A disarming laughter: The role of humor in tribal cultures. An examination of humor in contemporary Native American literature and art.

Abstract
Non-Indians have long considered Indian people to possess little or no sense of humor because they trustingly accept prevailing stereotypes. This dissertation dispels this assumption by showing that humor has served, and continues to serve, an important role in tribal cultures, oftentimes assuming even a sacred position within ceremonies. It begins by examining some of the varied roles which humor played in traditional tribal cultures---the widespread Trickster tradition, clown societies of the Pueblo tribes, Cherokee Booger Dancing, the Potlatch ceremonies of Northwest Coast peoples---and then shows how this tradition carried on into the early twentieth century, and continues in the present-day. After a close analysis of early humorists, such as Alexander Posey [Creek], Will Rogers [Cherokee] and Dan Madrano [Caddo], this study segues into a discussion of how and why humor functions in contemporary Indian Country, with special attention paid to humor's important place in literature, art, music, cartoons, Reservation jokes, and storytelling. The examples presented are not intended to be conclusive but, rather, to serve as a foundation for understanding the various roles which humor plays in present-day Native America, all with an emphasis upon how this practice is rooted in tribal traditions.

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Theories about humour have an ancient pedigree. Plato expressed the idea that humour is simply a delighted feeling of superiority over others. Kant and Freud felt that joke-telling relies on building up a psychic tension which is safely punctured by the ludicrousness of the joke. But most modern humour theorists have settled on some version of Aristotle's belief that jokes are based on a reaction to or resolution of incongruity, when the punchline is either a nonsense or, though appearing silly, has a clever second meaning. However, there is another type of laughter, the laughter of social appeasement and it is important to understand this too. Play is a crucial part of development in most young mammals. Rats produce ultrasonic squeaks to prevent their scuffles turning nasty. The difference between humor and laughter is that humor is a perceptual process while laughter is a behavioral response. People of all ages and cultures respond to humor. The majority of people are able to experience humor, i.e., to be amused, to laugh or smile at something funny, and thus they are considered to have a sense of humor. The hypothetical person lacking a sense of humor would likely find the behavior induced by humor to be inexplicable, strange, or even irrational. Though ultimately decided by personal taste, the extent to which a person will find something humorous depends upon a host of variables, including geographical location, culture, maturity, level of education, intelligence and context. An examination of humor in contemporary Native American literature and art. This dissertation dispels this assumption by showing that humor has served, and continues to serve, an important role in tribal cultures, oftentimes assuming even a sacred position within ceremonials. It begins by examining some of the varied roles which humor played in traditional tribal cultures—the widespread Trickster tradition, clown societies of the Pueblo tribes, Cherokee Booger Dancing, the Potlatch ceremonies of Northwest Coast peoples—and then shows how this tradition carried on into the early twentieth century, and continues in the present-day.