermined by Trickster’s unsettling interventions, representing the

two traditions that have influenced Highway's writing – the Euro-Christian and N.A. Indian ones. In the end, Trickster triumphs and works as a “catalyst for others' empowerment” (Horne, 127). He “foregrounds the agency of American Indians and subverts colonial efforts to disempower them” (Horne, 129). In this case, it means freeing the women from their (colonial) desires and bringing them closer to their culture.

7.2 Dry Lips Oughta Move to Kapuskasing (1989)

Just like *Rez Sisters*, Highway's second famous play is also set on Wasyachigan Hill Reserve on Manitoulin Island. In fact, it is some kind of ‘mirror’ counterpart of the first play; it is “intended as a ‘flip side’ sequel to *The Rez Sisters*” (Johnston, 260). Pretty much everything is turned around – instead of seven women, we meet seven men, Nanabush is shown only in female guise, and the tragic figure is a boy suffering from fetal alcohol syndrome rather than a mentally disabled girl traumatized by sexual abuse.

The stage is set on two different levels, the realm of the ‘real’ human characters and above them the level of Nanabush. However, the “apparent dichotomy between the two levels [...] is not clear cut” (Horne, 132). Regularly, Nanabush enters the realm of the reserve to play tricks on the men or to mimic them. First, we encounter her when we see Zachary Jeremiah Keechigeesik lying on a couch, naked. Nanabush, in the guise of Gazelle Nataways, with whom Zachary is cheating on his wife, appears behind the couch,

reaches under Zachary's sleeping head, from where she gently pulls a gigantic pair of false, rubberized breasts. She proceeds to put these on over her own bare breasts. [...] Pleasurably and mischievously, she leans over and plants a kiss on Zachary's bum. [...] Then Nanabush/Gazelle exits, to sit on her perch on the upper level of the set. (*Dry Lips*, 15-16)

This is the first scene where we see Nanabush wearing false and ridiculously large rubberized breasts or bums. In doing so, she mimics and “embodies what the men both fear and desire,” female power. As we will find out later, the men on the reserve have adopted to (Christian) settler society's sexism and “patriarchal values” (Horne, 133), fearing that the women might break out of their oppression.

Nanabush not only mimics the men's anxieties, but also sets in motion a set of events by sleeping with Zachary. Not only does Nanabush threaten Zachary's marriage, but she is also

risking Gazelle's relationship, since Gazelle Nataways is in fact, Big Joey's girlfriend. That very Big Joey, the 'Reserve stud,' finds Zachary in his own house after the 'act'. Together with his friend Creature Nataways (Gazelle's ex-husband) they surprise Zachary and take his pants from him, playing with the poor naked man in a slapstick manner, teasing the man in traditional style:

CREATURE:

Here doggy, doggy. Here poochie, poochie woof woof! Zachary grabs the pants. **They rip almost completely in half. Creature yelps. Yip! Momentary light up on Nanabush/Gazelle, up on her perch, as she gives a throaty laugh.** (*Dry Lips*, 19)²³

Nanabush is obviously happy about the chaos she created, laughing at Zachary's misfortune. For most of the rest of the play, Zachary runs around with his pants torn apart, looking for something else to wear – one of many symbols for the loss of the men's identity as N.A. Indians.

Most of the humour in the play results from the formation of a female hockey team, however. The 'Wasy Wailerettes' in which almost all women on the reserve play, threaten the men who think the world has gone mad. More signs for this can be found in the "inversion of stereotyped gender roles" (Horne, 132) in the play. Spooky Lacroix, an ex-alcoholic and drug addict turned preacher (a case of successful cultural appropriation), is constantly knitting shoes for the baby his wife is expecting:

Spooky is knitting (pale blue baby booties). A bible sits on the table to the left of Spooky, a knitting pattern to his right. The place is covered with knitted doodads: Knitted doilies, tea cosy, a tacky picture of 'The Last Supper' with knitted frame and, on the wall, as subtly conspicuous as possible, a crucifix with pale blue knitted baby booties covering each of its four extremities. [...] He knits with [...] great concentration [...], getting the bible and the knitting pattern mixed up with each other. (*Dry Lips*, 36)

Highway comically inverts traditional (settler) stereotypes and gender roles to highlight the men's wrong-doing; he "critiques the psychology of those American Indian men who have adopted patriarchal colonial values" (Horne, 132). At the same time, he mocks Christianity being imposed onto the N.A. Indians, when Spooky mixes his knitting patterns up with the bible. In another example of inverted stereotypes, Zachary is experimenting with baking

²³ Note: On grounds of authenticity, all quotations in this chapter are in bold print if they appear likewise in the original text.

recipes to prepare for the bakery he wants to open soon. Pierre St. Pierre, another friend of the men, has been 'forced' by his wife to be the referee for the team. Interestingly, Nanabush always disappears from the upper level when Pierre enters. This could be seen as a sign that Pierre in fact is another manifestation of Nanabush. He is also responsible for spreading the news about the hockey team to all his male friends, thus creating a disturbance that would later resolve in a big revelation – another traditional 'job' of Trickster.

But Nanabush herself makes fun of the men's sexism by wearing oversized breasts, bellies and bums – a sign of settler society's focus on (female) sexuality. This mockery shows when she causes the Marilyn Monroe poster in Big Joey's kitchen to fart:

Split seconds before complete black-out, Marilyn Monroe farts, courtesy of Ms. Nanabush: a little flag reading 'poot' pops up out of Ms. Monroe's derriere, as on a play gun. We hear a cute little 'poot' sound. (*Dry Lips*, 107)

Significantly, this happens only moments after Dickie Bird tries to kill himself. Nanabush thus "deflates the grim moment" (Wassermann, 40) with her humour. However, more tragic events are to follow which Nanabush partly causes and tries to ease by making jokes.

Coming back to the men and their struggles, we find that Simon Starblanket, a young man who repeatedly wishes for Native 'spirit' to come back to them, is the only man who has no problem with the women's hockey team. On the contrary, he is even cheering them on in their first game. Significantly, he is also one of only two characters who can see Nanabush, together with Dickie Bird Halked, a 17-year-old boy suffering from fetal alcohol syndrome. These two characters obviously mirror Marie-Adele and Zhaboonigan from *Rez Sisters* and their fate is similar. Unsettled by the women's aspirations the men sense that "apocalyptic changes" may be "lurking over the horizon" (Johnston, 260). Dickie Bird Halked is searching for the real identity of his father, another symbol of N.A. Indians searching for identity, apart from referring to the history of stolen children. He finds out that it was Big Joey who impregnated his mother and left her alone, watching her almost drinking herself to death together with his friends. Simon repeatedly urges the men to tell the truth and to face their guilt but without much success. In a bizarre twist of events, Dickie Bird rapes Nanabush/Patsy Pegahmagahbow, Simon's fiancée, with a crucifix. Simon sets off to avenge his girl and kill Dickie Bird after having a grotesque game of Simon-says with Nanabush/Patsy in which the Trickster character makes fun of the English language that was forcefully imposed onto the

N.A. ‘Indians in the past by mimicking the kind of ‘baby-talk’ ignorant white people often employ when talking to people whose English is not entirely perfect:

SIMON:

...weetha (‘him/her’ – i.e., no gender) ... Christ! What is it? Him? Her? Stupid fucking language, fuck you, da Englesa. Me no speakum no more da goodie Englesa, in Cree we say ‘weetha’, not ‘him’ or ‘her’ Nanabush, come back! [...] Aw, boozhoo how are ya? Me good. Me berry, berry good. I seen you! I just seen you jumping jack-ass thisa away...

NANABUSH/PATSY:

As though she/he were playing games behind Simon’s back.

... and thataway

SIMON:

... and thisaway and ... (*Dry Lips*, 110-111)

Simon and Nanabush have an argument over whether Nanabush is male (as Simon thinks) or female (as Nanabush wants to be defined as). Simon “realizes that the problem lies in English, and the gender distinctions that exist in the language.” Their following discourse of “thisaway” and “thataway” comically “parodies the binary thinking underlying much of colonial language and discourse” (Horne, 135).

Simon continues to hunt Dickie Bird down to get his revenge. In an instant of black humour, however, he dies for the sins of his friends when Zachary wants to take his gun off him. Simon has already given in and is about to leave with Zachary when Nanabush intervenes and causes a tragedy in a slapstick manner:

The shimmering movements of the bustle balloon out into these magical, dance-like arches, as Nanabush/Patsy manoeuvres it directly in front of Simon, hiding him momentarily. Behind this, Simon drops the bank of the rifle to the ground, causing it to go off accidentally. The bullet hits Simon in the stomach. (*Dry Lips*, 115)

Jerry Wassermann calls this “classic Trickster cosmology – part tragic irony, part dirty rotten trick” (Wassermann, 39) as Trickster indirectly causes Simon to drop the gun and shoot himself. In another mix of Christianity and N.A. Indian mythology, Simon takes the role of Jesus Christ, dying for the sins of the men who watched Dickie Bird’s mother drinking herself senseless during her pregnancy. On sight of his dead friend, Zachary yells at God:

ZACHARY:

Aieeeeeee-Lord! God! God of the Indian! God of the Whiteman! God-Al-fucking-mighty. Whatever the fuck your name is. Why are you doing this to us? (*Dry Lips*, 116)

Nanabush comically responds to this, mocking Christianity, “parodying settler society and its concept of a patriarchal Christian God” when she appears on her level after Zachary witnessed the tragedy:

She is sitting on a toilet having a good shit. He/She is dressed in an old man’s white beard and whig, but also wearing sexy, elegant women’s high-heeled pumps. Surrounded by white, puffy clouds, she/he sits with her legs crossed, nonchalantly filing his/her fingernails. (*Dry Lips*, 117)

Obviously parodying the traditional Christian god of the old testament by wearing sexy clothes along with a white beard, Nanabush mixes Christian mythology with Native mythology, one that doesn’t take itself as seriously as the other one. She is “neither good nor bad, but playfully nonchalant,” she does not give Zachary a clear answer to his question but wants him to find his own, as in traditional educational storytelling. As Dee Horne explains, Nanabush is

not the agent of change. These men, not settlers, are the agents of their actions and transformations [...] Nanabush is a catalyst, perhaps, but only to those who seek direction. (Horne, 136)

Just like the death of Marie-Adele in *Rez Sisters*, Simon’s death makes the men change their lives; Big Joey, for example, accepts his son Dickie Bird. However, as we find out in the very last scene, everything might just have been a dream Zachary has dreamt when he passed out on his own couch. Everything is well, for Zachary at least. He is with his wife; they seem very harmonious; the ‘threat’ of the women playing hockey is gone:

ZACHARY: To Hera [his wife]

Hey, cup-cake. You ever think of playing hockey?

HERA:

Yeah, right. That’s all I need is a flying puck right in the left tit, nee...

But stops to speculate.

...hockey, hmmm.... (*Dry Lips*, 129)

This end leaves the audience puzzled. On the one hand, one is relieved that the tragedy around Dickie Bird and Simon has never really happened; on the other hand, there is no clear revelation as in *Rez Sisters*. “There is no women’s hockey team, no death, no consequences to the ‘stupid life’ the men have been leading. Or are there?” (Johnston, 263). Indeed, it is not clear if any change has happened. The play ends in a circle, with Zachary’s wife kissing him on his bum just like Nanabush/Gazelle Nataways did in the beginning. “On another level,” however, “the circle is ongoing,” when Zachary “lifts his infant daughter, who symbolizes the next generation, into the air” (Horne, 137), a sign of a good future.

Very much like *Rez Sisters*, this play is not extremely funny, and in some sequences the humour is violently overshadowed by tragedy and pain. On the other hand, the circular structure, the open ending, and “the mere presence of Nanabush” tell us that the play tries to “move beyond realism” (Gilbert, 392). Underlining this view is the fact that the play is set on two levels with Nanabush constantly disrupting the events on the reserve. Nothing is certain when Nanabush shows up,

Dreams and visions are real, past-present-future exists simultaneously in a holotropic time, and Nanabush has never left. (Horne, 137)

The only thing we can be sure of in the end of the play is that “Zachary is not the same person that he was at the beginning of the play and neither are we, thanks to Nanabush” (Horne, 137).

7.3 Kiss of the Fur Queen (1998)

Highway’s only novel to date tells the story of two young Cree brothers from their birth in the snow of northern Manitoba until the death of one of them in a hospital in Toronto. It concentrates on the boys’ traumatic experience in a residential school run by the Catholic Church. Sam McKegney argues that these schools “acted as a weapon in a calculated attack on Indigenous cultures, seeking to [...] compel its inmates into assimilation” (McKegney, 79). But the story begins with their father having a vision of a certain ‘Fur Queen’ while racing the last few miles of his most important dogsled race yet. With her help he miraculously overhauls his last three opponents and receives his trophy together with a kiss from this angelic figure in the guise of a Beauty Queen dressed in bright white fox hide. This woman is no-one else but Trickster who watches his family’s life throughout the whole book, indirectly

helping them in their greatest struggles and even bringing their children into this world. When Champion Okimasis is born to his parents Abraham and Mariesis somewhere in the vicinity of Mistik Lake, Manitoba, the Fur Queen literally drops him from the sky into a thick snow bank in what seems like a slapstick performance:

Poof! He went on his bum, smack into the most exquisite mound of snow in the entire forest, making crystals of silver spray shoot up to join the stars. He disappeared into the mound and would have stayed down there indefinitely if it hadn't been for his bouncy baby flesh and his supple newborn bones. [...] And the baby boy came shooting out of the mound of snow in two seconds flat and landed on his feet, right beside a small spruce tree that happened to be sleeping there. Bang! The baby tripped, falling flat on his face, with a shriek more of surprise than of pain, in front of a cave. Growling like an ill-tempered bitch, a large, hairy animal lumbered out of the cave [...] and gave him a swift kick in the bum. The baby yelped, jumped up, and dashed away from the cave [...] bumped into a rabbit, who took pity on him, [...] slipped off his coat and wrapped it around the child's shivering, plump midsection. The [...] infant made his gratitude clear to the rabbit, who turned out to be a writer of lyric rabbit poetry. (*Fur Queen*, 19-20)

This story which is told over and over again to the boys by the age-old midwife Little Seagull Ovary and represents traditional mythology in all its swift imagination and humour. But it also shows the great influence of settler culture on the N.A. Indians in even the remotest areas in the rabbit poet, poetry being a concept that was unheard of in traditional storytelling. This is underlined when Little Seagull Ovary later tells the boys that the bear in the story was a "bear actor" who, due to the sudden appearance of the baby boy, "had missed a vital entrance cue," leading the audience to complain to the management which put the bear in "danger of fading into obscurity" (*Fur Queen*, 32). Although there are clear signs that the midwife had mixed the traditional stories up with settler culture elements, no danger results from this hybridity; the story still makes for splendid entertainment and causes no harm to the boys. They are still living a happy life, spending most of their time out in the wild among spruce trees and caribou with their father and their mother, a devoted Christian. Their contact with settler culture is confined to sporadic visits to the church in the nearby reserve where they have a humble cabin. When it comes to Christianity and its effect on Native life, Highway misses no chance to make fun of it. Shortly before we witness the birth of the second boy, Ooneemeto (baptized 'Gabriel' against the will of his Godmother), we see their pastor Father Bouchard being cross about his 'children' disobeying his orders and dancing on Sundays:

The priest in his study, a nail in one hand, a hammer in the other, poised to nail a brand-new crucifix into a wall. No good Catholic danced on Sundays. [...] His hammer came down, very hard, on his left thumb. (*Fur Queen*, 17)

This is not only a mockery of the conservative rules of the Church but also foreshadows the boy's future occupation of ballet dancer and his hatred of everything religious. *Kiss of the Fur Queen* is peppered with jokes on Christianity and Church, which functions as an instrument of healing, as I will explain later.

Knowing about Tomson Highway's own life, we begin to realize just a few pages into the book that it has strong autobiographical elements. Not only was he also born "on the trapline of his father" (*Rez Sisters*, vi) in the middle of nowhere in the far north of Canada; his father, too, was a famous dogsled racer and so were his brothers. When the brothers are sent away to residential school by their parents and Father Bouchard, it becomes clear that Highway is transforming his own experiences into words.

The first who is sent away is Champion who is now only called by his baptized name of Jeremiah. He doesn't speak a word of English and finds this new language rather funny, sounding "like the putt-putt-putt of Happy Doll Magipom's pathetic three-horsepower outboard motor" (*Fur Queen*, 52). Highway here parodies the sad custom of imposing English onto the N.A. Indians and prohibiting them to speak their own language. In fact, Jeremiah is encouraged by the pastor of the school, Father Lafleur, to report any Cree boy speaking their mother tongue so that they could be punished. The reader witnesses much of what is going on in the school through the eyes of innocent seven-year-old Jeremiah Okimasis; which leads to many funny moments, especially when we read what the boy makes of his religious indoctrination:

Heaven had a substantial population of beautiful blond men with feathery wings and flowing white dresses [who were escorting] people from their graves beneath the earth to one side of an ornate golden chair on which sat an old, bearded man. Among the people rising from these graves to heaven, Champion-Jeremiah tried to spot one Indian person but could not. [He] peered at the image of God and though he looked rather like Kookoos Cook dressed up as Santa Claus [...]. Hell looked more engaging. [...] At the ends of the seven tributaries were dank-looking flame-lined caves where dark-skinned people sat. Aha! This is where the Indians are, thought Champion-Jeremiah, relieved that they were accounted for on this great chart. These people revelled shamelessly in various fun-looking activities. One cave featured men sitting at a table feasting lustily on gigantic piles of food. [...] In another, people lay around completely idle, sleeping, doing absolutely

nothing. There appeared to be no end to the imagination with which these brown people took their pleasure. (*Fur Queen*, 59-61)

Again, Highway refreshingly parodies Christianity and shows how ridiculous its stories and beliefs must have seemed to the N.A. Indians who were brought up with an entirely different set of myths. He also mocks Christianity's (and settler culture's) dividing everything into good and bad, black and white, heaven and hell, as opposed to multi-layered Native mythology which is never clear-cut and, contrary to Christianity, encourages its followers to think for themselves.

When his brother Gabriel joins him at the school, however, the fun time they have is overshadowed by Father Lafleur's sexual assaults on Gabriel. The Trickster watches all this from a photograph their father had given them in which he is kissed by the Fur Queen in 1951 for winning the world championship. When Father Lafleur walks by Gabriel's table one night, "the semi-darkness, the moon, playing her usual tricks on glassy surface, made the Fur Queen wink" (*Fur Queen*, 74). Trickster is still with them, mocking the pervert's wrong-doings, assuring him that the boys' spirit is not broken yet.

During their time in residential school, and later in high school, Jeremiah and Gabriel develop likings for piano playing and ballet, respectively. They move to Winnipeg and pursue their careers. Jeremiah has become a devoted Christian, who dreams of suffering Jesus Christ's wounds and has no sexual drive whatsoever because, as the reader finds out towards the end of the book, he was also raped by Father Lafleur.²⁴ The rest of Gabriel's life is shaped by his ballet dancing and homosexual activities. Jeremiah, meanwhile, is concentrating on his career as a concert pianist, which is another autobiographical bit of the book for Highway pursued the same career earlier in his life.

The brothers only seldom visit the reserve which steadily goes down the drain. Alcoholism and violence spread, and their parents and others are being moved to new plywood houses with "walls so thin a man could hear his neighbour fart and chip off the ice on February mornings" (*Fur Queen*, 111). In an attempt to heal this painful process of relocation through humour, Highway installs a bizarrely funny scene:

²⁴ This, I find highly controversial. Gabriel has (so the book likes to tell us), because of being raped by the priest, become a homosexual and sells his body in the run-down areas of town, unbeknownst by his brother. Today, we know that people are either born heterosexual or homosexual. Therefore, I find Highway's assumption, one could become gay because he was raped by a member of one's own sex, questionable, to say the least.

Kookoos Cook's ancient brown couch was banging its way out the one-room cabin's splintery doorway as Slim Jim Magipom and Big Bag Maskimoot wheezed under its obstinate weight. For there was Kookoos Cook, plain as politics, perched on the top, his thighs crossed vise-like, trying to sip a steaming cup of coffee. (*Fur Queen*, 111)

Although being a hopeless drunk, Kookoos Cook still fights colonial oppression, exemplified by the attempt to control Native life – by executing passive resistance and showing great humour.

Jeremiah and Gabriel more and more distance themselves from their parents on the reserve and, thus, from traditional Native life, or what is left of it. They bathe in settler culture niceties like fancy clothes and fast food until they are almost completely absorbed (or appropriated), until they have almost become white. This is symbolized in a sequence where they feast on all kinds of different (settler culture) foods in the food court of a mall, telling each other a funny traditional story:

“Remember Aunt Black-eyed Susan's story,” [Jeremiah asked] “about the weasel's new fur coat?”

“You mean where Weesageechak comes down to Earth disguised as a Weasel [and] the Weasel crawls up the Weetigo's bumhole?” [answered Gabriel]

“Yes ...” Jeremiah, in spite of himself, exploded with jagged laughter. “In order to kill the horrible monster?” [...]

“Why did Weesageechak kill the Weetigo?” asked Gabriel [...]

“All I remember is that the Weetigo had to be killed because he ate people,” replied Jeremiah [...] “Weesageechak chewed the Weetigo's entrails to smithereens from the inside out.” (*Fur Queen*, 120)

The Weetigo (or ‘Wendigo’ in other stories) is a creature from Native mythology who eats people alive. The mall in this example represents the entrails of the Weetigo, a “mecca of consumerism,” ready to devour the Native boys and assimilate them into settler culture; it “suggests the implication of capitalist economics in the cultural rape of Indigenous people in Canada.” And like the Trickster Weesageechak in the story, the “brothers feast” on the entrails of the beast and thus become Trickster figures themselves. But unlike Weesageechak in the story, the brothers don't want to destroy the monster but become a part of it; they want to become “more Euro-Canadian” (McKegney, 84), in order to find their place in a society that negates their heritage.

There is a second element to this funny story, however. Through telling it to each other and laughing about it, the boys imagine Father Lafleur as the Weetigo and themselves as the Trickster who kills the monster from the inside out which is the lesson of the story. As mentioned before, the Weetigo feasts on human flesh

which renders it an appropriate symbolic tool for interrogating transgressions of the body by a Roman Catholic priest, particularly in light of the Eucharist. (McKegney, 86)

However, the boys are not ready to eat the beast from the inside out. They still punish themselves in an attempt to forget the traumatic events, not even humour is strong enough to alleviate this excruciating pain. Gabriel still pleases men for money, and Jeremiah denies himself any kind of happiness, especially contact to the opposite sex. Even when his classmate and Ojibway girl Amanda Clear Sky shows clear interest in him, he cannot allow himself to 'sin', so well did the religious indoctrination work on him.

In one scene where Gabriel tries to enter a gay bar for the first time at the age of fifteen, Highway uses the chance to make fun of the colonial institution of cowboy movies, parodying and thus undermining this deeply heterosexual, manly western concept that was responsible for so many stereotypes on N.A. Indians in the past:

Gabriel [...] pushed the door open. Instantly, he felt the change that took hold of the room. Even blind men would have sensed it. Chatter stopped, laughter went unfinished; cigarettes hung in midair, beer bottles went undrunk, whisky tumblers untouched. [...] Like a surplice of fine linen, a hundred eyes enveloped Gabriel. (*Fur Queen*, 166)

Obviously mocking settler culture's most beloved myth, that of the Cowboy and thus also the concept of the Hollywood Indian, Highway continues his humorous crusade on white culture's oppression of the N.A. Indians. This is underlined by the fact that the man whom he is about to meet there is called Wayne, an obvious reference to John Wayne, the 'Indian's' nemesis in countless stereotypical movies. When Gabriel watches the dance floor, he briefly meets a transvestite, clearly another manifestation of the shape-shifting Trickster.

Jeremiah has an unwelcome encounter with his heritage when he visits a powwow Amanda Clear Sky has invited him to. He is not able to express anything but mockery, seeing Amanda as the "Princess Pocahontas," again denying himself to connect with his heritage. Amanda's Ojibway Grandma gives him a good reminder of the traditional teasing humour of the elders:

“Oh, these Cree. [...] Sometimes I wish they were more like us lusty, enthusiastic, gung-ho Ojibway,” she bobbed at Jeremiah. “Don’t you?” (*Fur Queen*, 175)

He half-heartedly chimes in with Ann-Adele Ghost rider and has a funny dialogue with her about her Cree name “Poosees” (Pussy) in which she shows the self-deprecatory aspect of Native humour by asking “what in the name of Jesus Christ is poosees-like about me?” (*Fur Queen*, 174). Despite this moment, Jeremiah is still not ready to let anything into his heart – neither his heritage nor Amanda Clear Sky.

After a huge argument with his brother who finally finds out about his homosexuality, Gabriel moves to Toronto to live with his lover. Sitting on top of Jeremiah’s Yamaha piano, the Fur Queen watches them, smiling (*Fur Queen*, 208).

Jeremiah plays his biggest concert yet, competing with a number of other pianists from all over the world. As she did for his father before him, the Fur Queen helps him to victory but he suddenly realizes that winning the silver cup, that being appropriated by settler culture, does not help him. He tries to cut his fingers so that he can never play the piano again but is interrupted by a vision of Fur Queen/Trickster in the guise of two girls he has known and seen dead after having been raped in one of the side streets, saying “You make me so proud to be a fuckin’ Indian, you know that?” (*Fur Queen*, 216), making fun of him for being so full of self-pity, suggesting he should instead get to grips with his heritage and, by mimicking them, warning him of a fate similar to that of the murdered girls.

Just like Tomson Highway, who also gave up his career as a concert pianist, Jeremiah works for a Native support organization for the next years. When their father dies, however, he becomes a drunk, ready to give himself up completely. After drinking three days in a row, he passes out in the snow and has another encounter with Trickster in the guise of Marie Sees who makes cruel fun of him:

“Sometimes you humans just make me laugh.”

Jeremiah squinted. He had lost his glasses. [...] Like a curtain, the mist parted. And there, leaning against a grand piano made of ice, stood a torch-singing fox with fur so white it hurt the eyes. [...] Jeremiah rubbed his eyes. Had he died and stumbled into some freakish afterlife? “Who are you?” [...]

“Name’s Maggie, Maggie Sees. It used to be Fred but it bored the hell outta me so I changed.”

“Honeypot, the way you been suckin’ back that whisky the past three days, you’re bound to see a few things you never seen before. C’mon, gimme some o’that shit.” Jeremiah obliged. The fox tipped the bottle and, delicate as china, took a sip. (*Fur Queen*, 231-232)

The shape-shifting Trickster has come to mock his pathetic life and especially his alcoholism by parodying an ‘elegant’ style of drinking. At the same time, by calling him ‘honeypot’ she makes a reference to Gabriel’s and Jeremiah’s imagining Father Lafleur’s sperm as “dripping honey,” trying to ease their pain. She also informs Jeremiah about the reason for her visit:

“Why do you think I put on these faaabulous shows?”

“To entertain?”

“And why to entertain?”

“Well...”

“Because without entertainment, honeypot, without distraction, without dreams, life’s a drag. No? [...] Without celebration, without magic to massage your tired, trampled-on old soul, it’s all pretty pointless, innit?”

“What’s pointless?”

“Life, honeypot, life. [...] So you get your little Cree ass out there. Just don’t come here wastin’ my time going, ‘Oh, boo-hoo-hoo, poor me, oh, boo’” (*Fur Queen*, 232-233)

This is probably the most significant and funny sequence in the whole book. Trickster suggests that without her entertainment, symbolizing the N.A. Indians’ humorous spirit, they are lost and their lives are worth nothing. But, by parodying his self-pity, by crying out “Oh, boo-hoo-hoo, poor me, oh, boo,” she also says that she can’t help Jeremiah get back on track again; that he has to pull himself out of the dirt and should not take his problems too seriously. And she also blames religion for putting her people in this situation:

“Show me the bastard who came up with this notion that who’s running the show is some grumpy, embittered, sexually frustrated old fart with a long white beard hiding like a gutless coward behind some puffed-up cloud and I’ll slice his goddamn balls off.” She winked, then flung a cigarette over her shoulder. (*Fur Queen*, 234)

Encouraged by her funny words, Jeremiah begins to improve his life with the help of his little brother. They visit a powwow on Wasachigan Hill Reserve, which we know from *Rez Sisters* and *Dry Lips Oughta Move to Kapuskasing*. There, they not only meet some characters from the former plays; Jeremiah and Amanda also finally find each other in love. Jeremiah

starts writing plays (hence Highway's life) with Gabriel as the director. Sadly, Gabriel is diagnosed with HIV and dies from AIDS soon after, and when he is taken to the spirit world by the Fur Queen, the "little white fox [...] turned to Jeremiah. And winked" (*Fur Queen*, 306).

Overall, *Kiss of the Fur Queen* shows not only strong autobiographical elements but also some resemblance to the two plays I have analysed earlier. In both the plays and this novel, Trickster does not act as an active agent of change but, by mimicking and parodying their problems, encourages people to take their lives into their own hands and not to make a mountain out of a molehill. This reminds readers of traditional teaching methods in which the people would be encouraged to make sense of the stories on their own. At the same time, Trickster and his humour function as a sign of hope and Native heritage which, despite vigorous oppression by the settler culture, is still very much alive. A third strong element clearly is Highway's criticism of the savagery of the Church in the past, when it tried to Christianize and 'civilize' the N.A. Indians. Much of the humour in the book is directed at residential schools and their destructive influence on the Native peoples and heals through "cathartic re-visitation of past trauma" as the brothers triumph "over their traumatic past through [...] spiritual reflection," which is triggered by Trickster's regular mimicking and parodying. (McKegney, 79-84) Hope, however, remains Highway's dominant theme; hope that his people might rediscover their spirit and find their place in a North America dominated by settler culture.

To conclude this chapter, Highway's work is as ambiguous as Trickster's doings, on the one hand very funny, on the other hand full of violence and tragedy. The humour of Trickster/Nanabush/Weesageechak, his/her/its constant mimicking of characters' big and small problems, plays a central role in all three works I have analyzed over the last pages. However, as Lina Perkins observes, Highway's Trickster differs much from the traditional mythological figure:

First, [he] is not identical to the Trickster figure who appears in Cree and Ojibway mythologies, and second, [...] he functions as part of an ensemble of other characters and must be assessed in relation to them. (Perkins, 259)

In all three books, Trickster mocks and mimics not only settler culture but also the Native characters and their behaviour. He watches over them but is never fully available to them as though they had lost him, as Perkins continues:

Nanabush is neither a contemporary nor a readily available figure. He is a figure brought back from the past of a culture that no longer exists in any coherent form. The point of Nanabush's presence is that he has been forgotten, at least in part, and needs to be recovered (Perkins, 260).

This must be seen as the reason why the Trickster in Highway's work incorporates so many different cultural elements. He shows up both as traditional characters such as a fancy dancer or a Weasel as well as in the guises of an entertainer and a beauty Queen, both deeply western concepts. Using Trickster's disguises and presenting him as an ambiguous character incorporating both Native and settler culture, Highway tells his people that it is time to "remember him, [take] him apart and [put] him back together" (Perkins, 263).

The second major topic he addresses with humour (but also with grim violence) is the atrocities committed by members of the Church to the N.A. Indians, especially to their children in residential schools. On numerous occasions, he makes fun of and parodies Christianity's tendency to draw everything in black and white as opposed to the more ambiguous Native mythology. Highway believes that "after exposing the poison" by his humour (as well as by his relentlessness when it comes to violence), "the healing will take place" (Wassermann, 41).

8. The Humour of Thomas King

The last author I want to analyze differs from the other two significantly. Although he is "typically classified as a writer of Canadian Native fiction," he is not of Canadian descent. He was born in Sacramento, California, in 1943 and is of "Greek, German and Native American descent" since his father was of Cherokee origins. The reason why he is often considered a Native Canadian author is the fact that most of his novels and short stories are located on the Canadian Prairies. Thomas King's Natives are "typically of Blackfoot descent," and he "acknowledges that Natives are his primary audience" (Witalec, 373).

Most of his work is characterized by typical Native humour, full of parody and self-deprecation, strongly influenced by Trickster, but also deals with tragedies that strike Native communities. He uses humour to "address the marginalization of N.A. Indians" and to "abolish common stereotypes about Native Americans" (Witalec, 373) and, as I will show, to

deconstruct colonial structures. He regularly employs Trickster figures and uncommon narrative structures to achieve this goal. In many ways, his humour is a mixture of Drew Hayden Taylor's and Tomson Highway's. Like Hayden Taylor, he frequently employs funny, implausible situations, as well as funny 'hybrid' word constructions. And much like Highway's, most of his books have a dark part, some hidden tragedy or mystery that effects the characters and needs to be addressed with the survival powers of humour, most of the time using the Trickster spirit of destruction/creation.

Thomas King, who holds a PhD in English literature and teaches at the University of Guelph, is best known outside of Canada for his novels *Medicine River* (1990), *Green Grass, Running Water* (1993), and *Truth and Bright Water* (1999), all of which I will analyze in the following. But he also wrote the screenplay for a TV adaptation of *Medicine River* starring Native actor Graham Greene, and he wrote and hosted the radio show *Dead Dog Café*, which was aired on CBC radio and in which he addressed typical stereotypes of N.A. Indians. Furthermore, he has written a collection of satirical short stories called *A Short History of Indians in Canada* (2005) and the post-colonial study on the history and situation of Natives in Canada *The Truth about Stories* (2003).

8.1 *Medicine River* (1990)

Thomas King's first novel is, compared with his later fiction, a subtle, almost quiet book. It is set in the town of Medicine River and is "for the most part a humorous and ironic look at a fictional community on the Canadian plains" (William, 116). Nevertheless, it follows the theme of all his novels in that it addresses the same issues such as tragedy, crime, and disconnectedness in Native communities. However, King manages to maintain a humorous, positive atmosphere throughout the book, something which cannot be said of his latest novel, *Truth and Bright Water*, as I will show in my analysis.

One of the main influences on King's work must be seen in the traditional Trickster figure of Native mythology, and so it comes as no surprise that virtually all his novels feature a character that reminds us of Trickster or even a proper mythological Trickster figure. *Medicine River* is no exception. But no humorous Native book would be complete without satirical accounts on typical stereotypes, and so *Medicine River* also "tries to subvert

misperceptions about Natives” (Witalec, 373) just as much as it provides a humorous portrayal of a the life of Native Canadians in a typical quiet Albertan plains community.

If we wanted to identify a main character in *Medicine River*, it would be Will, a man of roughly 40 years who was born on the Indian reserve bordering Medicine River but grew up in Toronto. When his mother dies, he returns to town for the funeral, and this is where he first meets Harlen Bigbear, who is to become the largest (positive) influence on his life so far. King interweaves the parts playing in Medicine River with flashbacks from the past in which we learn of Will’s rather troubled childhood, which is significant if we want to understand his relation with Harlen and the humour that results from it. Will and his brother James grew up without a father, who is thus almost completely absent except for some stories their mother tells about him. “This absence of his father [...] is the great condition of Will’s life, and it has made him profoundly detached and passive.” Suffering from a fate Will shares with many Native children, his lonely life takes a turn when he meets Harlen who is a “concerned and mothering Trickster, not just for Will, but for all the Native North American characters” and the “primary agent of change” in the book (Butler, 374).

Harlen, the Trickster character, is omnipresent in the life of virtually all characters. He doesn’t seem to have a life of his own; his whole existence seems to circle around helping others, improving the life of the Native community of Medicine River. In doing so, he is, as Will notes at the beginning of the book, “like the prairie wind. You never know when he was coming or when he was going to leave” (*Medicine River*, 1). In comparing Harlen to a force of nature, King makes a connection to the Trickster figure, deeply rooted in Native mythology and connected with nature. And indeed, like a hurricane, it seems like nothing can stop Harlen from achieving his plans, although most of the time, the positive outcome has nothing to do with his doings. Harlen is the real centre of the book, as well as the centre of the community, the force that holds it together; “there is scarcely anything which Harlen doesn’t know about his Native friends and neighbours” (William, 117). And he doesn’t tire of telling all his friends and acquaintances about what happens in the community and about his plans of fixing things. His most frequent ‘target’ is Will, his best friend. When they first meet after the funeral of Will’s mother, he convinces Will of moving back to Medicine River and opening a photography business which marks the beginning of Will’s re-integration into the Native community. Harlen also recruits Will for the local Native basketball team in his “typically oblique fashion” (Witalec, 374) when he turns up in Will’s shop, carrying a bag:

“So, what’s in the bag?”

“Your uniform, Will.” [...]

“HARLEN,” I said. “I can’t play basketball worth shit.” [...]

“Number four, Will. That’s a sacred number. Lucky, too. Person always looks better in a basketball uniform. [...] Women love basketball players.” [...] You know what they say about basketball players.” (*Medicine River*, 13-14)

Harlen doesn’t leave Will a chance to resist, and the book is full of humorous struggles between the two, which practically always leave Will giving in to Harlen’s insistence. Harlen symbolizes Native life as King thinks it should be – rooted in the community, with friends and family helping each other to achieve harmony. Will represents the detachment and disconnectedness from their heritage of many N.A. Indians; he “does not feel part of any community” (William, 119) and tries to resist being sucked into a life he has forgotten about. Harlen’s persistent, often annoying, always entertaining and never aggressive approach to fix Will’s life succeeds through humour, however. He also fixes Will’s loneliness through getting him involved with Louise Heavyman who is pregnant from a man she doesn’t want to marry:

“Seeing a man live alone is sad, Will. You get all drawn out and grey and wrinkled. Look at Sam Belly.”

“Sam’s over ninety”

“And he’s not married”

“Sam was married for over fifty years, Harlen.”

“Course he was, wouldn’t have lived this long without a good woman. But do you think he’ll live another ten years?” (*Medicine River*, 26)

This is a classic case of what Blake would call the “humour or errors” (Blake, 119), more precisely a lack of logic or knowledge that makes us laugh, in this case intensified by Harlen’s funny attempts to get out of his net of lies. Harlen, a true Trickster, doesn’t really have a plan about how to fix things; he just tries by talking to Will and other people, twisting and turning his approach constantly, making up arguments, stating bogus, inventing examples, but he usually succeeds, at least when it comes to Will. However, sometimes the eventual success has nothing to do with Harlen’s actions. In the course of the story, Louise and Will get together and Will becomes South Wing’s (accidentally named after the hospital wing she was born in by Will) surrogate father.

Harlen's connectedness with community and place often shows in humorous events revealing his refreshing naivety. For example, he convinces Will to buy a canoe and take it to the river:

"Hey, I've been wanting to go out canoeing. It would be fun. You know, you and me out on a river. Just like our grandparents used to do."

"The Blackfoot didn't use canoes." (*Medicine River*, 231)

Again, ignorant of facts (again, the humour of errors), Harlen seems to know less about Native life than Will, but he is nevertheless much more connected to it than his friend and is interested in rediscovering his roots, however embarrassing his ignorance might be.

However, Harlen's Trickster status is not the only source of humour in *Medicine River*, although he always seems to be involved in it. King also regularly makes fun of the gossip that circulates small communities and the Native love for storytelling, especially through Harlen's friend and gifted storyteller Floyd who frequently tells stories about Harlen that turn out to be just rumours. But these incidences give Will the chance to prove his friendship. When Floyd tells him that Harlen had been seen drinking regularly, he asks about Harlen's whereabouts:

"Anybody know where he is?"

"Could be anywhere, Will. Man starts to drink, he loses track of where he is."
(*Medicine River*, 94)

When Will goes to Harlen's house, he finds Bertha Morley caring for Harlen who is lying in bed, with a bucket next to it:

"Bud Prettywoman said Harlen just started drinking. Didn't know why. You got any idea?"

"Bud see him drinking?"

"Floyd told him." [...]

"Harlen's not drunk, Will. He's just got the flu. You had it yet?" (*Medicine River*, 97)

This story, reminiscent of a classic "punch-line" joke, which also makes fun of the (alleged) alcoholism problem in Native communities is only one of many in which Will's gullibility leads to humorous results, revealing "a deep and abiding friendship that remains unspoken between the two" (William, 125), contrasting his usual lack of interest in the fate of

the members of the community. On one occasion, Will hilariously tries to turn the game around and use Harlen's technique to return the favour of bringing him together with Louise. When he learns that Bertha Morley is trying to find a husband through a dating service, he suggests Harlen, only to earn laughter for his suggestion. When Harlen comes by to tell him about Bertha's plans, he tries to plant an idea in Harlen's head:

"She mentioned your name."

"Me? Why would she do that?"

"Well, you are not married." (*Medicine River*, 174)

When Bertha learns about this, she is furious and rushes to Will's shop:

"You tell that crazy Bigbear that I was hot for him?"

"No, I didn't do that."

"You tell him I was looking for a husband?"

"I don't think so."

"So why is that one hanging around wanting to take me out, all the time smiling like he knows something I don't?" [...]

"He said he thought you were a strong woman."

"He said that?" (*Medicine River*, 175)

Harlen's behaviour undoubtedly is a hint towards Trickster's "wanton sexuality" (Ryan, 6). Surprisingly, Will's plan works out and Harlen takes Bertha out, if only a few times. Nevertheless, this rare showing of Will's deep connectedness with his friend shows that his "detachment is only a façade that is gradually worn down through the story," especially through Harlen's intervention and his involvement with Louise Heavyman and her daughter South Wing, as they "increasingly involve him in the events that are important to them" (William, 122).

Harlen also tries to fix other problems in the community, for example a struggle between the director of the Friendship Centre, Big John Yellow Rabbit, and Eddie Weaselhead, one of the workers there who thinks he should be the director. King introduces Big John and Eddie in a peculiar way that reminds the reader of the endless blood-bond accounts of the Bible:

Big John Yellow Rabbit was Evelyn Firstrunner's blood nephew. Her father had married Rachael Weaselhead, which made Harley Weaselhead Big John's great-grandfather on his grandmother's side, which meant Eddie Weaselhead, whose grandfather was Rachael's brother, was blood kin to Big John. Evelyn's sister, Doreen had married Fred Yellow Rabbit just long enough to produce Big John before Fred went off to a Rodeo in Saskatoon and disappeared. (*Medicine River*, 50).

This passage is interesting as it addresses three themes in a funny way. Firstly, we can find mockery of the Bible and its endless accounts on blood relations which can be read as a critique of the Church and its involvement in atrocities against Natives in the past. Secondly, we also find a comment on fathers 'disappearing,' meaning leaving their families, a big problem in Native communities. The humour doesn't end here, however. Big John and Eddie represent two extremes that King ridicules using an argument between them. Big John dresses in suits, owns a poodle and generally behaves in the way of snobbish (white) businessmen and is promptly mocked for this by centre employee Bertha Morley:

"Them suits make us think of Whitney Oldcrow over at the DIA, [...] and why'd you cut your hair?" [...] "People going to mistake you for a Mormon." (*Medicine River*, 51)

Eddie Weaselhead represents the other extreme; he is the 'imaginary Indian,' straight out of cheap western movies and stereotypically written novels. Although being 'only' half-blood, he

always wore a ribbon shirt to work and a beaded buckle. He had four of five rings and an inlaid watch-band that he wore all the time and a four-strand choker made out of real bone with brass ball bearings, glass beads and a big disc cut from one of those shells. (*Medicine River*, 53)

Bertha Morley also has some words for Eddie's outfit, saying he looked like a "walking powwow poster" (*Medicine River*, 53), a classic example of mockery, the art of making "something [...] seem stupid or useless" ("Mockery", 915), in this case Eddie's attempt at being 'über-Indian'. Eddie and Big John get into a fight over their clothing and Eddie throws a knife at Big John which gets him into jail. King uses these two bizarre characters to point out how detached some N.A. Indians are from their 'real' identity, trying to be like a white person or, the other extreme, trying to be 'so Indian it hurts.' "They don't see that their own clothes reflect an attitude that sets them apart from the other Indians" (William, 128), especially the Native characters in the book who seem to be (with the exception of Will) very genuine and with a well-established identity. Without changing their identity, Harlen also

fixes this problem by inviting the two to a gambling event at his house using his skills of talking people into something:

“How’d you get Big John and Eddie to come?”

“That was the simple part [...]. Told Big John that Eddie was going to head up one of the teams. Told him that Eddie fancied himself something of an expert on Indian gambling games.”

“What’d you say to Eddie?”

“Same thing. Big John said no at first, but I kept talking about how good Eddie figured he was, and pretty soon Big John said sure, he’d come.

There were dangerous curves and corners in Harlen’s mind, and none of them was marked. “You checked them for weapons?” (*Medicine River*, 62)

If we needed any more proof of Harlen’s Trickster persona, here it is. Like the Trickster of traditional stories, he has no real plan, just a rough idea on how to fix things. The outcome of his mischievous plans is highly doubtful and his means risky, as Will points out. However, the two adversaries face each other in the final game and, after Big John loses one of his ties to Eddie and Eddie gives him his bone choker so that Big John wouldn’t be “mistaken for a white man” (*Medicine River*, 65), become the friends that Harlen had always claimed they were (they had never been). However, as Will states, he “was sure Harlen didn’t have much to do with it” (*Medicine River*, 66).

King also addresses other stereotypes white people often have about Native North Americans, such as the alleged discomfort with having their picture taken. More satirical than funny, King mimics this using Will’s profession of photographer and combines it with Will’s final big step of being re-enacted into the community when Harlen talks him into taking a family picture of Joyce Blue Horn’s family. King gently pokes fun at the extended Native understanding of family, meaning a “larger part than just their ‘nuclear’ family” (William, 128) when Harlen and Will talk about the size of the group to be photographed:

“The photo special is for immediate family.”

Harlen wiped his eyes with his shirt sleeve. “Oh,” he said, “then we’re only talking about fifty people or so” (*Medicine River*, 196).

It turns out that Will’s studio cannot handle the huge amount of people that show up so Harlen ‘decides’ the photo should be taken at the river and they set up a picnic with all of their friends and Joyce’s family. This picnic and the photos taken symbolize Will’s “move

away from the detached and remote character who is on the sidelines looking into the community” (William, 130), especially when one of the elders announces she wants to “adopt him” (*Medicine River*, 202) and insists he should be in the picture, too, thus making him part of the extended family. The fact that all people in the picture are smiling as well as Will’s profession mocks and therefore alleviates the pain of the ‘stoic Indians’ in photographs taken by Edward S. Curtis and others in the late 1800s and early 1900s and the stereotypes that resulted from this phenomenon.

The book ends very positively with Will finding his place in the community, having a great friend in Harlen, a partner in Louise Heavyman, and a daughter in South Wing. When Will goes out for a walk in the snow, we know he will be alright and his future is promising. Most of this is a result of Harlen’s/The Trickster’s humorous intervention in his and other people’s life. Harlen is the “elemental force, the metaphor of the wind [...], he is the proactive Prometheus” (William, 131) who fixes his life, draws Will away from his detached life into the arms of the community. Using his helpless but humorous interventions, Harlen/Trickster tries to fix many typical problems of Native communities: detachment, absent fathers, single mothers, pretend whites, so-much-it-hurts-’Indians’ and more. The fact that he only succeeds so often underlines his Trickster status since Trickster’s plans are not always successful either. This book succeeds in drawing a positive picture of Native communities holding themselves together by helping each other out, caring for its members and, not the least, humour. Humorous events not only turn up occasionally in this novel, Harlen’s funny undertakings provide most “of the framework within which the story unfolds” (William, 134), from convincing Will to open his business to giving him identity. In this sense, Harlen is more than Will’s friend, he is a creating force, a modern Trickster whose actions, in contrast to the traditional character, yield almost exclusively positive results.

8.2 Green Grass, Running Water (1993)

King’s best-known novel (and his greatest success), *Green Grass, Running Water*, is arguably the funniest work in this collection and also the only one in which Trickster appears in his most common form, as Coyote. Together with an unnamed narrator, he

preside[s] over two loosely interwoven plots: one based on the myth of creation of the world, and one based on the quasi-realistic events on and near a Canadian Blackfoot reservation. (Bailey, 43)

But more on this dual narrative structure later on. First, it is important to investigate the title of the book itself since this marks King's very first critical mockery of the understanding of the written word among colonial powers. It is a common belief that some of the treaties signed between Native tribes and the U.S. government in the late 19th and early 20th century say that they would be in effect as long as "the water runs and the grass is green." In fact, this is nothing more than a modern myth and no such phrase was ever written down in any such treaty, even though "terms such as 'in perpetuity' or 'perpetual' or 'from this day forward' [...] were employed [regularly]" (Utter, 91), as Jack Utter explains in his book *American Indians: Answers to Today's Questions* (1993). Regardless of its authenticity, the title foreshadows a key element in the comedy of *Green Grass*, namely the undermining of the written word, the notion not to trust everything that one reads in a book or any other written text. At the same time, it shows how King craftily mingles common stereotypes about Native North Americans with authentic historical events to an extent that leaves the reader wondering what and what not to believe, another important factor underlying the humour of this novel.

From the very first page onwards, the author plays with the authority of written texts, especially the Bible, by mimicking and mocking them. The first sentence goes: "So. In the beginning there was nothing. Just the water" (*Green Grass*, 1). A clear reference to the Christian creation myth, with the exception that King adds "just the water" (more on the importance of water later) and omits God's "let there be light." The first real laugh comes when, over the next few lines, Coyote's dream comes to life, runs around, making "a lot of noise" and claims to be Coyote himself upon which the real Coyote names him "dog." Soon, his name turns into "GOD" and, thus, the figure from Native mythology has accidentally created God, which mockingly undermines God's authority and the authority "of one of the most sacred books in Western culture," which is thus "transformed into a joke [and] supplanted by the authority of the storyteller and the Trickster Coyote." Furthermore,

by placing the creation of God after the creation of Coyote, the narrator has [...] displaced Christianity from its position of ultimate truth. (Bailey, 46)

And this part of the story goes on in much the same way throughout the book. The Bible is by no means the only "written text whose authority is sabotaged" (Bailey, 46) in the

course. Together with four characters from various Native mythologies, First Woman, Changing Woman, Thought Woman and Old Woman, the narrator and Coyote mimic the creation myth four times over as every one of the Native characters gets one go and every time they mix the Christian creation myth with a random one from different tribes of N.A. Indians. Every attempt features one of the women, one character from the Bible and one protagonist from a well-known piece of English or North American literature. Importantly, all these stories are told in dialogue between the narrator, Coyote, and the Native characters, contrasting and undermining the second narrative level of the book which is written in classic (European/American style) prose. In one instance, Changing Woman falls from the sky to encounter Noah and his ark:

So. There is Changing Woman falling out of the sky. And there are those animals. And there is this canoe full of poop. Watch out for the poop, all those animals shout. (*Green Grass*, 145)

Here, King mocks one of the most famous stories of the Bible, ridiculing its proclaimed authority by pointing out that a vessel like this must have been full of animal excrements. Almost instantly, Noah creates a not-so-holy lust for Changing Woman which further demolishes his status in a comical way:

Lemme see your breasts, says Noah. I like women with big breasts. I hope God remembered that. [...] For the next month, Noah chases Changing Woman around the canoe. Noah tries balancing along the railing, but he falls in the poop. Noah tries jumping across the backs of the animals, but he falls in the poop. (*Green Grass*, 145-146)

Noah is reduced to a horny, chauvinistic fool and thus loses all of his intended nobility. In his (Christian) world-view, Changing Woman should willingly abide to his advances. Furthermore, King mimics and, in consequence, ridicules other “Christian rules” when Noah forbids Changing Woman to speak to the animals since “that’s almost bestiality” (*Green Grass*, 146), a clear reference to the Christian belief that man is superior to animals and, therefore, talking to them would undermine this authority. King clearly connects Noah’s behaviour to

the cultural values [...] that many European immigrants, Christian missionaries, and the federal government invoked to justify domination of the North American landscape. (Cox, 226)

Sticking with this sub-story, Changing Woman has to leave the ship after Noah gets angry because no-one is obeying his Christian rules. She swims for a while before she is

picked up by Captain Ahab and taken aboard the Pequod. There, she is re-named Queequeg (later, she changes it to Ishmael) by Ahab and his crew. Ahab, of course right out of Herman Melville's *Moby Dick*, represents "a dogmatically true belief system comparable to that of Christianity" (Bailey, 48), just like the other literary characters we meet throughout the book. He doesn't accept her real name and substitutes it for one that fits better into his view of an 'Indian,' and it doesn't even matter that she is a woman rather than a man. They go hunting for the white whale which turns out to be a female, lesbian whale coloured black and named "Moby Jane," another mockery of the authority of written texts, especially those which feature stereotypical Native characters and undermine the role of women, hence the transformation of the masculine Moby Dick into "Moby Jane." This connects with Ahab's truly Christian beliefs which surface in another one of his sayings:

There's a big market in dog food, you know. This is a Christian world, you know. We only kill things that are useful to us or things we don't like. (*Green Grass*, 196)

King not only ridicules the Church for its wrong-doings to the N.A. Indians of the past, but also condemns "Christianity for its concept of Original Sin, the belief in the fallen nature of the natural world and in man's dominion over it" (Ruppert, 298), personified by Ahab in this quote. Ahab shows ludicrous ignorance towards nature when he declares his motives for hunting whales. When stating that they kill "things we don't like," he clearly refers to the Native tribes that were killed because the 'invaders' more or less didn't like them or, more precisely, thought of them as inferior. But when Changing Woman and Moby Jane escape him, he is facing

resistance from both a female creative force and the avatar of populations marginalised by European North American colonial and patriarchal forces. (Cox, 232)

In the other three tales, we encounter First Woman as Eve, meeting Adam in the Garden of Eden, yet his name in the book is "Ahdamn," who gives all the animals ridiculous names reminding us of typically American things like "cheeseburger" or "garage sale" (*Green Grass*, 41). This is a good point to talk about the use of names in the book. On the one hand, King mocks (especially Christian) authorities by altering their names, as in this last example. On the other hand, the mythological women inherit names from authoritarian colonial literature, to mimic them and show how wrong the image of the N.A. Indian in them really is. So, First Woman gets the name of Lone Ranger by the prison guards in Fort Marion. Thought Woman

meets Robinson Crusoe who is obsessed with making lists and gets his name taken away by her. Old Woman, who is renamed Hawkeye by a dying “Nasty Bumppo” from the *Leatherstocking Tales* who was too short to reach his rifle. Other characters from the Bible include A.A. Gabriel (Arch Angel Gabriel), a Canadian border guard and ‘Young Man walking on Water,’ a depressed and powerless Jesus Christ. Each time, the oral narrative thrashes the written counterpart, “placing a cleft between the written text and its historical meaning” so that the “text becomes [...] arbitrary” (Bailey, 46). King uses the humour of situations to disrupt the authority of English/American literature as well as Christianity, for example when Jesus walks over the water to stop the waves from overturning a boat:

Rock, rock, rock, rock says that Boat. Calm down! Stop rocking! Calm down! Stop rocking, says Young Man Walking On Water. But that doesn't happen, and those men on that Boat begin throwing up. Yuck, says that Boat. Now look what happened. (*Green Grass*, 351)

Wherever these funny incidents happen, Coyote isn't far away, and his role in these tales is rather typical of Native narratives, maybe with the exception that he is never the centre of the attention, even if he tries hard. Although he is always present, it doesn't seem as though he has much influence on what is happening, at least not at first. Nevertheless, he creates God and acts as a counterpart to him, regularly cracking jokes on him, and though his “foolishness contains the possibility of disaster [...], he usually promises liberation [...] and almost always produces humour” (Cox, 227), for example, when he self-deprecatorily replies “that's frightening” to the narrator's “This world is full of Coyotes” (*Green Grass*, 272). Unlike the Christian god, whose word is always true in the mind of his believers, Coyote underlines his own fallibility and that one of his kind is plenty enough, considering his mischievous undertakings. In the book, he usually watches the tales and gets involved in slapstick-like situations, for example, when he acts as a cushion softening Changing Woman's fall from the sky, but it is not before the end of the novel that he enacts change. He simply “enjoys mischief and distraction more than orderly relating of the story” (Bailey, 49) like in this funny dialogue with the first-person narrator:

“Well,” I says, “Old Woman falls into that water. So she is in that water. So she looks around and sees-“

“I know, I know,” says Coyote. “She sees a golden calf!”

“Wrong again,” I says.

“A pillar of salt!” says Coyote.

“Nope,” I says to Coyote.

“A burning bush!” says Coyote.

“Where do you get these things?” I says.

“I read a book,” says Coyote

“Forget the book,” I says. “We’ve got a story to tell.” (*Green Grass*, 349)

Significantly, the narrator later reminds Coyote that “there are no truths [...], only stories” (*Green Grass*, 391), which is a hint at one element that distinguishes traditional oral storytelling and colonial/Christian stories (in this dialogue he clearly refers to and mocks the Bible) – the oral stories of N.A. Indians, contrary to colonial texts, are always subject to change and, thus, in case of the creation myths in this book,

although [...] repeated in order to get it right, [it] becomes increasingly difficult to believe that the right version will ever be told. (Bailey, 49)

King not only doubts the authority of the written texts, but also his own narrator’s, using not only colonial literary discourse for his humour but also the oral narrative. Mostly, however, he shows his distrust of the authority of the Bible and other written texts to

reconfigure the power dynamic articulated in the invader’s discourse – European/European North American as inherently superior, Native American as inherently inferior. (Cox, 223)

All four tales end with the women (now being men, hence the gender-shifting ability of some Native North American folklore characters) being taken to Fort Marion in Florida, a real place from U.S. history where many Plains Indians were imprisoned in the distant past. Those four characters, in the ‘realistic’ plot roughly two hundred years old, escape from a mental hospital (which substitutes Fort Marion) and its head, Dr. J. Hovaugh (a reference to Jehova, the name of god). The psychiatric hospital, too, stands for colonial structures imposed on the Native population, and when the four Natives escape from the institution and its ‘holy’ leader, they act as “elusive Tricksters outside of the control of the Christian and colonial world’s representative” (Cox, 228).

They venture out to ‘fix’ the life of Lionel, the main character of the second, parallel plot, written in common narrative prose, a sharp contrast to the playful, inventive oral narration of the mythological plot. Lionel is a man of thirty odd years who never finished his University education and works as an electronics salesman in Blossom, a town near the

reservation. Through representing his life as “seemingly without options” (Smith, 525), King mirrors his mockery of colonial written texts, limited and fixed in their possibilities. Vice-versa, we could read the fact that Lionel’s story is written in prose as a symbol of the cultural oppression young N.A. Indians face in modern-day North America.

What links both texts, apart from the intervention by the four ‘Indians’ is the way King mimics names and the stereotypes attached to them, on both sides. Lionel’s girlfriend, Alberta, teaches Native American history at a university. In the audience there are students such as Mary Rowlandson, like the author of the famous captivity narrative *A True History of the Captivity and Restoration of Mrs. Mary Rowlandson* from 1682 (*Green Grass*, 19), chatting with her friend rather than paying attention to the lecture. Lionel’s boss is called Buffalo Bill Bursum and “can only relate to Indians as figures in John Wayne movies” (Smith, 524). His sister Latisha runs a small restaurant called “Dead Dog Café” in which she serves hamburgers allegedly made of dog meat to clueless tourists from all around the world. To highly comical effect, King draws the picture of a young woman who exploits the naïve beliefs of ‘outsiders’ to make a profit. To fool her customers and leave them in some kind of ‘fascinated disgust,’ she

printed up menus that featured such things as Dog du Jour, Houndburgers, Puppy Potpourri, Hot Dogs, Saint Bernard Swiss Melts, with Doggie Doos and Deep-Fried Puppy Whatnots for appetizers [and hung up a picture that showed] four Indians on their buffalo runners chasing down a herd of Great Danes. (*Green Grass*, 109)

These jokes, which would be called “Laughs in the lexicon, [...] words that make us think of something funny” by Barry Blake (64), make great fun of the stereotypical belief that all N.A. Indians ate dogs.

Reflected in King’s use of colonial, ‘limited’ prose, Lionel’s life is indeed very static and the reader cannot see much hope for him. What is more, he got deeply involved with colonial structures, and so have most other characters such as Charlie Looking Bear, with whom he has to ‘share’ his girlfriend. Charlie is part of a new generation of Natives who left the reserve to aspire a ‘colonial’ type of job as a lawyer. His father Portland was an actor in Western movies before his career went belly-up thanks to an Italian actor who had a bigger nose and therefore seemed more ‘Indian’ than him. Lionel’s Uncle Eli and probably the only important character who isn’t ‘limited’ by the dominant culture, was once in a similar situation, but now found his way and blocks a dam project by occupying his late mother’s

cabin in the area which would be flooded if the dam was opened. Eli encourages Lionel to finish his studies and even drives Lionel to attend the Sun Dance on the reservation.

When the four ‘Indians’ step into Lionel’s life, they immediately start ‘fixing’ things, although in a very surreal way, hardly noticeable and difficult to pin down by the reader, at least not without possessing background knowledge on Trickster discourse. The funniest of those attempts happens when they visit him at his workplace. The name of Lionel’s boss, “Buffalo” Bill Bursum refers to the ‘Bursum Bill,’ a “piece of federal legislation [...] which would have legitimized the rights of squatters on Indian land and forced the onus of land-claim proof onto the Indians” (Ruppert, 300). This witty detail and its inherent criticism on the government’s policy of land-claims is intensified by Bursum’s wall of TVs that resembles a map of Canada on which he shows his employee his most famous Western movie. *The Mysterious Warrior*, starring John Wayne and Richard Widmark, is a (fictional) stereotypical film where the white guys slaughter the ‘Noble Savages’ after they turned into ‘bloodthirsty’ ones. Eli and Charlie Looking Bear, who are also in the shop, are stunned to see Charlie’s father in the leading role. When the four ‘Indians’ recognize the film, the one called Lone Ranger mysteriously cries: “Oops, [...] I thought we fixed this one,” to which Hawkeye replies: “A lot of them look the same” (*Green Grass*, 320). Obviously, they already fixed a film but it wasn’t this one. King here makes fun of the vast number of similar films that all have pretty much the same plot, with white soldiers gunning down the bloodthirsty ‘savages’. So the four decide to fix this one as well, and in the final scene where the Native warriors and soldiers clash in the final battle, the following happens:

There at full charge, hundreds of soldiers in bright blue uniforms with gold buttons and sashes and stripes, blue-eyed and rosy-cheeked, came over the last rise. And disappeared. Just like that. “What the hell,” said Bursum, and he stabbed at the remote. Everywhere was colour. Portland turned and looked at Wayne and Widmark, who had stopped shouting and waving their hats and were standing around looking confused and dumb. [...] The soldiers ran back to their logs and holes and rocks, shooting as they went. But as Lionel and Charlie and Eli and the old Indians and Bill and Coyote watched, none of the Indians fell. John Wayne looked at his gun. Richard Widmark was pulling the trigger on empty chambers. The front of his fancy pants was dark and wet. (*Green Grass*, 320)

In this hilarious, intertextual event of mockery, all the soldiers as well as the two heroes fall with their chests full of blood and the ‘Indians’ are victorious. Bill Bursum blames the change in the story on faulty equipment but it is clear that the four old ‘Indians’ have ‘fixed’ the outcome of this movie to awaken Lionel, encouraging him to escape his static existence

and make something of his life. In this “cacophony of competing transcultural and intertextual voices [...] Lionel’s story of liberation emerges” (Smith, 526). King humorously reminds us that nothing is for certain, that there is no stagnation, that there is always room for change and that Natives shouldn’t let themselves be dominated by colonial structures. Shortly after this puzzling incident, Lionel begins to broaden his view.

This all sounds like there was no humour in the book except when the four ‘Indians,’ Coyote and the narrator fool around in their mythological realm or when they change things in the real world. But this is not the case. The real-world characters are good for a great number of laughs as well. Every so often, King lets his characters get entangled in colonial structures which leads to funny incidents, for example when Lionel accidentally gets into a AIM (American Indian Movement) rally where he gets arrested and somehow ends up with a medical record showing a serious heart problem, which he doesn’t have. This leads to a few problems later in his life:

A year later, Lionel applied for a car loan, and when he went back to check with the loan manager, the man sat Lionel down, smiled, and asked him if he had had any more troubles with his heart. Six months later, he was turned down for a part-time job driving a school bus because of his health, and for years, the Heart Foundation sent him letters about tax-deductible donations. (*Green Grass*, 36)

It becomes obvious that Lionel fell victim to colonial bureaucracy, and his reluctance to resist the oppression, which is represented by this incident, becomes the big issue of the ‘realistic’ part of the book.

The biggest change comes when the great dam breaks and the masses of water kill Lionel’s uncle Eli and flood the land. It is significant that throughout the whole book, we regularly find water imagery. And in a funny comment, even Coyote himself who is, after all, part of many creation myths like that “of the flood and the re-creation of the world” (Lowe, 194), notices the omnipresence of water in the book:

“Hmmmmm,” says Coyote. “All this floating imagery must mean something.”

“That’s the way it happens in oral stories,” I says.

“Hmmmmm,” says Coyote. “All this water imagery must mean something.”
(*Green Grass*, 352)

Most of this imagery appears in the creation stories on the mythological level, since water plays a major role in Native creation myths and when cars stand in puddles of water

only to be washed away shortly afterwards in the ‘real world.’ All in all, three cars float away towards the dam and with a little bit of imagination (and common knowledge), we can notice another one of King’s funny situations, in this case mocking ‘proud’ colonial history. The cars are a Nissan, a Ford Pinto and a Karmann Ghia, undoubtedly a reference to Christopher Columbus’ ships, the Nina, the Pinta and the Santa Maria and in fact, one of the cars is said to “look like a little ship” (*Green Grass*, 27) as it floats away. When they destroy the dam, King humorously reminds the reader that “the arrival of Columbus’ ships [marked] a major shift in world history that included the devastation of many Native American populations” (Cox, 233).

When it comes to this water imagery, the reader who does not have thorough inside knowledge is confronted with a narrative “that escapes total meaning except as a temporary assignation within involutions of other narratives” (Smith, 527). However, I believe that it hardly ‘totally’ escapes meaning as we can in fact read the water imagery as a symbol of change, an overthrow of stereotypes and colonial oppression, initiating a shift in the life of the protagonists Lionel, Charlie, and Latisha for all of them are “entangled [...] in the colonial legacy [and] colonial domination” (Cox, 221). Charlie is reminiscent of a typical, slimy American lawyer, and his father Portland worked in an industry that highly marginalised N.A. Indians; Latisha runs a restaurant with Native cuisine but insists on being ‘Canadian,’ and Lionel’s childhood hero is John Wayne. They all are deeply influenced, dangerously close to being appropriated by colonial structures which are fixed and devalue Native North Americans, as King wants to show. It is obvious that something has to happen. And once more, the agent of change can be seen in Trickster. He does not do much except watching and cracking jokes for most of the book but there is one funny situation where he accidentally carries out a rain dance which probably causes the flood that in turn destroys the dam. What seems more likely, however, is that Coyote plays only one part in the change and that the four ‘Indians’ and Lionel’s Uncle Eli must be granted equal credit.

Unchallenged, however, remains Trickster’s role as “healer, but also disruptive [...] element that resists colonial representations and stories of containment” (Smith, 528). Particularly in this book, King likes playing the role of the Trickster himself. Although very funny and pleasing to read, he disrupts the text with various intertextual references to (Native) oral and (Colonial) written texts, carefully avoiding to make a clear judgment on the value of either. King “replaces the honoured cause and effect structure” of most colonial texts “with

the disarray of chance” (Blaeser, 170) by letting Trickster loose on the structure of the text. This makes it quite hard for a white audience to interpret the doings of Trickster and the four ‘Indians’ whereas other funny incidents involving stereotypes (the creative menu in Latisha’s restaurant or Portland Looking Bear’s nose) provide provocative yet easily accessible critique. King, “whenever he portrays his characters as *Indians*,” he does so “with the aid of absurd stereotypes.” This humour of exaggeration shows the irrationality of stereotypes and that “cultural differences [are] usually the result of artificially imposed expectations” (Bailey, 46). Refreshingly, King does not just make fun of Christian and colonial traditions, but also frequently ridicules Native mythology and critically jokes about modern Native life.

8.3 Truth and Bright Water (1999)

King’s latest novel centres on teenage Native American Indian Tecumseh, who lives in the American town of Truth, just across the border from the Indian Reserve Bright Water in Alberta. The two towns are divided by not only the border but also the ‘Shield River,’ which can be crossed by a bridge, an old rusty ferry that has to be operated by hand or at the official border crossing.

The story follows Tecumseh on his adventures during his summer holidays and is, for most parts, a tragedy about destroyed families, alcoholism, and child abuse, interspersed with Trickster and survival humour. It “can be enjoyed as the bittersweet story of a young boy’s coming of age,” as “a mystery story [...] and a wry satire of the culture clashes of European and Indigenous peoples” (Querengesser, 152). All three readings are, in my opinion, legitimate but I will concentrate on the last two approaches since they contain most of the humour of this book. Furthermore, I will add a fourth reading, analyzing the peculiar structure.

First, I will deal with the mystery story. The book starts with Tecumseh and his cousin Lum hanging out on the coulees close to the river. When night breaks in, they witness a woman dropping something into the stream and jumping in after it. This incident is, of course, in no way funny and when the boys find the skull of a human baby down the river, the reader is both shocked and puzzled by this opening scene. The humour comes at the very end of the book, when the ‘mystery’ is solved, so let’s pick this up later on.

Throughout the story, Tecumseh meets several peculiar characters such as Lucy Rabbit, who regularly comes to his mother's salon to have her hair dyed blonde to look like Marilyn Monroe, whom she insists was of Native descent.

Lucy has been coming to my mother for several years to get her hair turned blonde, but the closest my mother has been able to get to the kind of baby-soft-yellow-white dandelion hair that Marilyn has is flaming orange. (*Truth*, 20)

King here addresses hybridity, the clash of Indigenous and western cultures and the bizarre outcome it sometimes shows by constructing a "contrast between some possible or plausible situation and one much less plausible" (Raskin quoted in Mulkay, 42). It is very unlikely that a Native woman develops the plan to dye her hair blonde and this is what makes this situation funny, apart from the hilarious result, of course. In this particular situation, he criticizes Natives who try to become 'white.' Lucy Rabbit argues that she wants to be blonde because

no one gives a damn about Indians but everybody likes blondes. Even Indians. "You ever see anybody famous who wasn't blond?" (*Truth*, 23)

King underlines her ridiculous desire when Lum promptly mocks Lucy by calling her 'Bugs Bunny' and saying "What's up, Doc?" (*Truth*, 21) every time they meet.

On a different level of cultural clash, King addresses colonial structures that, often with disastrous results, influenced Native life in the past, such as residential schools, or the church. The local church in *Truth* is sold to Monroe Swimmer, a home-coming Native artist of international fame, who, in the course of the events, transforms the building into something new. Monroe is revealed as the Trickster character of the book very early, when the people talk about his return.

Lucille Rain [...] remembered Monroe as a bit of a joker. One time, she told us, he borrowed a tuba from the Mormon Church over in Cardston and got his auntie to make him a pair of short pants out of elk hide with elk hide suspenders. And when Indian Days came around and the crowd of tourists were everywhere, he marched through the booths and tipis, puffing on the tuba, pretending to be the Bright Water German Club. "He said it was the least he could do," said Lucille, "seeing how Germans were so keen on dressing up like Indians. (*Truth*, 26)

Staging a highly improbable situation, Monroe mimics western tourists. He inverts roles, and by dressing up as a stereotypical German, exposes the peculiar obsession of some Germans with imaginary Indian life portrayed by Karl May. His main motive for his various mischievous projects after coming back to *Truth* is up for interpretation. He lives in the

church now, a fact known only by Tecumseh who regularly visits him with his dog Soldier to witness some truly bizarre installations. Firstly, Monroe starts painting the church

so that it blends in with the prairies and the sky, and he's done such a good job that it looks as if part of the church has been chewed off. (*Truth*, 44)

Achieving what is actually impossible (another funny, implausible situation), Monroe paints 'away' the door of the church, so Tecumseh struggles to find his way in. Monroe undermines the authority of the Church and tries to 'take back' the prairie from the colonial forces by painting the church away. He also puts up a platform with "Teaching the Grass about Green" (*Truth*, 44) written on the side in the grass, paints it green, and promptly Tecumseh bumps into it, becoming a symbol of the necessity for Native peoples to re-discover their roots and re-invent themselves in a modern society. He also flies a kite, "Teaching the Sky about Blue" and announces that "Teaching the Night about Dark is going to be a lot trickier" (*Truth*, 50). Monroe employs Tecumseh to be his left hand, and the teenager returns to the church regularly to help Monroe with his installations. He continues to take back the prairie by 'swimming' in it with snorkel and swimming suit, proclaiming that "it's really warm, once you get used to it" (*Truth*, 131), once again inviting his fellow Natives to 'get used' to their Native land again. Next, he installs a great number of metal buffaloes on the prairie, mimicking the 'glorious' past as an invitation for the real buffalo to return. At Indian Days, he once again ridicules the German tourists who arrive dressed like 'real Indians' by turning up wearing a Hawaii shirt, cowboy hat and sunglasses and having cameras dangling around their necks. This time, he mimics the tourists themselves to make fun of their often romanticized image of N.A. Indians. Dressed like this, he meets Tecumseh and asks him to help him find the church. He has finally finished painting it and, in true Trickster style, got tricked by his own creation and lost the church. After they find the church again with the help of Tecumseh's dog soldier, Monroe reveals why he returned home. He used to get paid by museums to restore expensive paintings but when he started to paint 'Indians' 'back' into them, they started firing him. "I don't think they wanted their Indians restored," Monroe concludes and humorously picks on the 'Imaginary Indian' and that most Whites prefer imagining Natives in a stereotypical way instead of finding out about their true nature. Monroe also tells Tecumseh that he 'took back' several skeletons of Native children from the Museums to bring them back to where they belong. "I told them it was a soup bone from the cafeteria," Monroe recounts how easy it was to steal the bones, showing a great deal of clever, Tricksterish wit. Criticizing anthropologists for their narrow views, cataloguing and putting

the children's bones "into drawers," he claims to have "rescued them" (*Truth*, 264-265). Here, it dawns on Tecumseh. He concludes that it was really Monroe that night on the bridge, dropping Native children's bones into the river and jumping in. So, the mystery about the suicidal woman is solved and the western reader is surprised, which surely was King's intention, not to find a revelation about some deranged teenage mother who takes her life out of frustration about life on the reserve. Once again, the Trickster uses mimicry, staging an improbable situation, namely the unlikely event of someone faking a suicide for artistic purposes, to show the protagonists what's wrong in their society. He turns a supposed tragedy into a ridiculous installation to alleviate the pain of the many times this is not a joke.

At this point, I find it interesting to analyze the humorous, satirical structure of the novel. The non-Native reader is at first pleased to find a classic structure with a plot that slowly builds up from a mysterious event at the beginning with a climax, namely the grotesque events at Indian Days at the end, only to be confronted with another, or rather two more climaxes after Indian Days. Firstly, there is Monroe's totally unexpected Tricksterish revelation about the skull and the night at the bridge, and then next, Lum takes his life rather unexpectedly, taking Soldier with him. In creating such an unusual structure, King mocks the white reader who has been brought up with classic Eurocentric structures. Pretending a climactic structure only to turn to a circular structure a few pages later is King's little wink at readers from western cultures to open their eyes and encourage them to read against the grain next time.

On numerous other occasions, King criticizes both the tourists for their naïve image of Native life and the Natives for selling anything as traditional if the price is right when the protagonists talk about the upcoming Bright Water Indian Days. Edna Baton, who runs a frybread stand at Indian Days, exemplifies this impressively when three Germans dressed up as 'Indians' arrive:

"they want to know the secret of authentic frybread [...] the guy with the bones offered me twenty-five dollars."

"Did you tell them?"

"Naw," says Edna. "I've got my pride."

"Right."

"The Deutschmark is strong right now," she says. "So, I'm holding out for fifty."
(*Truth*, 223)

This almost reminds the reader of a classic “story-line joke,” with a “punch-line in the third part” (Blake, 109), the punch-line being that Edna is not as proud as she first claims but just waits for the right price to be offered. Another primary example of shamelessly selling out is Elvin, Tecumseh’s father. He carves small wood coyotes to sell them at Indian Days, and when his friend Skee Gardipeau asks him “This one of those Indian things?” he answers “There is good money in it, [...] fifty bucks apiece. Easy” and reacts to comparisons with Monroe Swimmer by saying “Hell, Skee, Monroe’s an artist, [...] this is business” with a grin on his face (*Truth*, 35). But Elvin is also doing some even more questionable business such as smuggling toxic hospital wastes across the border to the landfill in Bright Water which is supposed to be closed. In a kind of poetic justice, he is denied access back into the heart of Tecumseh’s mother.

Franklin, Lum’s father, enjoys two things regularly – beating up his son and coming up with ideas to make money, most often off tourists. Interestingly, as with Elvin’s plans, all ideas end in disaster, reminding the reader of slapstick situations. His plans for a landfill failed because he built it too close to the river; his RV park flopped when the septic tank overflowed, and no-one was interested in seeing the buffalo he bought. It seems as though nature did not let him violate her; his Native land struck back on him when he tried to sell it to get rich. His latest idea is the most bizarre yet and another one of Raskin’s (in Mulkey, 41-42) implausible situations that make us laugh. With the help of Elvin, he acquires two motorbikes with sidecars and some paint guns and lets tourists ‘hunt’ buffalo from the sidecar on Indian Days. Yet again, poetic justice provides adequate and humorous punishment for Franklin’s disrespect. Two tourists get into a fight “over one of the big cows” (*Truth*, 248), start shooting at each other and crash both motorcycles, getting badly injured. When one tourist proudly proclaims that he “got it on film” (*Truth*, 247), the grotesque of the spectacle becomes obvious, and once again, Franklin’s plans go down the drain in return for his violation of Native culture and history.

In conclusion, this book is not exactly a comedy or a satire. As I suggested at the beginning of this analysis, it is mostly a tale of tragedy, the story of a teenage boy growing up in a deeply disturbed community, where everybody has something to hide. But as much as the people’s secrets are seldom revealed, much of the humour of the book is hard to pin down and highly symbolic. Monroe’s/Trickster’s installations, his staging of funny situations, and mischievous doings are attempts to bring Natives and their land closer together as well as to

undermine colonial structures and ridicule tourists that are obsessed with the imaginary Indian. Yet, Monroe's attempts seem powerless against the immense weight of tragedy and hopelessness and seem to have almost no effect whatsoever. No one seemed to have learned anything from the events and Monroe's installations go mostly unnoticed. So, *Truth and Bright Water* is for me, contrary to most critics, not a story about hope and reconciliation but about the harshness of life in Native communities, commented on by using satire and Trickster mockery.

9. Conclusion

Let me suggest some answers to the guiding questions of my thesis on N.A. Indian literary humour. First, I wanted to locate some distinct features of N.A. Indian humour.

Native authors very often incorporate characters from Native mythology into their works. They also regularly use an appropriation of oral storytelling as an opposition to colonial writing traditions, very often in a funny way.

Critics have often claimed that Native humour is about survival and community, yet Thomas King himself points out that this is "simply to state the obvious" and that it "won't stand as a definition for anything" ("Performing", 170). So, this cannot count as something distinct. However, there is one point that distinguishes the humour in N.A. Indian writing from all others in this context and that is the character of the Trickster. Although other cultures know Trickster personae as well, there is a certain way of using his/her powers that only N.A. Indian authors know. Trickster not only appears in the guise of an animal or another human being among the 'real-life' characters of the stories to mimic their wrongdoings and disrupt everything in order to show them how not to live their lives. He/She also frequently shows up as a chaos-creating force behind the structures of the stories, for example, in Thomas King's *Green Grass, Running Water*, where he/she causes various creation myths and stories from colonial literature to "circulate like running water" (Smith, 519), never to reveal the ultimate truth western readers are waiting for. I think that in this sense, and in this sense only, N.A. Indian humorous writing is in fact clearly distinct from any

other forms of funny writing. However, it is a very striking and powerful concept that makes the reader think more about the meanings colonial literature would (most often) do.

The topics N.A. Indian humorists make fun of are, of course, very specific and located in the past as well as in the present living conditions of N.A. Indians. First, there is, as one might expect, the past atrocities committed by the colonial oppressors. Practically every single author, including the three I have analyzed in this paper, uses humour to alleviate the pain of this darkest part of North American history. Most often, they mimic or mock colonial powers and institutions such as the Church to express their anger over the mistakes of the past. In some works, for example in those of Tomson Highway, the humour carries a second, darker element of tragedy. One example of this kind of survival humour is when Gabriel, one of Highway's protagonists and rape-victim, remarks that a priest he just met "would look none too shabby" in "Superman leotards" (*Fur Queen*, 180). As I have shown above, Thomas King is probably the meanest of those authors when it comes to Christianity as practically all of *Green Grass, Running Water* and much of *Truth and Bright Water* is dedicated to ridicule this particular colonial institution. Another notion involving Christianity as a colonial institution is the vast difference in the view on nature between the old-world myth and the Native tradition. All three authors, especially Thomas King and Tomson Highway, present Native mythology as an alternative to Christianity and its teaching of "man's dominion" over nature (Ruppert, 298) and the use of this belief to take land away from the N.A. Indians in the past.

However, this making fun of historical events bears a second, rather ideological element. Authors like the ones dealt with in this paper use 'survival' humour to 'rewrite' colonial history since most of it was written in the past by the colonial oppressors for "those who control the land, have controlled the story of the land and its people". When King ridicules the Church or the voyages of Columbus in his books he is trying to "expose the hidden agendas of historiography and, thereby, remove it from the grasp of political panderers" (Blaeser, "New Frontiers", 162-163). Native humorists want to open the reader's eyes for the fact that written accounts on the history of North America are often not trustworthy since they were written on the basis of biased notions. Kimberly Blaeser summarizes this attempt:

By overturning the enshrined accounts of history with Trickster reversals, they arouse in a reader an awareness of the way that history can and has been

possessed. The intentions of the authors, however, are not to re-possess history nor to replace one historical account with another, but to incite the reader to an imagiNative re-evaluation of both the accounts and the process of history (Blaeser, “New Frontiers”, 167).

Exactly this is the reason for the lack of most of these books to provide an ultimate meaning or conclusion. The authors don’t want to exchange one (false) history with another one but simply to incite a re-consideration of the authenticity or ‘truth-value’ of historical accounts written by the winners.

Another frequent topic in King, Hayden Taylor, and Highway is cultural appropriation and ‘hybridisation’. The fear of being assimilated and the difficulties of combining two cultures are favourite topics of Drew Hayden Taylor and Thomas King. Both show ridiculously exaggerated examples of white people desperately trying to ‘go Native’ and N.A. Indians who run dangerously close to becoming white, N.A. Indians who would sometimes be referred to by “certain Indian brothers and sisters as ‘apples’; red on the outside, white on the inside” (Lowe, 197). Probably the funniest example of the former is the character of Summer from Hayden Taylor’s *Buz’Gem Blues* and *Baby Blues*, who embarrasses herself and shows a laughably flawed attitude towards ‘Indianness,’ for example when she buys a Ford Thunderbird because she finds that “wonderfully symbolic” (*Baby Blues*, 68).

Thirdly, these authors deal with problems and tragedies in modern Native communities such as “drunkenness, alienation, aimless lives, poverty, and clashes among cultures, within families, and between men and women” (Lowe, 198). Drew Hayden Taylor dedicated a whole book to the demon alcohol, *The Bootlegger Blues*, and is famous for his politically incorrect jokes on such issues:

“What do you call a seven-course dinner in Lakota country?

One dog and a six pack.” (“Whacking”, 72)

With incredibly self-deprecatory humour, Hayden Taylor and others show that there is more than one way of dealing with these problems. Instead of endlessly debating and despairing over them, one can make fun of them to ease the pain they create.

When it comes to the techniques used by Native humorists, most of the traditional forms of humour show through. As suggested in the chapter on the theory of humour, the definitions provided by white scholars do not suffice for my analysis of Native humour since Native

authors use much subtler ways of making us laugh than just funny words or puns (although these are also used).

One of the most prominent techniques used, especially by Tomson Highway and Thomas King, are mimicry and parody. Employing the Native character of Trickster, a born mimic and clown, King and Highway mimic and thus undermine the authority of the colonial oppressors but they also mimic Native characters to show them what is going wrong and to get them back on the right track. Trickster here functions as a “comic butt who mirrors man’s own failings” (Lowe, 195). As an example, Highway’s Nanabush in *Dry Lips Oughta Move to Kapuskasing* appears in the guise of Black Lady Halked, who is the mother of Dickie Bird, the tragic figure of the play and mimics her past behaviour that led to Dickie’s disabilities:

Black Lady Halked sits on the jukebox, [...], legs out directly in front. Nine months pregnant and naked, she holds a bottle of beer up in the air and is drunk almost senseless. (*Dry Lips*, 92)

Thomas King enjoys parodying the authority of written colonial texts such as the Bible and *Moby Dick* in his novel *Green Grass, Running Water* or ‘hybrid Indians’ as opposed to white ‘wannabe Indians’ in all his work, a technique also very often used by Drew Hayden Taylor.

As I have shown earlier, Native humorists also employ uncommon narrative structures, most often to ridicule ‘fixed’ structures in colonial texts. Thomas King, as a rule and deliberately, fails to supply an ultimate interpretation for any of his texts, a critique on the often very clear-cut stories of colonial writing. In *Green Grass, Running Water*, he even splits the plot into two parts, a mythological part and a realistic part, a method also used by Tomson Highway in his plays and novels. The humour here is rather difficult to pin down; it doesn’t provide big laughs; it rather offers a different way of interpretation, a surprise for white audiences who are used to straight-forward storytelling.

As far as language is concerned, the three authors I dealt with employ all sorts of different methods to amuse their audiences. Drew Hayden Taylor, for example, likes funny word compounds comprised of a Native and a colonial element, such as “Anishnaabe aerobics,” now called “Anishnaabics” (*Berlin*, 65). Thomas King makes use of the same concept as in “Old Agency Puppy Stew” (*Green Grass*, 108) to refer to a quasi-traditional

meal. But he also uses funny names such as “Adolph Hungry Wolf” (*Truth*, 213) for a German guy who went Native in *Truth and Bright Water*. Another method that falls into this category are witty remarks and one-liners, a discipline in which Drew Hayden Taylor displays great talent. To give but one example, Jenny from *Baby Blues* doubts Pashik’s claim to be 19 by saying “Yeah, and the federal government is serious about settling all land claims” (*Baby Blues*, 62).

One method that all three authors regularly use is that of funny, often slapstick-like situations. As I have mentioned earlier, in the introductory chapter on the theory of humour, this kind of humour (and only this one) works in every culture, which is probably the reason why it is the one most easily accessible for western readers. To remind ourselves once again, Raskin calls the reason for its funniness a “contrast between some possible or plausible situation and one much less plausible” (Raskin quoted in Mulkey, 42). Examples in the works analyzed in this paper abound, from Hayden Taylor’s character Noble hurting his back in an attempt to show that he is not old (*Baby Blues*, 25-26) to Highway’s women from *Rez Sisters* getting into a slapstick fight over money, one of them sitting on the toilet, whose door is regularly opened to reveal her ranting about the other women, “panties down to her ankles” (*Rez Sisters*, 43).

At the very end, I would like to briefly reflect on the future of N.A. Indian humour and give a personal outlook from my experiences in Vancouver, where I spent one year between August 2008 and August 2009. Apart from one reading by Drew Hayden Taylor (which was attended by an estimated 50 people), I didn’t see much of Native authoring in public, let alone Native humour. Although I could access all books I needed in the public library, the book stores’ department on Native literature rarely exceeded half a shelf somewhere in the “Religion” (sic!) section. I sincerely hope that this will change in the future since I believe that Native humorists like King, Hayden Taylor, and Highway can easily compete with the best among white humorists and should get more attention, not just by scholars or aficionados, but also by the average book-reader.

As far as unanswered questions are concerned, I suggest further studies on the following:

- Comparison between humorist works written by N.A. Indians and works by other minorities around the world. What are the similarities and the differences?

- Native humour in film: Do the methods employed in literature correspond to those in Native films?
- The omnipresence of Trickster: Are there any humorous works that DO NOT work with Trickster as character or underlying, disruptive force?

It would be interesting to see someone working on these questions for there wasn't enough time and space in this paper to deal with them as well. For me, it was a highly enjoyable experience to work on this topic and I want to close this paper with a gag told by Don Kelly, one of the few Native stand-up-comedians:

I'm an Aboriginal citizen living in Canada. And I just want to say to you, on behalf of all of us: We love what you've done to the place. (Kelly, 54)

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12. Appendix

12.1 Zusammenfassung / Summary

Diese Diplomarbeit beschäftigt sich mit humorvoller Literatur, geschrieben von Autoren mit kanadisch-indianischen Wurzeln, die sich mit kanadisch-indianischen Themen befassen, im besonderen mit den Werken von Drew Hayden Taylor, Tomson Highway und Thomas King. Es sollte dabei herausgefunden werden, welche Techniken angewandt werden und welche Themen die Autoren mit der Verwendung von Humor ansprechen wollen.

This diploma paper explores humorous literature written by authors with indigenous Canadian roots who write about topics concerning Canadian Indians, in particular the authors Drew Hayden Taylor, Tomson Highway and Thomas King. My goal was to find out which techniques they use and which themes they seek to address using humor.

Im ersten Teil („On Humour“) wird versucht, eine kurze Zusammenfassung der wissenschaftlichen Arbeiten zum Thema Humor an sich zu geben. Nach der Analyse verschiedener Texte ist festzuhalten, dass Humor das Resultat eines Widerspruches zwischen etwas Realem und etwas Irrealem bzw. etwas Plausiblen und etwas Unplausiblen ist wobei es auch darauf ankommt, dass Erzähler und Zuhörer eine gemeinsames kulturelles Basiswissen besitzen.

In the first part („On Humour“), I attempted to give a short overview of the academic works on humour available. An analysis of the texts on the topic have shown that humour arises from an opposition between something real and something surreal or between something plausible and something implausible. Moreover, it is vital that both speaker and listener share cultural knowledge.

Der zweite Teil („The Stoic Indian: White North American Perception of North American Indian Humour“) besteht aus einer kurzen Analyse des Stereotypes des „stoischen Indianers,“ eines Vorurteils, dass über Jahrhunderte in den Köpfen weißer Nordamerikaner aufgebaut wurde. Von Erzählungen der frühen Entdecker wie Columbus und Vespucci über die Zeit der Massenbesiedelung des

Nordamerikanischen Kontinents werden dieser und andere Stereotypen analysiert. Es zeigt sich, dass neben Mythen von „bluddurstigen“ oder „noblen Wilden“ so gut wie keine Angaben über den Humor der Nordamerikanischen Ureinwohner zu finden sind. Später hatte vor allem die frühe Photographie und der Film großen Anteil daran, den „stoischen Indianer“ weiter zu fördern, indem sie Ureinwohner so portraitierten, wie sie das (weiße) Publikum sehen wollte – „heroisch“ oder „bluddurstig“, aber niemals humorvoll.

The second part (,The Stoic Indian: White North American Perception of North American Indian Humour‘) consists of a short analysis of the stereotype of the ‘stoic Indian,’ a preconception which has been built up over centuries in the minds of white North Americans. From stories written by the early explorers, such as Columbus and Vespucci, through the period of mass colonisation of the North American continent, this and other stereotypes are dealt with. It shows that, next to the myths of ‘bloodthirsty’ and ‘noble savages,’ accounts on the humour of the indigenous peoples of North America are hard to come by. Later, still photography and film contributed greatly in strengthening the myth of the ‘stoic Indian’ by portraying them in the only way the (white) audience wanted to see them – ‘heroic’ or ‘bloodthirsty,’ but never humorous.

Es ist allerdings eine Tatsache, dass die Ureinwohner von Nordamerika schon immer Humor gekannt und benutzt haben. Im dritten Teil wird ein Blick auf die Geschichte des Humors in deren Kultur geworfen. Humor spielte in den Geschichten alter Stämme eine große Rolle, vor allem jene, den Stammesmitgliedern humorvoll die Grenzen des Akzeptablen aufzuzeigen. Sehr wichtig hier war (und ist) die Figur des „Tricksters,“ ein Erschaffer/Zerstörer, der jedes Geschlecht und jede Gestalt annehmen kann. In vielen Geschichten erleben die Zuhörer, wie Trickster unabsichtlich Dinge erschafft oder zerstört und erkennen sich darin selbst wieder, mit all ihren Schwächen und Stärken. Auch von modernen Autoren wird diese Gestalt immer wieder gerne verwendet.

However, it is a fact that North American Indians have always known and used humour. The third part sheds light on the history of humour in indigenous North American culture. Humour has played a significant role in the tales of old tribes, especially those which showed the people the limits of the socially acceptable. One figure has been (and still is) vital to these

tales – that of the ‘Trickster,’ a creator/destroyer who can shift into almost any shape and gender. In numerous tales, the listeners witness how Trickster accidentally creates or destroys things and see themselves in him/her, with all their weaknesses and strengths. This character is also extensively used by the authors of today.

Nach einer kurzen Abhandlung über die Geschichte des Humors in der Nordamerikanischen Literatur werden die Werke des Autors Drew Hayden Taylor analysiert. Sein Blues Quartett, bestehend aus *Bootlegger Blues*, *Baby Blues*, *Buz’Gem Blues* und *Berlin Blues*, beschäftigen sich humorvoll vor allem mit einem Thema: Der Schwierigkeit, die moderne „Indianer“ damit haben, ihre Traditionen und das moderne Leben in Einklang zu bringen. So kommen Hayden Taylors Charaktere immer wieder in lustige Situationen, indem sie sich „zu indianisch“ oder „zu weiß“ benehmen.

After a short summary of the history of literary humour of North American Indian writers, I analyse the works of Drew Hayden Taylor. His Blues Quartet which consists of *Bootlegger Blues*, *Baby Blues*, *Buz’Gem Blues* and *Berlin Blues* predominantly address one theme: The difficulties that young ‘Indians’ face when trying to combine tradition and modern life. Hayden Taylor’s characters thus frequently amuse the reader by behaving ‘too Indian’ or ‘too white.’

Ganz anders funktioniert der Humor von Tomson Highway. Er setzt in seinen Büchern *The Rez Sisters*, *Dry Lips Oughta Move to Kapuskasing* und *Fur Queen* auf subtile Lacher und benutzt alternierende Ebenen des Erzählens: eine „reale“ Welt und eine, die dem Trickster „Nanabush“ gehört. Dieser spielt den Charakteren in der realen Welt regelmäßig Streiche, auch solche, die tragisch enden, ganz in der tradition des tollpatschigen, nicht vorausplanenden Tricksters der Mythologie. Auch zieht Highway gerne die katholische Kirche durch den Kakau, weil sie u.a. ihn selbst und viele andere Kinder „indianischer“ Herkunft ihren Müttern entrissen und in Internatsschulen gesteckt hat. Dafür rächt er sich mit beissendem Humor.

Contrary to Hayden-Taylor, Tomson Highway employs subtle humour in his books *The Rez Sisters*, *Dry Lips Oughta Move to Kapuskasing* and *Fur Queen*. He uses alternating levels of story – telling: a ‘real’ world and one that belongs to ‘Nanabush,’ the Trickster. Nanabush plays tricks on the ‘real’ characters including such that end tragically. Thus, he/she follows

the tradition of the clumsy, irresponsible Trickster of indigenous mythology. Furthermore, Highway pulls jokes on the Catholic Church, avenging the fact that he and many other children of indigenous descent have been taken from their mothers and put into residential schools in the past.

Thomas King, der einzige Autor in dieser Arbeit, der nicht kanadischer Staatsbürger ist, wird im letzten Kapitel behandelt. Auch seine Werke *Medicine River*, *Green Grass*, *Running Water* und *Truth and Bright Water*, beinhalten einen guten Teil Kirchenkritik, aber auch er beschäftigt sich mit „Hybridity,“ dem Versuch Tradition mit (weißer) Moderne zu verbinden. Seine Protagonisten haben oft den Anschluss an die „indianische“ Gesellschaft verloren und finden sie mit Hilfe von Trickster-artigen Figuren wieder.

The only author in this paper who is not of Canadian descent, Thomas King, is dealt with in the last chapter. His novels *Medicine River*, *Green Grass*, *Running Water* and *Truth and Bright Water*, include a good deal of criticism of the church, too. But he also addresses ‘hybridity,’ the attempt to combine tradition with (white) modern life. His protagonists often loose contact to ‘Indian’ society and re-discover their roots with the help of Trickster-like characters.

12.2 Lebenslauf

LEBENS LAUF

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