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Humor and Hemispheric Consciousness: Chicana/o and Native American Contemporary Art

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Humor is a good weapon against victimization. We Indians are very funny. I'm always impressed at how silly we can be in beautiful ways that would be inappropriate in the normal world.

Jimmy Durham (qtd. in Lippard 66)

Faced with a no-win situation, I finally settled for a tongue-in-cheek attitude. I was exhausted by all the "isms" and ideas that had been formulated for me in American art or American-European art [so] I decided to deal with the element of humor that was my survival.

Rubén Trejo (88)

These reflections made by Durham, a Native American artist, and Trejo, a Chicano artist, bear a striking similitude in their attitude toward the regenerative as well as transgressive power of humor. Scholars in comparative ethnic studies are well aware of the common history, culture and political consciousness between Native American and Chicana/o populations in the United States. Their shared history of displacement, colonization and marginalization has allowed Native and Mexican populations in this country to connect in political, cultural and spiritual ways. Even the traditional markers of difference often established between Native American and indigenous Mexican peoples are ones determined by colonial demarcations and imposed borders. The interdependent and intertwined history between Mexico and the United States further complicated this distinction. In 1848 with the signing of the Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo between the two countries, Mexico was forced to cede nearly half of its territory to the United States. With this dramatic redrawing of the U.S./Mexico border, the indigenous populations in the affected

territory were transformed from indigenous Mexicans to Native Americans practically overnight. Most indigenous people in the affected territory were brutally deterritorialized and displaced by the spirit of Manifest Destiny, their lives violently altered by the relentless stampede of Westward Expansion.

Though Mexicans and Native Americans experienced overlapping histories predating European colonialism, the connection between these two communities was never made more self-evident when in the 1960s people of color in the United States began to organize politically to demand equality and appropriate representation in all aspects of civic life. For their part, Chicana/o writers and thinkers in seminal texts like *el Plan Espiritual de* Aztlán and in various other forms of political activism proclaimed and celebrated the indigenous ancestry of Chicanas/os and in the process established counter-hegemonic alliances with Native American communities in the U.S.

In this essay I argue that the historical, cultural and political connection between Native American and Chicana/o communities is made most visible in the humorous aesthetics of their contemporary art. The use of humor, wit, irony and satire in the work by these artists function in both cases as strategies of cultural survival as well as a means to expose racial, social and gender hierarchies in U.S. dominant culture. Through humor Native and Chicana/o artists found ways to express subaltern or alternative subjectivities that operated against the grain of U.S. institutions of power. Humor can often function as a lure to the unsuspecting observer or viewer who doesn't think a serious political message can possibly be couched within a humorous format. In other words, humor allows the artist or performer to slip in social and political critique when no one really suspects it thus capitalizing on the element of surprise.

Humor has also allowed both groups of artists to directly contest hierarchies established by the institutions of art history, anthropology and archaeology which have traditionally appropriated, colonized or romanticized Native and Mexican cultural property. Within canonical art history, humorous imagery often emerges on the margins of more established and time-honored artistic traditions. Art historians like Wendy Wick Reaves whose work has explored the element of humor in modern art, observed that art historians often have a snobbish distrust toward humor because of the belief that art ought to be taken seriously (5). Moreover, the extreme intellectuality that has defined the practice of art history has also

rejected forms of creative expression that might be easily accessible to a non-academic audience. Speaking in more general terms, in Western culture we often find a general attitude that associates humor with popular culture and the intellect with "high culture." Moreover, humor in the arts is usually connected with subversion and transgression. For example, when Spanish painter Francisco Goya used humor in his work he often did so with the purpose of critiquing the excesses and foolishness of the Spanish monarchy and when British printmaker William Hogarth included humorous aesthetics in his imagery he intended to expose the ills of the socio-economic inequities of the nineteenth-century English class system. To explain why the work of French caricaturist Honoré Daumier was so popular and powerful in spite of repeated censorship by the monarchy, art historian Elizabeth Childs argued that "when the dominant ideology seeks to repress its opposition, the less powerful may forge solidarity and identity through humor and satire" (150).

Native American and Chicana/o artists were cognizant of the subversive element in the history of humor in art and were naturally attracted to it. Humor also became a strategy of survival for Native and Chicana/o artists struggling with the Euro-centric artistic institutions that dominate the United States. Most notably, however, by using humor many Chicana/o and Native American artists effectively turned the tables on the social and cultural status quo of the United States. For centuries, both Native and Mexican communities had been the locus of ridicule and mockery through the construction of derisive stereotypes. In this way, humor became one of the many tools dominant culture utilized to further colonize, marginalize and attack the cultural other. By appropriating humorist strategies, Chicana/o and Native American artists were using the tools of the oppressor not only to empower themselves but also expose the seams of institutionalized racism and discrimination.

What has been widely recognized within the fields of cultural and ethnic studies is that articulations of humor in Western cultures are often saturated with power relations. Humor targeted at underrepresented, disenfranchised and historically marginalized groups tends to enfeeble, scapegoat and emasculate them, thus further reiterating the supremacy of the dominant group. Chicana/o studies scholar Guillermo Hernández pointed out that "stigmatized members of a social group may be subjected to the antagonism or even the hatred of majorities who feel threatened [by this group]" (2). This type of humor also tended to deny the groups being

ridiculed any sense of intellectual capacity and social agency. What cultural studies scholars have observed is that ridiculing stereotypes and mockery directed at ethnic minorities often emerges and increases when dominant society perceives that these groups are not assimilating quickly or well enough to mainstream culture. These constructions are intended to firmly maintain and reify social and cultural boundaries that keep the ethnic Other in line. Stereotypes in particular also have the function of creating kinds of anti-selves, that is, antitheses of what dominant culture should be. Stereotypes, in many ways, function similarly to Edward Said's notion of the Orient constructed by colonial powers seeking to "define Europe (or the West) as its contrasting image, idea, personality, experience" (87).

The comic effect of stereotypes targeted at ethno-racial minorities can only be determined when the in-group, the intended audience for these "jokes," and the out-group, the brunt of the joke, are properly identified. When Chicana/o and Native American artists began using humor in their work, they either turned dominant culture into the out-group or just undermined the binary opposition the in- and out-groups by even poking fun at themselves. While many scholars of humor and culture would argue that humor poses a form of escape from the pain associated with colonization and racism, humor also functions as a tool of defiance and resistance. When marginalized communities go from passive objects of ridicule to active agents of mischief, they are definitely subverting the social order (Maciel and Herrera-Sobek).

Both Native and Mexican culture have suffered a continued form of colonization through the institution of anthropology. The romantic notion of the noble savage dating back to the 19th century has deeply informed readings of indigenous cultures in the Americas. Anthropological studies of both Mexican and Native American communities have tended to circumscribe and Otherize the identities and subjectivities of their subjects by not only primitivizing their cultural practices but also by establishing a clear demarcation between the observer and the observed, that is, the self and the racialized Other. Helen Tiffin argued that postcolonial literatures and anthropologies held the delicate mission of "establishing patterns of reading alterity at the same time as it inscribed the 'fixity' of that alterity, naturalizing difference within its own cognitive codes" (98). Both Chicana/o and Native artists have actively sought to expose and deconstruct this dynamic by reversing the role of the anthropologist and the native object. In Native artist Dan Namingha's oil on canvas painting, *Action-Reversed Roles*

(1989), we see a concrete exchange of cultural positions between the anthropologist and his native object. This image is a self-portrait of sorts where the artist depicts himself dressed as a ritual clown. Ritual clowns are figures that often accompany kachinas, ancestral spirits acting as intermediaries between the worldly and the divine, in Hopi ceremonial dances. These ritual clowns often act in mocking and irreverent fashion during these rites thus representing "ka-Hopi" or improper behavior (Berlo and Phillips 51). Native American studies scholar Kenneth Lincoln has remarked that "Serious men make good *kochares*, or clowns, the Hopi say, for in their language the word for 'clowning' means 'to make a point'" (15). Namingha makes his point by presenting perhaps the most extreme form of "ka-Hopi" for here he is transgressing his role within the colonial order. In *Action-Reversed* Roles, the Native figure has taken control of perhaps the most powerful tool of discursive colonization utilized by the anthropologist, the movie camera, and turned it on the Western world thus reversing the ethnographic gaze.

But Namingha does not show us what his new vision actually sees; he merely focuses on the process of reversal itself. Following the lead of Native artists, Chicana/o artists have also played with a similar type of role-reversal, as was the case of the artistic collective known as Los Anthropolocos. A group of artists from San Diego composed of the brothers Richard Lou and Robert Sanchez, Los Anthropolocos began narrative series on the discovery of white culture in 1991. In this series, the artists took on the personas of two Chicano anthropologists, Dr. Ritchie Lou and Dr. Bobby Sánchez from the fictional country of United Aztlán set sometime in the future. In this country, Anglo and European-Americans who once controlled the world are now extinct very much like the unfortunate though still mysterious demise of the dinosaurs. Drs. Lou and Sanchez have made their mission to uncover the remnants and artifacts of this forgotten culture. The series was composed primarily of still photographs depicting their "scientific" discoveries. In *Captives of Fate* (1995), the anthropologists document perhaps one of their most important findings, namely the capture of an Anglo-Saxon couple in their original habitat and with their basic food staple, the glazed donut. While humorous, the photograph is painfully reminiscent of the images of European anthropologists posing next to new human "specimens" of the "New World." Los Anthropolocos accompanied the picture with the following caption:

> After capturing and tranquilizing these two magnificent specimens, Los Anthropolocos were overcome by a combination of euphoria and grief. They understood the importance of being privileged, figuratively, to travel back to some unspeakable primordial space. To see and touch one's past is frightening. Los Anthropolocos walked the Mountains of the West, just north of Whittier, grieving, tormented and forlorn. Had they reached the end of their life's work, searching for and analyzing the Colorless? And what would become of these godless brutes? Would they be capable of learning language beyond their customary grunts, squeals and belches?

Both Namigha's *Action-Reversed Roles* and Los Anthropolocos's *Captives of Fate* operate under the knowledge that, as postulated by scholars of postcolonial studies Bill Ashcroft, Helen Tiffin and Gareth Griffiths, "European [and Euro-American] texts —anthropologies, histories, fiction, captured the non-European subject within European frameworks which read his or her alterity as *terror* or lack."[1] These Native and Chicano artists are then reproducing that construction of abject alterity often imposed on the exotic Other and are placing it upon the space and body of the colonizer thus underscoring the capriciousness of the colonial gaze. By emulating and then displacing colonial discourse these artists are engaged in what Homi Bhabha calls the "menace of mimicry [implying a] double vision which in disclosing the ambivalence of colonial discourse also disrupts its authority" (129). But Namingha and Los Anthropolocos are not only exposing the seams and constructedness of the colonial order but are themselves also undergoing a process of decolonization that effectively dismantles and exposes Eurocentric codes utilized to define native cultures.

People of color living in the United States are often confronted with the maddening complexity of identity politics. Ethnic labels and categories, often imposed by the dominant culture as well as their own communities, are as much a part of survival as they are constructions that further relegate their presence to the margins. Native and Chicana/o artists both have responded to the frustrations associated with these types of social ordering. In *You're Not an Indian. You Weren't Born on a Reservation* (1993), Cherokee artist Kay

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[1] In their introduction to the third chapter, "Representation and Resistance" 85.

WalkingStick addresses the common stereotype dictating that all Native peoples in North America come from reservations. The artist places her self-portrait next to a red banner to her right bearing the aforementioned statement in the work's title. She looks directly at the viewer with a weary and ravaged look in her face, as if years of taunting and name-calling had taken a toll on her. The entire composition is rendered in flat areas of unmodulated color, reminiscent of the style belonging to the Santa Fé School, a studio program founded by Anglo-Americans in the early 1930s that taught indigenous artists to work in an often romanticizing style (Berlo and Phillips 218). The stereotypical indigenous style that WalkingStick purposely reproduces further reiterates the cultural and even artistic expectations to which Native artists are subjected. In a similar fashion, Chicana/o identity has become an equally contested territory for the artists who came of age during or shortly after the Chicano Movement. Alfred Quiroz, like WalkingStick, also places himself in the middle of controversies surrounding identity issues. In ¡*No Soy Chicano, Soy Aztlano!* [I am not a Chicano, I am an Aztlano] (1999), this Chicano artist represents himself surrounded by various iconographic motifs representing the numerous stereotypes and ethnic labels traditionally directed at Chicanas/os. To his right, a hand points at him with the accusations "eres pocho," "eres gringo" [you are a pocho, you are a gringo], charges often directed at Chicanas/os from Mexicans who might believe Chicanas/os have lost their cultural connections to Mexico and have assimilated into U.S. mainstream culture. Directly above him and to his left, we find a series of vignettes visually and textually depicting stereotypes that define Chicanas/os' identity politics. In the upper-left corner of the composition, the artist is being forced to pray to atone the sins of every Chicana/o and Mexicano who is, as the caption reads, "traidor por nacimiento" [traitor by birth]. This is a reference to the idea furthered by Mexican writers like Octavio Paz and Carlos Fuentes that all Mexican-descent peoples are children of la Malinche, the infamous indigenous translator of Hernán Cortés, and are therefore tainted by her treacherous legacy. Nearby we see a literal representation of the derogatory term "wetback" that presupposes that all Chicanas/os and Mexicans living in the United States swam across the Rio Grande thus breaking U.S. immigration law. Other derisive terms directed at Mexicans emerge in the compositions of this painting: "greaser," "dirty Mexican," and "taco bender." But unlike Kate WalkingStick who seems disoriented and psychologically injured by the stereotypes and offensive name-calling suffered by Native Americans, Quiroz's figure in ¡*No Soy Chicano, Soy Aztlano!* emerges

victorious and whole from the experience, smiling back at the spectator as he points to himself with one hand and holds the U.S. and Mexican flags in the other. In spite of the derisiveness and hurtfulness of these labels, they define the bi-culturalism, bi-nationalism and multiple subject positions that inform the Chicana/o experience. Even in the title of this work, Quiroz rejects the word Chicano in favor for a new term, "Aztlano," an inhabitant of the homeland of Aztlan. Below the figure of artist in this painting, we find a series of hands engaged in various gestures of friendship and goodwill across racial and cultural divides. With *¡No Soy Chicano, Soy Aztlano!* Quiroz explores the delicate tension between the negative but also positive results that come out of stereotyping and name-calling.

The common history of colonialism shared by Native Americans and Chicanas/os has created many similarities in their artistic representation of humor. Native American scholar Paula Gunn Allen made the following statement regarding humor: "Not to make too much of it, but humor is the best and sharpest weapon we've always had against the ravages of conquest and assimilation. And while it is a tiny projectile point, it's often sharp, true and finely crafted" (qtd. in Lincoln 91). Satirical humor has become a particularly powerful tool by which these two groups of artists exert biting critiques of the social order. Chicano/Mexicano artist Enrique Chagoya is widely known for his use of collage elements and rather dark humor to deconstruct colonial history in his work. In *Uprising of the Spirit* (1994), the artist juxtaposes three visual aesthetics within the same composition, namely Mesoamerican, colonial, modern European and pop culture traditions. The image is dominated by two principal figures, Nezahualcoyotl, on the right, and none other than Superman, on the left. Nezahualcoyotl was perhaps one of the most decorated Mesoamerican philosopher kings of the 15th century just prior to the arrival of Europeans to the Americas. Luis Valdéz himself called him "one of the greatest poets America has ever produced" (qtd. in Martínez 46). This king-philosopher here is taking on the man of steel to engage in what promises to be a battle of divine proportions, a confrontation that can be interpreted as the symbolic encounter between European and Indian populations or even the conflict between indigenous culture and U.S. capitalism. While a scene of a Mesoamerican ruler taking on a comic book hero may seem to be tongue- in-cheek to the unsuspecting viewer, upon a closer reading of the iconography we realize that Superman is actually emerging from a horrific scene of pillage, rape and murder taken from the Colonial manuscript Codex Ixtlilxochitl. Chagoya uses the lure of

the comical and the satiric to call attention to the brutal violence that characterized the periods of conquest and colonization.

Like Chagoya, Native artist Jaune Quick-to-See Smith has also combined satiric and ironic commentary with comic book and popular culture aesthetics. In *Paper Dolls for a Post-Columbian World* (1992), Quick-to-See Smith recounts the ill effects that colonization and subsequently U.S. expansionism had on Native people utilizing a rather unorthodox format. Combining the look of a comic strip with the characteristics of a child's paper doll game, the artist exposes the damaging repercussions and genocidal campaigns suffered by Native families in the hands of the U.S. government. She introduces the strip with the first caption: "Paper dolls for a post-columbian world with ensembles contributed by the U.S. government." The following three panels introduce the archetypal Native family: "Ken Plenty Horses," "Barbie Plenty Horses" sporting a Catlin skirt and their son Bruce Plenty Horses. The subsequent four captions describe the clothes worn by this family:

> Flathead Headdress collected by whites to decorate homes after priests and U.S. government banned cultural ways such as speaking Salish and drumming, singing or dancing. Sold at Sotheby's today for thousands of dollars to white collectors seeking romance in their lives.
>
> Special outfit for trading land with the U.S. government for whiskey with gunpowder in it.
>
> Maid's uniform for cleaning houses of white people after good education at Jesuit scholar government school.
>
> Matching smallpox suit for all Indian families after U.S. government sent wagonloads of smallpox-infected blankets to keep our families warm.

Quick-to-See Smith creates a disruptive and almost traumatic effect between the seeming innocence and playfulness of her child-like drawings and the seriousness the stories of cultural oppression and cruelty in her text. As in the case of Chagoya's work, the viewer might be drawn by this the playfulness and element of innocence in her work not expecting biting postcolonial and anti-expansionist critique behind the façade of the image

thus making spectators' feelings quickly go from amusement to guilt and even shame.

Many Chicana/o and Native artists have placed at the center of parody and ridicule the museum as an institution of power that has traditionally contained, curtailed and controlled native cultural practices. Native artists have had to contend with curators and patrons who insist on collecting "authentically Indian" art untouched by any "Western" influences. Chicana/o artists, up until recent years, have been faced with the utter rejection of their work from museum, galleries and the art market altogether. In 1987, Diegueño Native artist James Luna began performing *The Artifact Piece* (1987-90) at the San Diego Museum of Man. Combining the media of installation and performance art, Luna hoped to call attention to the often colonizing and damaging ways in which Native American culture is often put on display in museums. For several hours at a time, Luna placed himself inside a display case situated within the gallery of Native American culture at the museum. Labels were placed close to the artist's body pointing to bruises and marks he had received in drinking and fighting incidents (Berlo and Phillips 3). While the idea of actually putting a human being on display might have seemed absurd and exaggerated to late twentieth-century observers, Luna's piece was nevertheless painfully reminiscent of the nineteenth- and early twentieth-century practice in Europe and North America of putting native peoples of non-European countries in public or museum showings. Some five years later in 1992, the year commemorating the 500th anniversary of Columbus's arrival in the Americas, Chicano-Mexican artist Guillermo Gómez-Peña in collaboration with Cuban-American artist Coco Fusco began enacting their performance piece entitled *Couple in the Cage* (1992) which traveled to various museums in the United States and Latin America. Both artists placed themselves in a cage installed within the museum space. Their attire comprised of a combination of native costumes from various non-Western cultures with elements from popular culture. The props surrounding them included everything from Mesoamerican incense burners to television sets. The labels next to the case related that Gómez-Peña and Fusco were the last surviving specimens of a now extinct tribe from the previously undiscovered island of Guatinau. While audience reactions ranged from amusement to anger to disbelief, the artists were surprised to find that many spectators believed that the fictional display constructed by Gómez-Peña and Fusco was actually real. Like Luna's *Artifact Piece, Couple in the* Cage made spectators uncomfortable and self-conscious about the damaging effects of their own gaze upon the exoticized body of the Other.

The similarities between the humorous aesthetics of Chicana/o and Native American artists have resulted not only in iconographic, stylistic and thematic correspondences and equivalencies in their artistic production, but they have also led to fruitful collaborations between these various artists. For instance, Gómez-Peña would soon join forces with Luna in 1993 for a piece entitled *The Shame-man joins El Mexican't at the Smithsonian's Natural History Museum*, a performance the artists continued enacting until 1996. Gómez-Peña deemed the collaboration appropriate given the similarities in both artists' work, in particular their use of humor: "[…] we both utilize melancholic humor and tactics of 'reverse anthropology' as strategies for subverting dominant cultural projections and representations of Mexicans and Native peoples." Luna, on his part, states that his "appeal for humor […] comes from Indian culture where humor can be a form of knowledge, critical thought and perhaps used to just heal the pain." During the first phase of this performance Gómez-Peña is dressed as a mariachi man bound by a straight jacket. Next to him, Luna paced back and forth taking on the personalities of Native American stereotypes: the "Indian shoe-shiner," the "diabetic Indian," and the "janitor of color." An additional portion to the performance was later added when one evening security guards at the Smithsonian stormed into Gómez-Peña and Luna's dressing room prompted by a suspicion of drug possession because Gómez-Peña was smoking cigarettes and Luna lighting sage. The artists would re-enact this incident during subsequent performances of *The Shame-man joins El Mexican*'t thus allowing a real-life event to inform their repertoire thus putting an uncomfortable critical lens on the racially-charged atmosphere at the Smithsonian.

By drawing these parallels between humorous aesthetics in Chicana/o and Native American art, I do not wish to homogenize or undermine the historical and cultural specificities that are unique to the Native American experience and Chicana/o experience, respectively. Rather, I intend to reveal how the fragmented and de-centered subjectivities of the two groups generated meaningful points of contact between their colonial and postcolonial predicaments. Native and Chicana/o artists utilized humor as a tool to establish markers of both similitude and difference within U.S. postmodern society. On the one hand, their ethnically-specific brand of humor critically resisted co-optation and assimilation into westernized U.S. culture thus allowing Chicanas/os and Native Americans to create a marker of difference *vis-à-vis* the country's mainstream. Simultaneously, however, humor also allowed these two communities to establish indicators of

similitude in relation to each other thereby forging a powerful counter-hegemonic alliance against oppression, racism and discrimination, among other social ills. But the similitude within the humorous aesthetics created by Native and Chicana/o artists is, of course, not coincidental; it is indeed the result of not only a shared history but also of common cultural strategies for dealing with adversity and hardship, practices that predate the arrival of Europeans in the Americas. Various Native artists and writers believe that if there is one element that united indigenous peoples of North America, it is the presence of humor deeply ingrained in their cultural make-up, a characteristic that binds tribe to tribe, including Chicanas/os, into a broader hemispheric consciousness.

If the presence of humor in the work by Native American and Chicana/o artists represents an act of decolonization, it is a procedure that is dynamic and in a constant state of flux, as explained by Helen Tiffin: "Decolonization is process, not arrival; it invokes an on-going dialectic between hegemonic centrist systems and peripheral subversion of them" (95). Humor as conceptualized by these artists does not seek to replace one form of dominance over the other but rather establish a dialogue between inhabitants of the so-called center and periphery thereby creating a hybrid subject that resists precisely these binary opposites that define the colonial order. The hybrid subject depicted by Chicana/o and Native artist, however, is neither stable nor fixed but nevertheless reveals that colonialism and post-coloniality are neither opaque nor impermeable discourses and that, by nature, these elicit counter-discourses and expressions of resistance.

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