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# Laughing Out Loud: American Indian Comedy as a Force for Social Change

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LAUGHING OUT LOUD:  
AMERICAN INDIAN COMEDY AS A FORCE FOR SOCIAL CHANGE

by

JACOB WARD

(Under the Direction of Alan Downs)

ABSTRACT

Activism entails not only individuals overtly campaigning for changes in public spheres, but in other ways and strategies as well. One of these other avenues is the use of political satire and humor. Comedy publicizes frustrations of American issues, just as sit-ins, walk-outs, or marches do. For the most part, scholars fail to address the importance of humor. This work researches not only the comedic works of Charlie Hill, the 1491s, and other American Indian comedians, but also how their craft possibly alters stances and opinions. These comedians have a voice, and, therefore, deserve examination. This work shows the influence of these comedians by revealing and detailing theories of humor and how comics implement these theories into their routines. By researching humor and the theory behind the craft, this thesis focuses on how American Indian comedians use their profession as a means to advocate for social and political change. The work ultimately argues that scholars need to tap into this approach of social and political activism.

INDEX WORDS: American Indian history, Stand-up comedy, Charlie Hill, The 1491s, Sketch-comedy, Adrienne Chalepah, Deanna (MAD) Diaz, Humor studies, Visual sovereignty, Activism

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by

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## DEDICATION

I dedicate this thesis to my mother, Diane Ward, father, Warren Ward, sister, Katie Ward, and fiancé, Lindsey Bradley. Your uplifting spirits and loving support helped make this work a reality.

## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

Many individuals deserve credit for this work coming to fruition. Published works by Jilian Belanger, Sophie Quirk, Matthew R. Meir, and Casey R. Schmitt guided me throughout my research endeavors. Their publications offered insight into the field of humor studies, and, therefore, gave me the proper knowledge for my examination. Vine Deloria Jr.'s book, *Custer Died For Your Sins: An Indian Manifesto*, deserves recognition as well. His seventh chapter on American Indian humor inspired me to embark on this journey. Drew Hayden Taylor's editorial, *Me Funny*, inserted American Indian comedy at the forefront of the conversation and I greatly appreciated everyone who took part in its creation. Jeff Berglund's examination of the 1491s' comedy and activism certainly bolstered my analysis of the troupe. Reading another individual's work on the comedy group certainly comforted me; perhaps more scholars might follow in his footsteps and cover the 1491s.

Even though I appreciated the scholarly works already set in place, I owe a great deal of thanks to the many people who assisted me in this project. The approachability of both Adrienne Chalepah and Deanna (MAD) Diaz definitely helped me. Each of their perspectives on American Indian comedy provided clarity for my research. I thank Dr. Craig Roell for cultivating a positive and hospitable learning environment in the graduate program at Georgia Southern University. With his positive demeanor, he inspired each of us within the program to strive for greatness. To my fellow cohort members, I thank them for their support. Whenever I experienced a set-back with this work, their kind words helped motivate me to press on. I enjoyed working with my mentor, Dr. Alan Downs; for, his vast knowledge regarding American Indian history certainly assisted me, but I also appreciated his calm demeanor and guidance throughout this process. I am grateful for the many hours he spent editing my drafts, but his words of advice gave me serenity even at the most stressful times. I also thank my committee members, Dr. Michelle Haberland and Dr. Cathy Skidmore-Hess. I appreciate their eagerness to be a part this study. To conclude, I thank the comedians studied; by using their jokes as a proponent of social change, they provided the much needed examples for my research.

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## CHAPTER 1

### INTRODUCTION

Humor can be a tool through which comedians influence their audience. Comedy is subjective in nature; for one person might find a joke or story comical, while another less so. Yet comedy is a tactic often used to influence and manipulate change. Activists from a variety of backgrounds used humor as a tool of influence. Malcolm X incorporated jokes and comical parables into his public statements on social issues.<sup>1</sup> Martin Luther King Jr., first attempted a career as a stand-up comedian prior to his life as a preacher and activist.<sup>2</sup> Although stand-up and sketch comics may not voice their social and political stances via marches, sit-ins, or other forms of peaceful protests, they do influence, manipulate, and hold authority on stage. Stand-up comedians usually perform in front of a live audience and usually speak directly to those in attendance. They form a rapport with the crowd, and use this bonding as part of their routine or set. These types of comics usually do not use props during their set, but rather produce laughter via monologues, stories, and jokes. In sketch comedy, performers act out comedic scenes or vignettes which last up to ten minutes. This form of comedy can be performed on stage in front of others, or through a medium such as television or video. Regardless of the type of comedy, both stand-up and sketch should be considered another form of social activism.

This narrative argues that American Indian comics (both stand-up and sketch) use their craft as a means to take social and political stances, manipulate their audiences via their implied authority on stage, and, while producing laughter, advocate for social and political change. To reinforce this argument, each chapter focuses on three distinct actors in the American Indian comedy arena. The first chapter examines the humor of Charlie Hill. Oneida/Mohawk, Charles Allan Hill burst on the comedy scene when he performed on *The Richard Pryor Show* in 1977. During his career as a stand-up comedian, he used humor

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<sup>1</sup> Malcolm X, “Best of Comedy-Malcolm X” (Collection of Malcolm X Comical Speeches, published on November 23, 2012), Accessed on May 7, 2018, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=EAqKtVJkk7A>.

<sup>2</sup> “Martin Luther King: Stan-Up Comedy Years” (Brief Synopsis, published on February 23, 2015), Accessed on May 7, 2018, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=HS9plRqBM7c>.

to dispel the common stereotypes of the day, combat racism, and fight against the use of Indians as sport mascots. The second chapter examines the comedic works of a sketch comedy troupe known as the 1491s. Using costumes, props, and the implementation of comedic theories, this group first gained a following through their videos on YouTube. They then began touring the United States, performing their sketch comedy routines to live audiences. While each of the first two chapters focus on an American Indian comedic entity, the third chapter explores lesser known American Indian comedians such as James Junes, Ernest David Tsosie III, Deanna (MAD) Diaz, and Adrienne Chalepah. These humorists, like Hill and the 1491s, use their comedy as a form of social and political expression, but, at times, lack the broad exposure to fully detail their effectiveness. Even so, their authority is still as legitimate as their predecessors. This work ends with a summation of research findings, a proclamation for deeper examination of American Indian comics by other scholars, and a push for the importance of comedic activists in general.

### **Key Scholarly Works on Comedy and its Rhetoric**

The concept of the contemporary stand-up comedian evolved in the middle of the twentieth century. Comedy, long entrenched in American society prior to the 1950s, altered its course, from the common joke-tellers, vaudevillians, and radio entertainers, to a new and innovative type of comedic delivery. Stand-up comedians were not actors of humor, like their predecessors, but they were comic orators. They became a new field of public intellectuals, manipulators, and forces of change.<sup>3</sup> A stand-up comic transformed from being merely an entertainer, to an entertainer who persuaded, held power, and took a stand against the current social order via humor.

Constructed from the Ciceronian model, where a speech became a source of amusement, stand-up comedy quickly took shape as a form of popular culture. This archetype incorporated a lone orator offering a humorous monologue a group of people seated close to each other in a venue of some sort, for the purpose of producing laughter.<sup>4</sup> Over the decades of popular stand-up comics, anthropologists,

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<sup>3</sup> Jilian Belaner, "Speaking Truth to Power: Stand-Up Comedians as Sophists, Jesters, Public Intellectuals and Activists" (PhD diss., University of Rhode Island, 2017), 21-2.

<sup>4</sup> Matthew R. Meier and Casey R. Schmitt ed., *Standing Up, Speaking Out: Stand-Up Comedy and the Rhetoric of Social Change* (Abingdon, United Kingdom: Routledge, October 29, 2016), xxiii.

linguists, psychologists, sociologists, scholars of the arts, and performers themselves, researched the effectiveness and impact of this medium as a form of manipulation. These researchers consider themselves scholars of comedy, and contribute to the field of humor studies.

One of the first meaningful additions to the scholarly conversation of the importance of comedy came from Anton C. Zijderveld. A Dutch sociologist, Zijderveld brought up academia's neglect of the examination of comedy's importance in the world.<sup>5</sup> His 1968 article was one of the first which argued that comedy and humor showed us our true social and cultural roots as a society. He suggested comedy and comedians are responsible for unmasking these social nuances in societies. Simply put, Zijderveld's article was one of the first which held the belief that comedy brought forth honest social assessment.

Likewise, Stanley H. Brandes' 1977 work, "Peaceful Protest: Spanish Political Humor in a Time of Crisis," demonstrated humor's impact on society by examining Spanish comics of the 1970s.<sup>6</sup> He explained the context of Spain's inefficient political leadership after Francisco Franco's death, and tied this with the use of comedy as an outlet for free speech and social critique in Spain. With this work, Brandes added to the growing field, and helped make a case for comedy as a form of social criticism.

Lawrence E. Mintz brought forth a stunning contribution, and used the medium of stand-up comedy, specifically, in his study, and argues stand-up comedy was one of the oldest, most universal, basic, and significant forms of comedic expression.<sup>7</sup> Mintz defines stand-up comedy as an encounter between a single performer who behaves comically to an audience. He then covered the history of stand-up comedy in America, dating to the early vaudeville and burlesque days in twentieth century theater. Mintz then focused on notable actors on the rise in popularity such as, Woody Allen, Rodney Dangerfield, Bob Hope, Jack Benny, Red Foxx, and Richard Pryor. Mintz suggests these actors use their craft for social commentary and critique. He argued that the venue of the performance influenced the

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<sup>5</sup> Anton C. Zijderveld, "Jokes and Their Relation to Social Reality," *Social Research*, 1968, 286-311.

<sup>6</sup> Stanley H. Brandes, "Peaceful Protest: Spanish Political Humor in a Time of Crisis," *Western Folklore*, 1977, 331-346.

<sup>7</sup> Lawrence E. Mintz, "Stand-up Comedy as Social and Cultural Mediation," *American Quarterly*, 1985, 71-80.

comic's effectiveness and authority over the audience. The intimate setting of shows forced interaction between the comedian and the audience. After this interaction, by making statements and comments to audience members, the comic formed a bond with them—a process called “working the room.”<sup>8</sup> Furthermore, Mintz asserted that the comedian then establishes their comic persona to the audience, in order to increase effectiveness and authority throughout the audience. Just as first impressions create opportunities to shape relationships, comedians use introductory moments with the audience to their advantage. This can be done in numerous ways, but allows the audience to accept the comic's exclusive status, as well as to adopt the mood of comedic license. The comedian may quip about a specific audience member to produce the chuckles to break the ice. The comic may make a witty remark in order to gain favor with the audience. Regardless of the comedian's approach, these few moments before the routine offer opportunities for which the comic ingratiates himself with the crowd. Having earned the audience's acceptance, the comedian's social critique can begin.

Andrea Greenbaum's scholarship helped bolster the growing field even further. By detailing a comedian's construction of ethos (credibility), and forming comic personae (character), while simultaneously forming Kairos (timing), the author argued that comedy was a form of rhetorical argument.<sup>9</sup> By fusing and blending all of these elements, comedians maximize the impact and significance with their jokes. Furthermore, the author contends that comedians act as cultural critics who surprise audiences by forcing them to experience the shock of the underlying messages embedded in their humor. Therefore, similarly to scholars within academic circles, comedians act as intellectuals who challenge the social hierarchy.

One of the most noticeable shifts among the scholarly conversation of comedy involved a former comedian, Joanne Gilbert. Gilbert brought an insider's examination of how the craft functioned as a medium of social avocation and authority. In her research, she contended that comedians hold a unique

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<sup>8</sup> Lawrence E. Mintz, “Stand-up Comedy as Social and Cultural Mediation,” *American Quarterly*, 1985, 78.

<sup>9</sup> Andrea Greenbaum, “Stand-up Comedy as Rhetorical Argument: An Investigation of Comic Culture,” *Humor*, 1999, 33-46.

position in society.<sup>10</sup> She examined tactics and approaches that comics use such as self-deprecating humor, and argued that these tactics lend to criticizing society in a way that becomes accepted by the audience. The comic, simultaneously, makes himself or herself the focus of the joke, but also externalizes some cultural and social incongruities as the target as well. She also examined female comics such as Roseanne Barr and Phyllis Diller, and challenged the notion that comedy only reinforces preconceived and preinstituted norms regarding social hierarchies.<sup>11</sup>

While Gilbert focused on comedy in reference to gender, Evan Cooper looked at the use of humor and its rhetoric through the lenses of ethnicity and race. Cooper examined Richard Pryor's use of the idiosyncrasies of black culture, to form the term "culturally intimate" humor.<sup>12</sup> Cooper then attributed this type of humor as Pryor's source of power, authority, and overall success on stage. Pryor's capability to use his comedy to critique dominant cultures greatly relied on his ability to make those critiques by using his own cultural subjectivity and perspective.<sup>13</sup> Gilbert's work was not the first to research the powerful comedy of Pryor, but it did inspire other scholars to view comedians in a meaningful and powerful role.

Jonathan Rossing expanded on Gilbert's work, and suggested that Pryor's humor challenged dominant cultural assumptions and stereotypes. He stated that Pryor spoke truth to power.<sup>14</sup> Moreover, Rossing implemented the term "parrhesia" or blunt humor, and argued that Pryor's comedy served as a medium for which a member of an oppressed group could speak to their oppressors. Rossing contended that the comedian's humor caused members of the audience to think critically about society, culture, and the power hierarchies of the day. By looking at the works of Gilbert and Rossing, one can surmise that comedy provides a medium for which dominant members and norms of society can be challenged, while simultaneously giving an outlet for those who may not otherwise have adequate means to be heard or

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<sup>10</sup> Joanne Gilbert, *Performing Marginality: Humor, Gender, and Cultural Critique* (Detroit, Michigan: Wayne State University Press, 2004).

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>12</sup> Evan Cooper, "Is it Something He Said: Mass Consumption of Richard Pryor's Culturally Intimate Humor," *The Communication Review*, 2007, 223-247.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>14</sup> Jonathan Rossing, "Critical Race Humor in a Postracial Moment: Richard Pryor's Contemporary Parrhesia," *Howard Journal of Communication*, 2014, 16-33.

listened to.

Sophie Quirk offered her input into the field with her book, *Why Stand-Up Matters How Comedians Manipulate and Influence*. She reinterpreted the craft of comedy as a form of manipulation, suggesting that comedians often consciously manipulate their unknowing audience.<sup>15</sup> She used evidence to show that, at times, audiences become aware of their role in the process of manipulation. Quirk divided narration into three parts, each serving a specific purpose. The first examined comedic theory, and the manipulative nature of jokes themselves. In the second, she examined crucial techniques, tactics, and approaches that comedians use to manipulate their audiences. The third section used examples to theorize the influence of stand-up comedy upon the public. Can humor legitimately alter one's opinion or stance on an issue? Quirk attempted to answer this question in this part of her work. She examined the possible social, political, and cultural impact of the medium of comedy. Quirk's book ultimately argued that comedy itself holds the power to argue, and has true purpose as a vehicle of influence.

Matthew R. Meier and Casey R. Schmitt compiled selected works from scholars from diverse fields and schools of thought. In the introduction, the editors pointed out that comedy holds unique potential to affect serious discourses for change through a comedic medium.<sup>16</sup> The editors organized the collection into four thematic sections. To conclude each, they inserted a response by a senior scholar. The four sections include, "Stand-Up is Comedy," "Stand-Up is a Physical Act," "Stand-Up is an Active Process," and "Stand-Up is an Assertion of Resistance." Even though each part served its own specific purpose and held its own set of arguments, the main theme throughout the editorial work remained constant. With Meier and Schmitt overseeing the project, the authors demonstrate that comedy holds a valid place as a mode of expression for social alterations. Their editorial bolstered the validity of the field's past scholarly works, while also showing the promise of this field's future.

One of the most contemporary academic contributions to the field of comedy and its rhetoric

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<sup>15</sup> Sophie Quirk, *Why Stand-Up Matters: How Comedians Manipulate and Influence*, (London, United Kingdom: Bloomsbury, 2015).

<sup>16</sup> Matthew R. Meier and Casey R. Schmitt (ed.), *Standing Up, Speaking Out: Stand-up Comedy and the Rhetoric of Social Change* (Abingdon, United Kingdom: Routledge, October 29, 2016), xxi.

came from Jilian Belanger. In her dissertation, Belanger deemed humor as an effective means to inform, manipulate, and persuade an audience.<sup>17</sup> She detailed the three major theories of comedy, as well as the five canons of rhetoric. Her work, in general, classified comedy performances as, not only entertainment, but a spectacle of authority to take stances on social, political, and cultural topics.

All in all, the examination of comedy as a means of social persuasion, manipulation, and influence resulted in some noteworthy publications. Yet, these studies are fairly recent, and the field itself remains a young one. Even with its inception and quick growth over the recent decades, gaps remain. Before delving into the voids in recent research, one must understand the theory of comedy itself. How is a joke funny? How does this exchange between the comic and the audience yield to manipulation, influence, and change?

### **Comedic Theory**

Telling jokes and invoking humor may seem like a free-flowing process that lacks little-to-no preparation beforehand, but the truth reveals quite the opposite. Comics use humor in deliberate ways, in order to produce a desired response from their audiences.

Comedic theory can generally be divided into three separate branches, which, in turn, ascribe to three different causes of humor: superiority, relief, and incongruity.<sup>18</sup> Recent studies attribute the last type, incongruity, to be the most well-rounded and convincing theory of the three, as it encompasses wider ranges of joking behaviors. In contrast, the other two theories of jokes, superiority and relief, aid in the explanations of particular types of jokes, but they do not apply in a more general sense. To put it simply, audiences can laugh at a comic's joke without feeling superior, and without alleviating suppressed thoughts, feelings, urges, or desires.

In the early seventeenth century, the superiority theory took root from an English philosopher named Thomas Hobbes. He saw humor as an avenue for humans to profess their own greatness and

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<sup>17</sup> Jilian Belanger, "Speaking Truth to Power: Stand-Up Comedians as Sophists, Jesters, Public Intellectuals and Activists" (PhD diss., University of Rhode Island, 2017).

<sup>18</sup> Sophie Quirk, *Why Stand-Up Matters: How Comedians Manipulate and Influence*, (London, United Kingdom: Bloomsbury, 2015), 20.

success in life.

I may therefore conclude, that the passion of laughter is nothing else but sudden glory arising from some sudden conception of some eminency in ourselves, by comparison with the infirmity of others, or with our own formerly...It is no wonder therefore that men take heinously to be laughed at or derided, that is, triumphed over.<sup>19</sup>

According to Hobbes, laughing at one's own superiority does not always imply the presence of an outside person to whom the comic feels superior. Some instances involve the joker's acknowledgment of them besting either their former self, or their opinion of themselves. Regardless, as Quirk notes, Hobbes' analysis does not encompass all forms of expression of comedy.<sup>20</sup> Laughter involves, at times, instances where the comedian's superiority remains unimportant or is altogether vacant. Therefore, simply describing all comedy by the definition brought forth from the superiority theory does not accurately encompass all humor. Hobbes generalizes comedy as a means for the comic to bask in his or her own greatness, and to feel nothing more than his or her own bloated sense of self. He then targets the audience and describes them as greedy seekers of self-aggrandizement, who have fun at the expense of the defeated and inferior.<sup>21</sup> Even though some jokes dabble in the notion of superiority, Hobbes' theory, in a general sense, does not fully encompass all instances of humor.

An English philosopher and scientist in the Victorian era named Herbert Spencer coined the second theory, known as relief theory. It theorized that any excess emotion or mental energies needed to be released by some activity or action. This did not exclude laughter.<sup>22</sup> Sigmund Freud further expounded on Spencer's theory with his interpretation of human psychology as the struggle with the superego to maintain control over the ego in opposition to the id.<sup>23</sup> With this theory, jokes offer pleasure because they

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<sup>19</sup> Thomas Hobbes, "Human Nature," in *The Philosophy of Laughter and Humor*, edited by J. Morreal (New York: State University of New York Press, 1987), 20.

<sup>20</sup> Sophie Quirk, *Why Stand-Up Matters: How Comedians Manipulate and Influence*, (London, United Kingdom: Bloomsbury, 2015), 21.

<sup>21</sup> Thomas Hobbes, "Human Nature," in *The Philosophy of Laughter and Humor*, edited by J. Morreal (New York: State University of New York Press, 1987), 20.

<sup>22</sup> Herbert Spencer, "The Psychology of Laughter," in *The Philosophy of Laughter and Humor*, edited by J. Morreal (New York: State University of New York Press, 1987), 99-110.

<sup>23</sup> Sigmund Freud, *Jokes and their Relation to the Unconscious*.



create an “economy of psychological effort.”<sup>24</sup> Freud believed some jokes were more psychologically effective, or funnier, than others. These sort of jokes save those laughing from monitoring their thoughts. Freud believed humans blocked their boorish thoughts and ideas to not feel conscious joy from them. Humorous jokes, Freud believed, offer an effective relief from the constant policing of thoughts in which humans participate.

This theory, originally crafted by Spencer and then expanded on by Freud, offers another interpretation of laughter and the joy from it. The implied cause of human pleasure comes from one’s ideas and thoughts that the beholder would usually not allow. The relief theory suggests humans unconsciously feel happiness while experiencing hostile, barbaric, and ignorant thoughts and ideas. Similar to superiority theory, relief theory explains unconscious and conscious motivations for humans laughing at a comic’s jokes in an otherwise inappropriate context. Like the previous theory, relief theory does not fully interpret comedy and humor as a whole. Both superiority and relief examine certain pieces of comedy, but do not analyze humor in a general sense.

The final theory, incongruity theory, suggests that humor occurs from a separation between reality, and the way in which comedians paint reality in their jokes: “the disjointing of expectation and actuality.”<sup>25</sup> This theory explains why humans feel pleasure from jokes as the joy of a discrepancy between “the set of association or progression the story which our experience of the world suggests as natural, and a different set of associations of progression provided by the punchline to the joke.”<sup>26</sup> With this theory, the success of any comedian’s joke lies with the comic’s ability to create a specific set of associations in the minds of their audience. Once this occurs, the comic twists or manipulates those expectations by introducing new associations or meanings into the fold. The comic repeatedly, throughout the set, introduces supposed expectations for the audience and then subverts them.

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<sup>24</sup> Sophie Quirk, *Why Stand-Up Matters: How Comedians Manipulate and Influence*, (London, United Kingdom: Bloomsbury, 2015), 22.

<sup>25</sup> Simon Critchley, *On Humor* (London: Routledge, 2002), 1.

<sup>26</sup> Sophie Quirk, *Why Stand-Up Matters: How Comedians Manipulate and Influence*, (London, United Kingdom: Bloomsbury, 2015), 25.

This theory relies on the notion that all jokes lie on the foundation of the twisting and the manipulating of expectations and associations. Incongruity comedy places the comedian in the driver's seat, and the audience allows the comedian to lead them down a road of trickery, in an exchange for the prize of laughter. Incongruity theory offers a fuller explanation as to why audiences find jokes funny, while also delving into the relationship between the comic and the audience. This reciprocal relationship between the two, is founded on a setting of manipulation. Using this third method as a foundation for their sets, comedians can also include the other two theories into their routines to offer an optimal comedy show. With the comedian directing the audience, he or she holds the authority and power. The result includes the manipulation of the audience, the acknowledgement of global issues, as well as the comic's advocacy for change.

### **The Inclusion of Sketch Comedy**

Recent scholarship, from academics such as Matthew R. Meir and Casey R. Schmitt, suggest that stand-up comedy lends to more effective outcomes regarding manipulation and the advocacy for social change than sketch comedy. They argue that stand-up comedy, more often than sketch comedy breaks the fourth wall.<sup>27</sup> Stand-up comedians openly talk with and to the audience. They create a natural bond with the crowd; therefore, Meir and Schmitt assert, stand-up comics yield more influence than sketch comedians. Sketch comedians, on the other hand, may keep a barrier between them and the audience intact in their performance. While differences between stand-up and sketch comedy exist, both can be used. Sketch comedy, just as stand-up, can be a medium for change.

### **American Indian Comics**

Few scholars focus on American Indian comedians. Yet, through the use of their craft, American Indians discuss injustices and advocate for social change. Drew Hayden Taylor, a stand-up comedian, British Museum lecturer, author, playwright, and successful documentarian, compiled works from several

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<sup>27</sup> Matthew R. Meier and Casey R. Schmitt (ed.), *Standing Up, Speaking Out: Stand-up Comedy and the Rhetoric of Social Change* (Abingdon, United Kingdom: Routledge, October 29, 2016), xix.

American Indian comics, writers, and scholars, who offer their ideas on the nature of Native humor.<sup>28</sup> Authors who contributed to the work hold diverse backgrounds, just as the editor himself. Some hold backgrounds in fiction, visual art, drama, performance, and storytelling. Ian Ferguson's essay explains the use of "in-jokes" in American Indian comedy, and their effectiveness.<sup>29</sup> Another contributor, Karen Froman, tells of her experiences of humor and its effectiveness in university classrooms which yields healing, unity, and tranquility.<sup>30</sup> Thomas King's praises academia for shedding light on American Indian humorists, while simultaneously arguing that over-analyzing Native humor may not be in its best interest. Either scholars may waste too much time and effort in defining why a Native joke yields laughter and miss the purpose of the joke itself, or scholars may apply a definition to American Indian humor to which all comics must adhere.<sup>31</sup> In the end, King's input shows both appreciation that American Indian humor finally receives the attention it deserves among academic circles, while warning scholars of the dangers of over-examining Native humor. All in all, Drew Hayden Taylor's compiled work illuminates the sub-field of American Indian comedy, and shows the need for more exploration into this area.

Another scholarly publication pertaining to American Indian comedians involves the work of Jeff Berglund. In "I'm Just As Indian Standing Before You With No Feathers Popping Out of My Head': Critiquing Indigenous Performativity in the YouTube Performances of the 1491s," Berglund examines two YouTube videos by the American Indian sketch comedy group, the 1491s.<sup>32</sup> He argues that, not only does the troupe's humor act as a vehicle of influence and change, but their craft challenges and motivates other American Indians to resist complicity and assert their sovereignty. Berglund also looks at viewers' feedback of their YouTube sketches, to evaluate how fans and followers of the troupe perceive them. In

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<sup>28</sup> Drew Hayden Taylor, ed., *Me Funny* (Vancouver, British Columbia: Douglas & McIntyre, 2013), 3.

<sup>29</sup> Ian Ferguson, "How to Be as Funny as an Indian," in D.H. Taylor's ed., *Me Funny* (Vancouver, BC: Douglas & McIntyre), 123-132.

<sup>30</sup> Karen Froman, "Buffalo Tales an Academic Trails," in Drew Hayden Taylor's ed., *Me Funny* (Vancouver, BC: Douglas and McIntyre), 133-144.

<sup>31</sup> Thomas King, "Performing Native Humour," in Drew Hayden Taylor's ed., *Me Funny* (Vancouver, BC: Douglas and McIntyre), 169-186.

<sup>32</sup> Jeff Berglund, "I'm Just as Indian Standing Before You With No Feathers Popping Out of My Head': Critiquing Indigenous Performativity in the YouTube Performances of the 1491s," *AlterNative* 12, no. 2 (2016).

general, this article assesses the 1491s use of humor to tackle topics such as racial stereotypes, “redfacing,” and several other subject matters, and how they use this medium as a way for social critique.

Berglund’s “‘Go Cry Over Someone Else’s Tragedy’: The YouTube Activism of the 1491s” focuses on the overall force of the comedy troupe as a source of social change.<sup>33</sup> This article delves into the group’s overall actions on social media platforms such as YouTube, Facebook, and Twitter, and deems the group as motivators and galvanizers. Instead of wallowing in current conditions of American Indians, and holding grudges from their hardship-ridden pasts, Berglund argues that the group acts as a source of political and social movement. He connects the group’s actions as comedians and also as activists ultimately to conclude that the 1491s are a “major force in social change, inspiring Indigenous and non-Indigenous audiences alike” to act for social progress.<sup>34</sup> Berglund deems the 1491s, the comedic troupe, as also; the 1491s, the comedic activists.

### **Thesis Arguments and Goals**

This narrative examines both stand-up and sketch comedians that affiliated with at least one American Indian nation or tribe. With their craft, these comedians manipulate their audiences, either while on stage or via YouTube videos to bring to light social injustices while simultaneously advocating for change.

The thesis begins with an examination of the forefather of American Indian comedians on the national stage: Charles Alan Hill. With a brief biography of his life and his ascension into the limelight, the chapter then examines notable stand-up routines of Hill’s, and ultimately suggests that Hill was the trail blazer after whom all other American Indian comics soon followed.<sup>35</sup>

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<sup>33</sup> Jeff Berglund, “Go Cry Over Someone Else’s Tragedy’: The YouTube Activism of the 1491s, *Australasian Journal of Information Systems* 21, No.0 (2017): 1-14, Accessed on May 10, 2018, DOI 10.3127/ajis.v21i0.1581.

<sup>34</sup> Jeff Berglund, “Go Cry Over Someone Else’s Tragedy’: The YouTube Activism of the 1491s, *Australasian Journal of Information Systems* 21, No.0 (2017): 1-14, Accessed on May 10, 2018, DOI 10.3127/ajis.v21i0.1581.

<sup>35</sup> In many interviews, Hill credits the American Indian comedian Will Rogers (1879-1935), as an inspiration for Hill’s own comedy. A Native himself, certainly Rogers’ work should not go unnoticed, but Hill both paved the way for more American Indian comedians, as well as broke through to the non-Native audience in a more popular way.

The narrative then transitions to a chapter focusing on the 1491s. The sketch comedy troupe, not only use stages across the globe as their venue for influence, but also social media platforms such as YouTube, and the popular TedX Talks informative program. The chapter examines a variety of the group's sketches, and the effectiveness of each. This section also addresses the group's REPRESENT series, and looks at its role in asserting Native voices into potential non-Native viewers. All in all, the chapter argues that the sketch comedians picked up the torch left by Hill. Although they are sketch comics, and not stand-up comics, the 1491s propel American Indian affairs onto the world stage, and provide an avenue for activism and participation to evolve.

The third chapter reveals lesser known American Indian comics. Though they may not be as popular as some others, their routines provide just as much influence. Interviews with some of these comics offer first-hand perspectives of American Indian comedy. This section intends to encourage other scholars to examine these comics as well, and to prove also that American Indian comedians did not cease their craft after Hill. Rather, the future of American Indian comedy seems rather promising.

The narrative serves as a means to demonstrate the effectiveness of American Indian comedy to advocate social change. Scholarship in the field of comedy as a form of social and political influence continues to grow, the sub-field of American Indian comedy should witness development too. Through the craft of comedy, both stand-up and sketch, American Indians insert themselves in the present as positive actors in determining their future.

### **A Brief Discussion of Sources Used**

Even though publications such as Taylor's and Berglund's offer insight into American Indian humor and its effectiveness, there is nevertheless a lack of scholarly source material in this field. YouTube videos, DVDs, podcasts, American Indian newspapers, magazine articles, and documentaries, however, provide insight into the comedians studied. Interviews with Native comedians likewise helped fill the void.

Each chapter involves the interweaving of comedy routines with scholarly works of comedic theory. It is to be hoped that this work encourages more scholars to focus their time and resources on the

role of Native comedy to promote social issues. Perhaps the spirit of Charlie Hill laughs while a white man attempts to examine the meaning of his performances; regardless, the following chapters pay homage to the comedians who use their jokes as forces of change.

## CHAPTER 2

## CHARLIE HILL

Charles Allan Hill was born on July 6, 1951, with Oneida-Mohawk-Cree heritage. Although a man of mixed American Indian ancestry, he openly embraced his Oneida heritage the most.<sup>36</sup> Hill, born in Detroit, Michigan, lived there for his first eleven years of his life. His parents, Norbert and Eileen Hill, wanted the family to learn and appreciate their indigenous culture, so in 1962, Charlie, alongside his brothers Norbert, James, and Richard, moved onto the Oneida reservation in Wisconsin.<sup>37</sup> He remained on the reservation until he turned eighteen and saw the mistreatment of Natives by the nearby Wisconsin non-Native citizens, and the federal government. He later credited this experience as his motivation for his outspokenness, as well as his inspiration to seek change for his people.<sup>38</sup>

During his time on the reservation, Hill attended West De Pere High School, graduating in 1969. After his high school years, he pursued a college education and moved off the reservation and enrolled in the University of Wisconsin-Madison. Naturally personable and a bit extraverted, Hill followed a career path where he could be in front of a group or crowd. He decided to major in speech and drama during his years at UW-Madison.<sup>39</sup> Comedy came naturally to Hill. Later in his life, he said “When someone asks me when I became an Indian comedian, it is like asking Jim Brown when he became a black athlete.”<sup>40</sup> Hill found success in his comedic endeavors while at the university—so much so, he toured Europe as a member of the comedy theatrical troupe known as the La MaMa Experimental Theater Group. Hill soon

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<sup>36</sup> Elizabeth Blair, “Native American Comic Living The ‘Indigenous Dream,’” (MP3 Podcast), *NPR Podcast*, June 21, 2012, Accessed on May 14, 2018, <https://www.npr.org/2012/06/21/155116734/native-american-comic-living-the-indigenous-dream>.

<sup>37</sup> Isaiah Montoya, “Native Comedians Stand Up,” *Native Peoples Magazine*, September/October, 2011, 25.

<sup>38</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>39</sup> Levi Rickert, “Native Comedian Charlie Hill’s Funeral Ceremony on Friday, January 3,” *Native News Online*, January 2, 2014, Accessed on May 14, 2018, <https://nativenewsonline.net/currents/charlie-hills-funeral-ceremony-friday-january-3/>.

<sup>40</sup> Isaiah Montoya, “Native Comedians Stand Up,” *Native Peoples Magazine*, September/October, 2011, 25.

disliked living in New York City, and felt he alienated fellow Natives.<sup>41</sup> Here, Charlie decided to use his humor to advocate for his people. He saw that comedy could reveal problems that he and his fellow American Indian brothers and sisters experienced to his non-Native audiences.

Hill gathered his belongings and headed to Los Angeles, California, where he began to gain a small following with his stand-up comedy routines at local comedy clubs. After a short time networking and cultivating relationships within the comedic scene, Hill began to experience success. In an interview in 2009, Hill claimed that Richard Pryor came to one of his small stage comedy shows in Los Angeles.<sup>42</sup> Pryor later called him on the phone and set up a time for Hill to do a set on Pryor's show. Only after being in the city for roughly four months, Charlie Hill, at the age of twenty-six, performed a stand-up comedy set on national television. Not only had his dream of performing stand-up comedy come to fruition, but also the opportunity for him to address indigenous social and political issues to a non-Native audience.

Hill began his stand-up set with a tactic that Ferguson characterized in his essay "How to Be as Funny as an Indian" called "the trickster."<sup>43</sup> In indigenous cultures across the world, this character was a clever and mischievous entity; for sometimes this being was not human, but another species of animal. But American Indian comedians, such as Hill in this instance, use this approach to tease both Native and non-Native cultural norms. More specifically, Hill greeted the audience by chanting "HiHowAreYa" repeatedly, simulating a stereotypical powwow chant.<sup>44</sup> This introductory joke produced several laughs, and Hill quickly shook his head and smirked. By playing into the stereotype of the chanting Indian, Hill simultaneously reassured and unsettled the audience. This "trickster" approach by Hill, subversively

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<sup>41</sup> Levi Rickert, "Native Comedian Charlie Hill's Funeral Ceremony on Friday, January 3," *Native News Online*, January 2, 2014, Accessed on May 14, 2018, <https://nativenewsonline.net/currents/charlie-hills-funeral-ceremony-friday-january-3/>.

<sup>42</sup> *Goin' Native* "American Indian Comedy Slam," (LOL Comedy Slam, 2009), DVD (LOLflix Stand-Up Comedy Films, 2009).

<sup>43</sup> I., Ferguson, "How to Be as Funny as an Indian," in D.H. Taylor (ed.), *Me Funny* (Vancouver, BC: Douglas & McIntyre, 24-27.

<sup>44</sup> "Charlie Hill on the Richard Pryor Show-1977," *YouTube*, Published on June 3, 2010, Accessed on May 15, 2018, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=545t5SvvyDo>.



flirted with the socially inappropriate behavior to disrupt expectations. This tactic, Amanda Morris argued in her essay, allows them (American Indian comedians) to “share real stories about contemporary Native communities, practices, and ideas that directly counter stereotypes about native peoples.”<sup>45</sup> This quick, but effective, introductory trickster tactic helped Hill build a rapport with his audience. After all, Hill, at this time, was fairly new on the comedic scene and needed to build a reputation for himself. Not only that, but the comedian needed to break the ice regarding more controversial topics he would later introduce in his routine.

Generally speaking, tricksters in many American Indian cultures operate to serve their fellow tribesmen and women. Although in playful ways, these beings often provided a positive spark for their respective tribal communities.<sup>46</sup> Morris argues in her work that American Indian comedians use the trickster motif in their sets as an effective tool and tactic. “Deploying the trickster strategies...simultaneously reassure and unsettle the audience.”<sup>47</sup> She argues that this strategy acts as a medium for American Indian comedians to shed light on their customs, practices, and identity in a way that counters the social stereotype of these people in a well-adopted manner and setting of a comedy venue. When Hill greets the crowd with his “HiHowAreYa” chant, he employed the trickster tactic of simultaneously playing into a stereotype, but also flipping that stereotype on its head. The crowd reacted with laughter and Hill’s opportunity to open minds and take social stances on issues began to take shape as the routine progressed.

After the laughter from the audience subsided from his “HiHowAreYa” introduction, Hill transitioned into addressing the elephant in the room: the notion of a comedian who was an American Indian. He outlined, “I know a lot of you white people have never seen an Indian do stand-up comedy

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<sup>45</sup> Amanda Morris, “Teasing the Funny: Native American Stand-Up Comedy in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century,” in Matthew R. Meier and Casey R. Schmitt (ed.), *Standing Up, Speaking Out: Stand\_up Comedy and the Rhetoric of Social Change* (Abingdon, United Kingdom: Routledge, October 29, 2016), 111-124.

<sup>46</sup> Ballinger, *Living Sideways*; Hyde, *Trickster Makes This World*; and Vixenor, “Trickster Discourse.”

<sup>47</sup> Amanda Morris, “Teasing the Funny: Native American Stand-Up Comedy in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century,” in Matthew R. Meier and Casey R. Schmitt (ed.), *Standing Up, Speaking Out: Stand\_up Comedy and the Rhetoric of Social Change* (Abingdon, United Kingdom: Routledge, October 29, 2016), 111-124.

before. Like, for so long you thought we never had a sense of humor.”<sup>48</sup> With this, Hill addressed the belief that American Indians never joke, and instead maintain a stoic demeanor. He quickly discredited that generalized belief with the punch line, “We never thought you [referencing his predominately white audience] were too funny either.”<sup>49</sup> Hill executed this joke in such a way that he purposefully challenged the stoic and serious American Indian stereotype, and simultaneously inverted this challenged belief onto the audience. He did this in a way in which he hoped, while the comedic act occurred, the audience would begin to open their minds regarding Indian stereotypes, without becoming defensive about preconceived beliefs. Hill’s delicate, but effective approach, used a comedic method called “incongruity.”<sup>50</sup> Hill began the joke by acknowledging that he was acting outside the social (non-Native) norm, as a funny American Indian in the public eye. He then subverted the audience’s expectations by introducing a new focus for the joke: the non-Natives themselves. When Hill quipped, “We [American Indians] thought you [non-Natives] were not too funny either,” he manipulated the audience. He managed expectation and surprise in their minds with this joke. Hill simultaneously acknowledged what he was doing defied the stoic Indian stereotype and kept the audience on their toes by turning the punch-line on non-Natives. He subverted and reworked the social hierarchy in the room with this one nonthreatening joke.

After Hill broke down the stoic Indian stereotype, he began to tackle another subject matter: white expansion. He explained that he belonged to the Oneida tribe and that his people lived in Wisconsin as a part of the Iroquois nation. After this quick description of his heritage he said, “We used to be from New York, but we had a little real-estate problem.”<sup>51</sup> The crowd instantaneously erupted in laughter. In approaching the topic of white encroachment indirectly, Hill allowed the audience to draw the conclusion he was after. Instead of causing the mostly non-Native crowd to feel guilty or uncomfortable for past

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<sup>48</sup> “Charlie Hill on the Richard Pryor Show-1977,” *YouTube*, Published on June 3, 2010, Accessed on May 15, 2018, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=545t5SvcyDo>.

<sup>49</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>50</sup> Sophie Quirk, *Why Stand-Up Matters: How Comedians Manipulate and Influence*, (London, United Kingdom: Bloomsbury, 2015), 24.

<sup>51</sup> “Charlie Hill on the Richard Pryor Show-1977,” *YouTube*, Published on June 3, 2010, Accessed on May 15, 2018, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=545t5SvcyDo>.

governmental actions, Hill instead placed the burden on his people: “We” had the real-estate problem. By contorting the punch-line of the joke in this manner, Hill allowed the audience to laugh while simultaneously acknowledge past transgressions.

Hill also utilized a method known as “relief theory.” In this case, laughter can be interpreted as an exchange of energy, with the most effective jokes often providing the audience with an opportunity to not monitor their own prejudice and uninformed sentiments.<sup>52</sup> To expand on this, Quirk noted that, with relief theory, the audience laughs at jokes which otherwise would be deemed as inappropriate or bigoted in normal day-to-day public settings.<sup>53</sup> In his joke, Hill made the “real-estate” problem of his ancestors a problem of their own making. Using relief theory, knowingly or not, Hill allowed the audience the opportunity to find humor in an otherwise traumatic time in history. Most cogent Anglo-Americans deem the conquest of Natives as a blemish in American history, but with Hill’s implementation of relief theory, the audience would laugh about removal. However, even though Native people may have been the focus of the joke, the message still held true and the topic of white encroachment still manifested itself into Hill’s routine. Through the implementation of relief theory during this part of his routine, Hill manipulated the audience and made his point.

Hill addressed non-Native generalizations regarding American Indians again in a later joke. He quickly offered background by telling the story about people asking him if he can speak “Indian” and Hill synchronously educated the audience while providing comedic relief. He taught the audience about the magnitude and variety of American Indian tribes across the United States. “Can you speak Indian is like saying, ‘Hey, can you speak Caucasian?’”<sup>54</sup> By framing the pedagogic parable in this manner, the audience laughed at the joke instead of laughing at themselves—all the while dispelling a prominent misconception.

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<sup>52</sup> Sophie Quirk, *Why Stand-Up Matters: How Comedians Manipulate and Influence*, (London, United Kingdom: Bloomsbury, 2015), 22.

<sup>53</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>54</sup> “Charlie Hill on the Richard Pryor Show-1977,” *YouTube*, Published on June 3, 2010, Accessed on May 15, 2018, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=545t5SvcyDo>.

Newly informed, the audience felt enlightened compared to the individuals described in his joke. Hill implemented a comedic method known as superiority theory here. With this, jokers and audience members alike laugh at another group of people, often times because the group is deemed less intelligent than them.<sup>55</sup> The audience found humor in the uninformed questions from the people Hill described in this joke; thus, the audience by default, felt superior to those individuals. This method was effective because the joke's target was actually the people present. Hill used the method of superiority theory to educate or remind the audience that there are many Native languages and dialects. He manipulated the audience into believing that they were aware of this information prior to Hill's comic commentary when, it is likely they were not.

Hill later spun the Pilgrims' landing in North America in a more pointed way by quipping, "Pilgrims came to this land over 400 years ago as illegal aliens."<sup>56</sup> He continued, "We used to call them white-backs." Hill, thus, flipped the concept of illegal immigration on its head by delicately, but effectively, addressing the topic of illegal immigration in a way in which the audience could accept. Hill's remarks about Pilgrims as the first illegal aliens in this country, suggests his view that some Americans' perspectives on immigration needed correcting. He ended this joke by saying how it can be frustrating when someone visits and never leaves, alluding to the first European settlers of America coming to the continent unannounced and not leaving. Here, Hill used a method called "incongruity theory." He produced laughter by bending and warping associations of what was represented in the joke.<sup>57</sup> The topic of illegal immigration at times involves a claim with xenophobic motivations from whites towards those of color. Whites argue that people of color come in droves, stealing jobs, and wreaking havoc in American society. These sentiments often come with prejudicial undertones along with them. Hill tapped into this and flipped the notion of illegal immigration on its head. He used terminology such as "illegal aliens," and subsequently twisted this into a joke of manipulation and influence by claiming ancestors of

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<sup>55</sup> Sophie Quirk, *Why Stand-Up Matters: How Comedians Manipulate and Influence*, (London, United Kingdom: Bloomsbury, 2015), 21.

<sup>56</sup> Ibid.

<sup>57</sup> S. Critchley, *On Humour* (London: Routledge, 2002), 1.

Anglo-Americans were the first to trespass on North America.

One of the final topics Hill addressed during his comedy routine pertained to treaties. Hill set up his joke by explaining how American Indians dress up like white people for Halloween and get whatever they wanted. He acted as if he knocked on a door and said “Trick or Treaty.”<sup>58</sup> Hill brought to light how European powers, and later the U.S. government, signed agreements with American Indians only to breach them later. This referred specifically to fishing rights that the U.S. Federal government had been infringing upon in the 1970s. Hill again used the method of incongruity here. While audience members expected the comedian to say the customary saying “trick or treat” he added an incongruitous twist with the words “treaty.”

Hill’s roughly five minute stand-up routine affected not only the comedic scene, but also social and political spheres of American life. Hill said later that Richard Pryor loved how “you [Hill] treat the white men like dogs.”<sup>59</sup> Pryor’s words may have been harsh, but Hill did influence Americans. Hill propelled Native people onto the public stage. While, in 1973, people such as Russell Means and Dennis Banks forcefully occupied Wounded Knee, roughly around the same time Hill brought indigenous issues to the foreground with his comedy. Of the two, Hill’s humorous messages were easier to digest to most Americans; thus, Hill soon saw more opportunities to address these issues.

Charlie Hill’s work on *The Richard Pryor Show* allowed him to dispel stereotypes of American Indians, and bridge the gap between Natives and non-Natives. Hill manipulated viewers, influenced the audience, and stood for social change. This routine became the first of many for Hill to prove that comedians can serve as intellectuals.<sup>60</sup> Hill’s influence through his humor had only begun.

After his debut on *The Richard Pryor Show*, Hill experienced mild success as a comedian. He

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<sup>58</sup> “Charlie Hill on the Richard Pryor Show-1977,” *YouTube*, Published on June 3, 2010, Accessed on May 15, 2018, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=545t5SvvyDo>.

<sup>59</sup> *Goin’ Native” American Indian Comedy Slam*, (LOL Comedy Slam, 2009), DVD (LOLflix Stand-Up Comedy Films, 2009).

<sup>60</sup> Amanda Morris, “Teasing the Funny: Native American Stand-Up Comedy in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century,” in Matthew R. Meier and Casey R. Schmitt (ed.), *Standing Up, Speaking Out: Stand\_up Comedy and the Rhetoric of Social Change* (Abingdon, United Kingdom: Routledge, October 29, 2016), 124.

made the first of multiple appearances on *Late Night with David Letterman* in 1985, and played a small role in an episode of *The Golden Girls* that same year. In 1992, he made the first of six appearances on *The Tonight Show with Jay Leno*. In 1995, Hill began writing for the television show *Roseanne* and also took a one-episode role as DJ's teacher, Mr. Hill.

Traditionally, many Thanksgiving episodes of television shows hired non-Natives to play American Indian roles; Hill sought to change this.<sup>61</sup> Writing the episode, Hill wanted to educate non-Native viewers while also keeping the overall family-friendly comedic vibe for which the show was known. Hill, playing a school teacher, quipped to Roseanne, "A long time ago, when my people met the Pilgrims, they [Pilgrims] called themselves saints. English people sure love giving themselves titles."<sup>62</sup> The episode then panned to a flashback scene in which the Pilgrims and the Tsenacommacah gathered for the first Thanksgiving. During the meal, the Pilgrims displayed hardened gender stratification of which the American Indians did not easily comprehend. The colonists' treatment of women disheartened the Natives. Soon after, an American Indian played by Floyd Redcrow Westerman said, "there goes the hemisphere."<sup>63</sup> This, of course, referred to European conquest of the Americas. When Roseanne and the rest of the Pilgrims planned to leave and return home, she said her goodbyes to some of the Indian women and wished she did not have to leave, for she learned a lot and wished to know more. The women replied, "Well, then buy my cassettes in the lobby."<sup>64</sup> This jibe referenced American Indian craft stores that catered to white buyers. This joke involved a bit of relief comedy by addressing the topic of non-Natives buying and selling crafts and other objects which falsely claim to be Native.

Toward the end of the episode, the show flashed back to the present-day as Hill, Roseanne, and her family gathered around the living room after finishing their Thanksgiving feast. They jokingly said to

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<sup>61</sup> Stacy Pratt, "Native American Representation in Thanksgiving Movies and TV Shows is Still Problematic, FYI," *HELLO GIGGLES*, Published on November 22, 2017, Accessed on May 16, 2018, <https://helogiggles.com/reviews-coverage/television-movies-native-americans-thanksgiving/>.

<sup>62</sup> "Roseanne S8 Ep09- The Last Thursday in November," *YouTube*, Published on November 20, 2007, Accessed on May 16, 2018, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=pNiMJQO94ss>.

<sup>63</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>64</sup> *Ibid.*

Hill, “On behalf of the Pilgrims, thanks for feeding us.”<sup>65</sup> Conquest of American Indian land was no laughing matter, but Hill found a way to find humor in it.

Roseanne then thanked Hill for teaching her family about Native cultures. The show ended with the group performing the “Friendship Dance” around the living room, and the screen faded to black. The episode provided enlightenment about the Native side of Thanksgiving, rather than outright comedy. The main goal of the show was to teach the predominantly non-Native television audience about the American Indian perspective of Thanksgiving. With his role of writer and actor in this episode, Hill inserted a Native perspective into the show. He made viewers across the country reevaluate the holiday. Hill did not overtly criticize the holiday, but he caused people to ponder the historical context of Thanksgiving.

During this episode of *Roseanne* Charlie Hill incorporated what some scholars coin as “in-jokes” into his humor. The whole objective of in-jokes revolves around the means of inclusion. Comedians use this so that the crowd, more or less, understands the context and underlying meanings of the jokes told. People do not need prior information or exposure Native ways of life or world views, in order to grasp the point of the joke. This type of comedy allowed viewers of various ethnic backgrounds to feel included in the humor, and, in the case of American Indian humor, in-jokes tend to be for both Natives as well as non-Natives.<sup>66</sup> The main purpose of these types of jokes within the general sphere of comedy, involved their accessibility. Hill incorporated numerous in-jokes into his comedy in the previous routines and performances discussed; yet, as his career continued, Hill also directed humor to his own Native people and their way of life.

In 2000, Sandra Osawa produced a film entitled as *On & Off the Res' With Charlie Hill*. The documentary catalogued Hill’s upbringing, journey to stand-up comedy and major contributions to the profession while simultaneously showing racist undertones embedded in American society towards other groups. Early in the film, Hill joked that America should just be called “Europe junior.”<sup>67</sup> He said this

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<sup>65</sup> Ibid.

<sup>66</sup> Ian Ferguson, “How To Be As Funny As An Indian,” in Drew Hayden Taylor, *Me Funny* (Vancouver, British Columbia: Douglas & McIntyre, 2013), 125.

<sup>67</sup> *On & Off the Res' With Charlie Hill*, Produced by Sanda Osawa (Upstream Productions, 2000), DVD.

because in his mind America really manifested itself from Anglo Saxon cultures and did not adopt a new culture after its independence. Hill used incongruity here; he offered comic relief by merging actuality with what was reality in the joke.<sup>68</sup> Hill challenged the very notion of “American exceptionalism.” He implied that America was merely a mirror of Europe; thus, American nationalism and notion of exceptionalism was, in itself, a fallacy. Hill’s quick joking remark offered comedic relief, while also challenging the very notion of Americanness.

Hill’s joke plays into the argument that Philip Deloria and Michelle Raheja suggest in their works, claiming that, after affiliating with Europe for many generations, Americans felt lost and insecure in their national identity. Thus, Americans adopted their version of American Indianess. Philip Deloria coined this practice as “playing Indian,” where white men dress in red-face. Deloria pointed out that “playing Indian” was a warped and false representation of Natives in general. In short, through their ethnocentric lenses, Americans falsely and offensively replicated the look of American Indians in order to help in their search for a new identity.<sup>69</sup> Examples of this can be found in the use of American Indians as American sports mascots, dressing up in “traditional” Indian garb, and falsely claiming American Indian identity and heritage.

Hill also addressed the topic of American Indian sports mascots. He noted that this practice exemplified how America had become numb to racism, so much so that the nation became oblivious to the act of adopting American Indians as mascots for their beloved sports teams. All in all, this documentary offered an insider’s perspective on the life of Charlie Hill. It simultaneously told of his life journey and provided background for the goals of performing his comedy.

In 2005, the fifty-four year old Hill performed at the Winnipeg Comedy Festival. At this point in his career, Hill was an established comedian. Roughly a minute into his stand-up routine Hill explained

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<sup>68</sup> Sophie Quirk, *Why Stand-Up Matters: How Comedians Manipulate and Influence*, (London, United Kingdom: Bloomsbury, 2015), 25.

<sup>69</sup> Philip Deloria, *Playing Indian*, (Yale University Press, 1998).



that he recently visited “Washington Deceit.”<sup>70</sup> The purpose of the joke was subtle but clear; it pointed to the litany of false promises and broken treaties by the Federal government. Hill relied on incongruity theory here for the joke’s effectiveness. He manipulated the name of the capital city of the United States, brought forth a new association with this word-play and added a level of social and political meaning in his routine in a compelling, yet subtle way.<sup>71</sup>

Throughout the many centuries of interaction between Natives and non-Natives, Anglo powers broke treaties and promises with Native groups. This habit continued once America broke from Britain; formal agreements between the American Federal government and Native nations would be breached from the American side. This treachery could not go unnoticed; therefore, Hill’s joke addressed the “deceitful” nature of American politicians.

Later on in this routine, Hill addressed another permeating issue in Indian country: the abundance of whites claiming American Indian heritage. Hill asked for everyone in the audience to shout out their American Indian tribal affiliation. After their response he replied, “Fantastic. Just what I thought. I heard someone, out there, say Wannabee.”<sup>72</sup> Anglo-Americans have adopted a fascination with Indians and their culture. Historian Vine Deloria, Jr. explained it best:

Whites claiming Indian blood generally tend to reinforce mythical beliefs about Indians. All but one person I met who claimed Indian blood claimed it on their grandmother’s side. I once did a projection backward and discovered that evidently most tribes were entirely female for the first three hundred years of white occupation. No one, it seemed, wanted to claim a male Indian as a forebear... A male ancestor has too much of the aura of the savage warrior, the unknown primitive, the instinctive animal, to make him a respectable member of the family tree. But a young Indian princess? Ah, there was royalty for the taking.<sup>73</sup>

Hill addressed this white cultural appropriation of American Indian ways of life in a comical, but

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<sup>70</sup> “Charlie Hill on The Comedy Network (Winnipeg Comedy Festival),” *YouTube*, Published on June 3, 2010, Accessed on May 17, 2018, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=QOf-3TShBio>.

<sup>71</sup> Sophie Quirk, *Why Stand-Up Matters: How Comedians Manipulate and Influence*, (London, United Kingdom: Bloomsbury, 2015), 25.

<sup>72</sup> “Charlie Hill on The Comedy Network (Winnipeg Comedy Festival),” *YouTube*, Published on June 3, 2010, Accessed on May 17, 2018, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=QOf-3TShBio>.

<sup>73</sup> Vine Deloria Jr., *Custer Died For Your Sins: An Indian Manifesto* (Norman, Oklahoma: University of Oklahoma Press, 1969), 3.

effective way with his fictional tribe “Wannabee.” He explained how Americans almost worship American Indian elders by placing pictures of them on their wall. He made his point by explaining that Americans do not see American Indians doing the same with pictures of white people on their walls. Hill’s jokes shed light on the fact that Anglos, at times, habitually adopt an artificial version of American Indianess. This warped or contrived perception frequently, as Hill alluded to, does more harm than good.

Hill then went back to focusing on Wannabees and how they can feel more at home when attending American Indian Powwows. He explained that he wrote a commercial advertising the use of a fictional commodity Hill coined as “Generikee.”<sup>74</sup> The commercial claimed that the product would cause Wannabees to have American Indian heritage and be able to feel more comfortable at Powwows. The product “increased wisdom, restored earthiness, and made one unified with the universe.”<sup>75</sup> This line, of course, harkened back to stereotypes. He ended his fictitious advertisement by stating: “Side effects may include: suicide, poverty, disease, religious persecution, and general loss of land.”<sup>76</sup> Hill’s punch-line alluded to the plight and struggles in which his fellow American Indians have experienced since conquest.

Hill used a combination of incongruity as well as in-jokes here. This routine focused on a serious topic in the guise of an advertising campaign. He traversed through topics of one institutionalized structure to another.<sup>77</sup> He painted the harsh experiences of American Indians in a more digestible manner, by discussing specific historical plights of Native people in the form of a pharmaceutical drug advertisement. Even though the audience laughed, Hill’s stand-up routine, successfully delivered a serious point: Non-Natives have habitually adopted American Indian culture at the expense of American Indians.

In 2009, Charlie Hill hosted and performed a comedy special, *Goin’ Native: American Indian Comedy Slam*, featuring a number of American Indian comedians all sharing the stage for the first time.

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<sup>74</sup> “Charlie Hill on The Comedy Network (Winnipeg Comedy Festival),” *YouTube*, Published on June 3, 2010, Accessed on May 17, 2018, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=QOf-3TShBio>.

<sup>75</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>76</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>77</sup> A. C. Zijderveld, “Jokes and Their Relation to Social Reality,” *Social Research* 36 (1936): 286-311.

J.R. Redwater tackled the issue of alcoholism in a routine about his failed attempt to take back his peoples' land in an intoxicated state on a plane.<sup>78</sup> Vaughn EagleBear, in one of his jokes, addressed Native alcoholism with, "Three Indians walk out of a bar sober."<sup>79</sup> He paused for roughly ten seconds, and then replied to the audience's laughter with, "What? It could happen."<sup>80</sup> These comedians performed to a mostly Native crowd; thus, they delivered a style of joking deemed "our-jokes." These differed from "in-jokes" in that, where comedians deliver "in-jokes" to both American Indians and non-Natives, "our-jokes," in this instance, usually encompass the way of living and cultures of American Indians.<sup>81</sup> Dissimilar to in-jokes, our-jokes can be less accessible, and, at times, may need translation or further explanation for those outside of the Native community. Of course, Natives and non-Natives alike knew the association of American Indians and alcoholism, but these comedians used a sense of communal ties with their comedy that non-Natives may not have fully understood. This technique of our-jokes provided both Redwater and EagleBear opportunity to influence and promote social issues with their humor. Prior to his routine, Hill mentioned that he believed comedy was a vessel of freedom of speech. He stated that very few individuals used comedy to address issues.<sup>82</sup> With this, Hill articulated the motivation for his work: to reveal and discuss problems within society

Another example of Hill's use of incongruity humor is when he told the audience about how a white man in a previous show became angry at Hill's jokes, and told him to go back to where he came from. Hill told the audience, "So I camped in his backyard."<sup>83</sup> Hill's punchline brought laughter because the outcome was incongruous to what the white man in the joke expected. The joke made the point that American Indians lived on the land prior to Europeans. While the joke produced laughter, it also offered

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<sup>78</sup> *Goin' Native: American Indian Comedy Slam*, (LOL Comedy Slam, 2009), DVD (LOLflix Stand-Up Comedy Films, 2009).

<sup>79</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>80</sup> *Goin' Native: American Indian Comedy Slam*, (LOL Comedy Slam, 2009), DVD (LOLflix Stand-Up Comedy Films, 2009).

<sup>81</sup> Ian Ferguson, "How to Be as Funny as an Indian," in D.H. Taylor's ed., *Me Funny* (Vancouver, BC: Douglas & McIntyre), 128-9.

<sup>82</sup> *Goin' Native: American Indian Comedy Slam*, (LOL Comedy Slam, 2009), DVD (LOLflix Stand-Up Comedy Films, 2009).

<sup>83</sup> *Ibid.*

an alternative perspective on topics such as immigration. In joking that Hill camped in the white man's backyard, Hill humorously set the record straight that whites migrated onto an occupied continent.

Hill further noted that whites should show more gratitude for Native people since Indians helped white colonists survive on the newly settled continent, and that the United States, in the process of nation-making, replicated democracies such as the Iroquois Confederacy. He then told the audience that Indians helped Americans outlast the British in the Revolutionary War. He exclaimed, "We told them, 'hide behind the tree.'"<sup>84</sup> The effectiveness of this joke was based in its simplicity. Hill used incongruity to articulate the effectiveness of guerilla tactics over conventional linear formations in skirmishes and battles during the war.<sup>85</sup> They learned this tactic, Hill stressed, from American Indians.

Hill's stand-up comedy routine addressed a variety of social and political topics. He brought up subjects such as racism, stereotypes, cultural appropriation, alcoholism, and poverty. But the comedian aired these heavy topics in a way that was receptive to the audience. At one point during his set, he addressed whites saying, "This is not white bashing, it is just some spiritual spanking your people should have gotten over 400 years ago."<sup>86</sup> He joked further and said that white people do not look white, but more like raw hot-dogs which appear pinker in pigmentation.<sup>87</sup> Hill joked gently, but forcefully. While he incorporated incongruity into his jokes for effectiveness, he also fused in-jokes and our-jokes into his routines as well. His work exemplified that comedy influences, manipulates, and advocates for change in a non-confrontational way.

Charlie Hill paved the way for other American Indian comics to follow. A group called the Powwow Comedy Jam (PCJ)—an intertribal group of four comics Marc Yaffee, Jim Rule, Vaughn EagleBear, and J.R. Redwater—shared the stage with Hill, and used their humor to address social issues.

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<sup>84</sup> *Goin' Native: American Indian Comedy Slam*, (LOL Comedy Slam, 2009), DVD (LOLflix Stand-Up Comedy Films, 2009).

<sup>85</sup> Jilian Belanger, "Speaking Truth to Power: Stand-Up Comedians as Sophists, Jesters, Public Intellectuals and Activists" (PhD diss., University of Rhode Island, 2017), 15.

<sup>86</sup> *Goin' Native: American Indian Comedy Slam*, (LOL Comedy Slam, 2009), DVD (LOLflix Stand-Up Comedy Films, 2009).

<sup>87</sup> *Ibid.*

Around the time of the event in 2009, the public learned of Hill's ongoing battle with lymphoma. A cancerous disease which affects the immune system, Hill's condition caused his health to worsen and this group picked up the torch and toured across the country using comedy to address Native issues. PCJ called him "the godfather of Native American stand-up."<sup>88</sup>

*Goin' Native* showed the impact of Hill on not only Americans, but also on American Indians. *Native Peoples Magazine* described Hill as "a trailblazer for all Native American comedians."<sup>89</sup> He became a role model for subsequent American Indians who decided to use comedy as an outlet to dispel Indian stereotypes. *Windspeaker*, a column within *Native Peoples Magazine*, also attributed Hill to be the founding member of American Indian stand-up. In the publication, the comedian, Don Burnstick, thanked Hill by saying, if it was not for Charlie Hill, he would not have a career."<sup>90</sup> Even as Hill reached his final years of his life, he continued to insert himself into the growing arena of American Indian comedy.

In 2009, Hill participated in an endeavor to bring light to the historical stereotyping of American Indians portrayed in films. In *Reel Injun*, Hill worked alongside other American Indians such as Adam Beach, Chris Eyre, John Trudell, and Russell Means. The film-makers noted that roughly 4000 Hollywood films falsely shaped images of American Indians to primarily non-Native audiences. Films such as, *Once Were Warriors*, and *Smoke Signals*, acted as correctives to that trend.<sup>91</sup> *Smoke Signals*, directed by Chris Eyre (Cheyenne and Arapaho), in particular became quite popular to both Native and non-Native audiences. Incorporating Native comedy, while addressing historical injustices and current problems in Indian country, the film earned great success, and profits reached upwards of \$4,000,000

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<sup>88</sup> Amanda Morris, "Teasing the Funny: Native American Stand-Up Comedy in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century," in Matthew R. Meier and Casey R. Schmitt (ed.), *Standing Up, Speaking Out: Stand-up Comedy and the Rhetoric of Social Change* (Abingdon, United Kingdom: Routledge, October 29, 2016), 124.

<sup>89</sup> "On the Wind/News," *Native Peoples Magazine*, Published on March 1, 2014, Accessed on May 21, 2018, 14.

<sup>90</sup> Dianne Meili, "[footprints] Charlie Hill: Veteran Comedian Explored Racial Divide," *Windspeaker*, Published in February 2014, Accessed on May 21, 2018, 22.

<sup>91</sup> *Reel Injun*, directed by Neil Diamond, Catherine Bainbridge, and Jeremiah Hayes (Rezolution Pictures International Inc., and the National Film Board of Canada, 2009), YouTube, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=YNZBpn9asng> (Telefilm Canada, 2009).

dollars in box office sales.<sup>92</sup> In the process of dispelling American Indian stereotypes made by Hollywood cinema, Neil Diamond, the director of the documentary, credited humor as a way in which Natives have persevered throughout the centuries. “Humor is the thread in which we natives thread our lives around...it has saved them.”<sup>93</sup> A vessel of humor whom Diamond used to exemplify this point was Charlie Hill.

The director incorporated snippets of Hill’s stand-up routines throughout his career into the documentary. He used some footage of Hill on “The Richard Pryor Show” as well as interviews for *Reel Injun*. Hill’s humorous, yet serious, contributions to the film aided in dispelling the stoic Indian stereotype. For example, when Diamond addressed how counter-culturalists in the 1970s imitated American “Indianess” (wearing headbands and moccasins, etc.) Hill jokingly said, “we...tolerated it [counter-culturalists imitating American Indians] because they had the best smoke.”<sup>94</sup>

Likewise, when describing the resilience of indigenous people, Charlie Hill inserted comedy into the conversation.

We are like the little energizer bunny. The mightiest nation in the world tried to exterminate us, anglicize us, Christianize us, and Americanize us. But we just keep going and going, and I think that energizer bunny must be Indian because of that drum he plays...Next time you have a powwow, have the bunny lead the grand entry... Afterwards we can get around and eat him, because we never waste anything.<sup>95</sup>

Hill’s smile while telling this joke, ended Diamond’s documentary. His jokes and humor dispelled preconceived stereotypes of American Indian peoples and reminded viewers that American Indians are human beings. Kristian Fagan, an aboriginal literature scholar further explained the notion of humor as a tool for survival and endurance when she wrote, “Humour-with its basis in incongruity— offers...an effective way to maintain balance, both affirming and critiquing...communities.”<sup>96</sup> Other

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<sup>92</sup> *Smoke Signals*, directed by Chris Eyre (Miramax, 1998).

<sup>93</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>94</sup> *Reel Injun*, directed by Neil Diamond, Catherine Bainbridge, and Jeremiah Hayes (Rezolution Pictures International Inc., and the National Film Board of Canada, 2009), YouTube, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=YNZBpn9asng> (Telefilm Canada, 2009).

<sup>95</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>96</sup> Kristina Fagan, “Teasing, Tolerating, Teaching,” in D.H.Taylor’s ed., *Me Funny* (Vancouver, BC: Douglas & McIntyre), 44.

comics and scholars mentioned that American Indian cultures fundamentally relied on humor. “Humor was a part of Native culture before first contact. There are traditional ceremonies that incorporate it. Laughter has been a part of Aboriginal culture since the beginning.”<sup>97</sup> Simply put, American Indian cultures and humor are, and always have been, symbiotic.

Hill died on December 20, 2013, on the Oneida reservation in Wisconsin. *Native News Online* attributed humor as one of the ways in which he combatted his battle with lymphoma.<sup>98</sup> During his lifetime, Hill often connected comedy with free-speech. For over forty years, he used humor to address issues that Native people experienced for decades, if not for centuries. He took on a litany of issues with his stand-up routines imploring Americans to realize that American Indians existed; they were not extinct. Less militant and radical than the American Indian Movement (AIM), comedians, such as Hill, used their platform to create change within American Indian communities in a more receptive manner. Hill’s legacy as a comedic activist lived on through new mediums and new approaches to old issues. A group soon arose with a different comedic design for their activism. They used Hill’s way, and molded it to their own liking and skill sets.

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<sup>97</sup> Ian Ferguson, “How to Be as Funny as an Indian,” in D.H.Taylor’s ed., *Me Funny* (Vancouver, BC: Douglas & McIntyre), 124.

<sup>98</sup> Levi Rickert, “Native Comedian Charlie Hill’s Funeral Ceremony on Friday, January 3,” *Native News Online*, January 2, 2014, Accessed on May 14, 2018, <https://nativenewsonline.net/currents/charlie-hills-funeral-ceremony-friday-january-3/>.

## CHAPTER 3

## The 1491s

In 2009 a band of “misfits” took the torch Charlie Hill once held, and led a new wave of American Indian comedy, albeit with a different approach. The comedy team consisted of a group of individuals rather than just one comedian. Dallas Goldtooth (Mdewakanton Dakota-Dine) not only considered himself a comedian, but also an organizer for campaigns for environmental justice. Sterlin Harjo (Seminole-Muscogee) made and organized the production of films. Migizi Pensoneau (Ponca-Ojibwe) wrote and produced films and television shows. Ryan Red Corn (Osage Nation) considered himself a graphic artist and a photographer, and he served on the Pawnee and Osage advisory board. Lastly, Bobby Wilson (Sisseton-Wahpeton Dakota) produced visual artworks.<sup>99</sup> Instead of one individual creating and performing comedic content, these members collaborated together to produce laughs.

Another difference between the 1491s and Hill’s style involved the execution and methodology of comedy. More specifically, Charlie Hill performed stand-up comedy which involved the performer telling jokes to an audience. In contrast, the 1491s performed “sketch comedy,” where performers acted out a brief scene either in front of an audience, or through a medium such as YouTube videos, television, or radio. At times, these types of comedic performers used props to aid in their comedy.

Even though the 1491s differed from Charlie Hill and other stand-up comedians in methods, the theory behind the craft still held true in its effectiveness to manipulate, influence, and address social and political issues. Scholars of sketch comedy argue that it “expresses human experiences and makes the invisible visible.”<sup>100</sup> Theories such as superiority, relief, and incongruity, found in stand-up comedy, also reside in sketch. Moreover, sketch comedy brought with it the opportunity to influence, just as stand-up comedy, and “has long been recognized as an agent of social change.”<sup>101</sup> So, although the execution of

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<sup>99</sup> “The 1491s-Who We Are,” Accessed on June 1, 2018.

<sup>100</sup> P. Brook, *The Empty Space* (New York, NY: Atheneum, 1968).

<sup>101</sup> Michael Karson and Janna L. Goodwin, “Making the Invisible Risible: Sketch Comedy as a Basis for Difficult Dialogues,” *Educational Publishing Foundation* Vol. 1, no. 1 (March, 2016): 67-81.



comedy differed from that of stand-up, these comedians and performers still effectively promoted social topics and influenced the audience.

In the 1491s' case, YouTube became the medium through which the group gained popularity. The group's rise in popularity ultimately led to their appearance on *The Daily Show* with Jon Stewart, as well as *TEDx Talks*.<sup>102</sup> Since their inception, the comedy team has travelled around the world through live performances, panels, and discussion venues, and prepared for their first feature film which has yet to be released.

The 1491s depict contemporary American Indian life in the United States. Just as Hill addressed stereotypes and racism, so do the 1491s. But the group also targets the conflict between tribal traditions and modernity in their material. The group's YouTube subscribers amounted to roughly 50,000 in June of 2018, and, in order to accurately and effectively argue their impact as comedic activists, their sketches need examination.<sup>103</sup>

In March 2010, Bobby Wilson performed one of the group's first popular sketches and subsequently uploaded the performance onto their YouTube channel.<sup>104</sup> In it, the cameraman asked Wilson to address a major contemporary problem on Indian reservations and in communities. Wilson addressed the drunken American Indian stigma, and spoke about how drugs and alcohol ravaged their way of life. But the joke began to surface roughly a minute into the sketch. Wilson articulated that these poisons affected one's body in poor ways, but the cameraman panned to Wilson eating an unhealthy meal at White Castle. While salivating over his unhealthy fast-food dinner, Wilson continued to say that drug and alcohol users poisoned themselves intentionally. Wilson continued his diatribe by boasting that he had remained sober for seventeen years, and claimed he took an oath in front of the creator that he would never poison his own body with drugs. Wilson bragged about his triumphs and healthy lifestyle all the while consuming unhealthy fast-food from the local fast-food burger chain. The sketch also targeted the

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<sup>102</sup> "The 1491s-Who We Are," Accessed on June 1, 2018.

<sup>103</sup> The1491s, "The 1491s," Accessed on March 9, 2018, <https://www.youtube.com/user/the1491s>.

<sup>104</sup> The1491s, "The Poisons That Kill Us," *YouTube*, Published on March 27, 2010, Accessed on June 4, 2018, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=vFmO-sgD4UQ&t=50s>.

impact of the non-Native dominant culture on Native society. The 1491s acknowledged that non-Natives were quick to show pity towards Native struggles, yet they overlooked their very own trials and tribulations.

Wilson, and the rest of the 1491s, aimed for irony in this sketch.<sup>105</sup> He implemented incongruity theory and aligned the narrative of the helpless American Indian alongside general American Indian plight, with the self-harm of most American non-Natives of present day.<sup>106</sup> The 1491s, with this sketch, argued that most Americans harm their bodies too, perhaps not with the stigma of alcoholism, but with their horrible dieting. The focus of the routine addressed, not the American Indian plight, but an American non-Native one. By doing this, Wilson simultaneously poked fun at non-Natives and also asserted the resilience, presence, authority, and sovereignty of American Indians; thus, the comedy troupe turned the social hierarchy on its head. The group did this in two ways; first they asserted themselves via Visual Sovereignty, and secondly, they re-imagined the purpose of Redfacing to flip non-Native notions of being Indian on its head.

Specifically, the 1491s inserted themselves into the non-Native public eye by participating in visual sovereignty. They used the medium of the internet, their YouTube channel, to articulate Native-focused content, in this case notions of the Native plight, to a mass audience.<sup>107</sup> Michelle Raheja's concept of visual sovereignty provided a platform for American Indians to assert their identity, their tribal entities, tribal communities, world views, etc. Simply put, they publicized a Native perspective sketch to the non-Native audience (YouTube), and therefore challenged the non-Native view towards American Indian struggles and hardships.

The group, more specifically Wilson, used a method coined by Michelle Raheja known as "Redfacing"—a form of "playing Indian—in this sketch as well. Wilson portrayed (or played) on the

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<sup>105</sup> The1491s, "The Poisons That Kill Us," *YouTube*, Published on March 27, 2010, Accessed on June 4, 2018, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=vFmO-sgD4UQ&t=50s>.

<sup>106</sup> Sophie Quirk, *Why Stand-Up Matters: How Comedians Manipulate and Influence*, (London, United Kingdom: Bloomsbury, 2015), 25.

<sup>107</sup> Michelle H. Raheja, *Reservation Reelism: Redfacing, Visual Sovereignty, and Representations of Native Americans in Film* (Lincoln and London: University of Nebraska Press, 2010), 101.

notion of the American Indian plight, while simultaneously strategically reframing the perception of American Indianess.<sup>108</sup> Wilson embodied the stereotype—that of the pitiful Indian—and ambiguously subverted it; he offered viewers the opportunity to interpret the sketch further. By flipping non-Native notions of Indianess—such as the Indian plight—the 1491s criticized these exact notions subversively and addressed the plight of American non-Natives, too, via the over consumption of unhealthy foods. While drug and alcohol abuse affected the health of American Indians, Wilson used irony to make the point that being addicted to fast food can be equally damaging as it leads to diabetes, heart disease, and mental illness.<sup>109</sup> Also, in ironically addressing fast food as a “major problem in Indian country of today,” Wilson flipped American Indian issues to suggest that the American population as a whole has an addiction problem with fast food.

In traditional American Indian music, the most integral components consist of percussion and singing.<sup>110</sup> Specific songs and their sound and performances differ from tribe to tribe, but the purpose remains consistent—communal belonging and a relationship with the creator.<sup>111</sup> These musical ceremonies provided American Indians with a connection to each other, their ancestors, and ultimately their creator.

In March 2011, the 1491s uploaded a sketch of troupe member Dallas Goldtooth, teaching a comedian named Tito Ybarra how to sing the AIM song. In the sketch, Goldtooth played Ybarra’s uncle and stressed the importance of learning the song and way of life. Shortly after this introduction, Goldtooth’s character told Ybarra’s character to begin playing the song. After a few seconds, Goldtooth’s character became visibly frustrated and shoved his drum beater into his nephew’s mouth and exclaimed, “You are singing it wrong!”<sup>112</sup> He then played his own drum and broke into song to show his nephew the

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<sup>108</sup> Jeff Berglund, “I’m Just as Indian Standing Before You With No Feathers...,” *AlterNative* 12, no. 2 (2016), 543.

<sup>109</sup> “Effects of Fast Foods on the Human Health,” *ResearchGate*, Published on January, 2018, Accessed on June 4, 2018.

<sup>110</sup> Marcia Herndon, *Native American Music* (Norwood, Pennsylvania: W.W. Norton & Company), 1.

<sup>111</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>112</sup> The1491s, “Singing Lessons,” *YouTube*, Published on May 22, 2011, Accessed on June 5, 2018, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=xJ89HBfaLs4>.

“true” way. He later explained that his nephew needed to play as if he cried for his people as he sang. So, after a lot of practice, the nephew broke into song again and visibly looked distraught. Goldtooth’s character looked at his nephew with a smile and affirmation, while his nephew continued to play the song in this way.

American Indian songs encompass a variety of occasions and serve in different capacities. Some honor the dead, others are used during pow-wows, but the specific AIM song in which these comedians played happened to be one of determination and perseverance. These comedians looked silly while playing this song, “as if they were crying for the people.”<sup>113</sup> They, knowingly in their sketch, played into the crying Indian stereotype, but, in all actuality, the song they sang was one of resilience and uplifting in nature. The 1491s brought up valid points in this sketch. This comical video showed audiences that various songs existed and each had their own purpose. By way of Goldtooth’s character shoving his drum beater into his nephew’s mouth and telling him to sing it as if he were crying, the 1491s showed viewers the true meaning of American Indian song. This silly and satirical sketch poked fun at those who perhaps did not know the true purposes of American Indian songs, and also the relationship between American Indian musical teachers and their mentees.

Tito Ybarra joined Dallas Goldtooth, once again, in another sketch titled, “Self Defense.” In this video, Ybarra and the 1491s addressed the fictional Karate Indian stereotype which Hollywood films such as *The Born Losers* and *Billy Jack* helped form. These films aired in the late 1960s and early 1970s and usually involved a protagonist who claimed American Indian ancestry who also knew the ways of martial arts. In *Billy Jack*, specifically, the main character claimed Navajo heritage and was a practitioner of Hapkido. Billy Jack used this knowledge to defend local hippies against adult authority figures. Films such as *Billy Jack* fell into cultural appropriation, and inaccurately fused Asian cultures with that of American Indians. To add fuel to this fire, the actor who played Billy Jack, Tom Laughlin, was not native; thus, the perpetual false representation of American Indians continued.

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<sup>113</sup> The1491s, “Singing Lessons,” *YouTube*, Published on May 22, 2011, Accessed on June 5, 2018, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=xJ89HBfaLs4>.

In this sketch, Goldtooth played the apprentice, and Ybarra played the role of the master.<sup>114</sup> Goldtooth admitted to Ybarra that he wanted to learn self-defense, and Ybarra confidently noted that he was the right man to come to for this. After this brief introduction, the apprentice charged, and the master immediately defended Goldtooth's blow while shouting "Kee-eye." The apprentice then urged the master to stop with, "the karate stuff," and just worry about strictly self-defense tactics.<sup>115</sup> After this short dialogue, the two individuals used their weapons that they brought. The master brought two bananas, and the apprentice held a broom in his hands. After a brief discussion of the weaponry, the apprentice charged to the "Karate-Master" Ybarra with his broomstick. This proved unsuccessful and the closing scene involved Ybarra's character chasing Goldtooth's character off-screen.

This short, roughly three minute, sketch addressed the Karate-Indian stereotype. Two American Indians played people performing martial arts, and, in doing so, brought attention to the fictional notion of the equation of American Indian and martial arts. With the use of bananas and a broomstick for weaponry, Goldtooth and Ybarra satirically poked fun at the Hollywood stereotype of the American Indian who knew martial arts. This fictional blend of Asian and American Indian cultures had no historical accuracy, and the 1491s used this video to dispel the myth.

Goldtooth and Ybarro played into these Hollywood generated stereotypes of "Indianness" to show just how absurd these non-Native formed notions of what being Native looked like. Performers such as Billy Jack offered a false sense of what being Native is—a martial artists who uses his fists and feet to fight oppression—so, Goldtooth and Ybarro did the same. They implemented a method coined by Raheja as "Redfacing," and subverted and bent these falsified and artificial views of "Indianness," and also questioned and critiqued these refracted images of "Indianness."<sup>116</sup> Through the act of playing Indian via the strategic use of "Redfacing", these performers manipulated preconceived perceptions of "Indianness,"

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<sup>114</sup> The1491s, "Self Defense," *YouTube*, Published on May 22, 2011, Accessed on June 6, 2018, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=oBM7xa7gUXE&t=94s>.

<sup>115</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>116</sup> Mishuana Goeman, "Introduction to Indigenous Performances: Upsetting the Terrains of Settler Colonialism," *American Indian Culture* V. 35, no. 4, (2011), 5.

questioned the authority of those notions, and influenced viewers to do the same.

In May of 2011, the 1491s foccused on “medicine men” in the sketch “Slapping Medicine Man.” Ybarra, Goldtooth, and Ryan Red Corn each paid the slapping Medicine Man a visit, and told him their problems and struggles. Ybarra vented about how he had no singing voice and felt lethargic all the time. The slapping Medicine Man asked, “Well do you party a lot?”<sup>117</sup> Ybarra said “Yes,” and the slapping Medicine Man quickly gave him a slap to the face to correct his behavior. After his recovery from the hit, Ybarra then complained about being overweight to which the slapping Medicine Man lived up to his title once again.

When Goldtooth visited the slapping Medicine Man, he complained about losing his family, job, and how his friends do not spend time with him. The slapping Medicine Man then asked Goldtooth if he drank alcohol and if he gossiped. Goldtooth replied, “from time to time” and slapping Medicine Man reacted by slapping him.

The final visitor, Ryan Red Corn, asked slapping Medicine Man if he could receive an American Indian scholarship for higher education. Ryan Red Corn, who is lightly pigmented, offended the slapping Medicine Man with this question, and so Red Corn received a hand to the face. This particular section of the routine provided the most satire. This sketch addressed cultural appropriation. Often, American Indian communities experience non-Natives adopting their culture without consent. Red Corn, who would pass as white, requesting an American Indian scholarship exemplified just that.

This satirical sketch contained a simple, but direct purpose: to destroy habitual rationalization that casts blame and guilt onto others for one’s own conditions and situations. In short, this sketch addressed accountability.<sup>118</sup> True, performers in this sketch fell victim to the oversimplification of issues such as, obesity, depression, gossip, unemployment, poor relationships, and so on, but the Medicine Man failed to

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<sup>117</sup> The1491s, “Slapping Medicine Man,” *YouTube*, Published on May 26, 2011, Accessed on June 7, 2018, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=MVWLHMZ-ceE>.

<sup>118</sup> Jeff Berglund, “Go Cry Over Someone Else’s Tragedy’: The YouTube Activism of the 1491s, *Australasian Journal of Information Systems* 21, No.0 (2017): 1-14, (6), Accessed on May 10, 2018, DOI 10.3127/ajis.v21i0.1581.

give these individuals what they wished to hear. Instead, he delivered a blunt and sharp slap to the face. Under the comment section of the YouTube video, viewers voiced their responses. One wrote, “If only today’s medicine man was this serious about slapping some sense into the younger generation. Nowadays you see that most are in it...for the financial opportunities...much like the white man that many of them complain about.”<sup>119</sup>

While some of the 1491s work focused on relations between non-Natives and American Indians, racism, stereotypes, and cultural appropriation, this work sought to address an invitation for action. This sketch rejected self-pity, and pushed for the acceptance of one’s control over their own life. It provided as Jeff Berglund stated, “a sovereignty of self that builds on the possibility of transformation and resilience for others.”<sup>120</sup> In this sketch, the 1491s became advocates for self-critique and objectivity, and, moreover, called for a grounded application of determination, perseverance, and strong will.

In September 2011, the group poked fun at the popular film *The Last of the Mohicans*. They named the sketch “Hunting,” and it featured Dallas Goldtooth and Ryan Red Corn.<sup>121</sup> The sketch began with Goldtooth’s character (Chingachgook) meeting Ryan Red Corn’s (Hawk Eye) in the woodlands of the Menominee Reservation in Wisconsin. After both of the men sat down on a fallen tree stump and breaking it Goldtooth’s character lamented, “They do not build them like they used to.”<sup>122</sup> Judging from comments of the video from other Natives, it appeared that the 1491s spoke several Native languages in this sketch seamlessly. Therefore, their dialogue made no sense whatsoever.<sup>123</sup> This alluded satirically to past Hollywood films where the actors who spoke their own Native language strayed from the script and the closed captioning.

After a short period of time talking to one another, the two individuals agreed to hunt the traditional way. They left their broken stump and ran toward game. For the remaining four minutes of the

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<sup>119</sup> Ibid., 7.

<sup>120</sup> Ibid.

<sup>121</sup> The1491s, “Hunting,” *YouTube*, Published on September 1, 2011, Accessed on June 8, 2018, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=7oKtyYIIcaQ>.

<sup>122</sup> Ibid.

<sup>123</sup> Ibid.

sketch, the two ran through the forest to the *The Last of the Mohicans* theme-song.<sup>124</sup> This, of course, imitated the scene in the film where the two characters epically fought off their foes during the French and Indian War. After the four minutes of chasing “game,” and a break in the action for the two to vomit, the characters reached the “game’s” location. They walked into the local Hardee’s and ordered their cheeseburger combo meals. After a few seconds of the two patiently waiting for their food, the screen turned to black and the credits rolled.

Goldtooth and Red Corn used the method of playing-Indian, more specifically, in the form of “Redfacing.” Again, the performers appropriate a non-Native perception of Indianess to refract it.<sup>125</sup> First, their spoken word failed to match with the closed captioning of the video; this was no mistake. Then, they began running through the wilderness while the “Last of the Mohicans” theme song played; further playing on non-Native notions of being Indian. After several minutes of this, the scene of the two vomiting added further exemplification of the performers satirically criticizing these non-Native depictions of their people; they discredited the “fit and able warrior” stereotype that many Hollywood film directors utilize. Finally, the strategy of “Redfacing” climaxed at the end of the sketch when the two reached their destination: a local Hardee’s fast-food establishment. This further refracted the non-Native outlook on American “Indianess”—even American Indians enjoy cheeseburgers.

The comedy in this video addressed the film and also brought to light that many traditional customs for Native peoples have succumbed to the dominant culture. In addition, the inaccurate subtitled translation of the spoken language added humor to the sketch. This would not be the only sketch in which the group addressed cultural appropriation and Hollywood’s depiction of American Indians.

In September of 2012, the group performed a sketch called “I’m an Indian, Too.” In it, Ryan Red Corn dressed as a generic Plains American Indian and danced with random individuals in Sante Fe, New Mexico. While Red Corn danced shirtless, the group incorporated a song titled, “I’m an Indian, Too” by

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<sup>124</sup> Dougie Maclean, *The Last of the Mohicans Soundtrack*, 1992.

<sup>125</sup> Mishuana Goeman, “Introduction to Indigenous Performances: Upsetting the Terrains of Settler Colonialism,” *American Indian Culture* V. 35, no. 4, (2011), 3-18.



Ethel Merman.<sup>126</sup> Also, written on Red Corn's chest was the word "Hipster." This term referred to individuals who followed trends and fashions, but only those which fell under the classification of outside the cultural mainstream. In doing this, Red Corn focused on the people who culturally adopted American "Indianess" into their own way of life. This, of course, became a trend during the 1960s, but is ongoing.

The routine addressed this topic of cultural appropriation, and the desire for non-Natives to adopt contrived American Indian cultural norms into their own non-Native way of life. The song dubbed into the video first appeared in the 1946 musical titled *Annie Get Your Gun* where the main character, Annie, sang the song after Sitting Bull adopted her into the Sioux Nation.<sup>127</sup> With lyrics such as "Big Chief Hole-in-the-Ground" and "Looking like a flour sack with two papooses on my back" some viewers found the musical number offensive and protested outside the New York Theater. With several outcries for the song to be repealed, contemporary performances of this production removed the musical piece.

The group incorporated this culturally insensitive song and used it to provide laughter. At various points throughout the routine, Bobby Wilson danced to the song as well. This added another member of the group into the sketch. The video ended with Bobby Wilson and Ryan Red Corn dancing to the song with audience members. This embrace of the offensive song in the sketch inserted satire into the issue of cultural appropriation.

The sketch ultimately addressed crossing discourses on "Indianess." Even though Ryan Red Corn was Osage, his light pigmentation mimics and signifies whiteness (non-Nativeness). Thus, viewers witnessed Red Corn participating in redface—in a Plains Indian headdress, wearing mismatched socks and a makeshift towel loincloth—and dancing around consumers as they shop at a local Indian Market on Sante Fe Plaza.<sup>128</sup> Red Corn awkwardly danced around in the video, while, simultaneously, American Indians were shown asserting themselves.

The video provided comedic relief owing to the many intersecting and juxtaposed meanings and

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<sup>126</sup> Ethel Merman, *I'm an Indian, Too*, 1946.

<sup>127</sup> Brian Kellow, *Ethel Merman: A Life* (London: Penguin Books, October 28, 2008), 108.

<sup>128</sup> Jeff Berglund, "I'm Just as Indian Standing Before You With No Feathers..." *AlterNative* 12, no. 2 (2016), 553.

portrayals of “Indianess.” Throughout the sketch, viewers saw a montage of mainstream non-Native perceptions of “Indianess,” for example a faux-buckskin costume popularized during Halloween festivities, contrasted with contemporary American Indians showing how obtuse, misguided, and inaccurate those perceptions and stereotypes were. The video, by the end, suggested that comparing these faux stereotypes against reality provides the antidote. “The joke is on the hipster who believes he is embodying something authentic,” when, in reality, the hipster merely replicated a falsified stereotype of American “Indianess” formed by non-Natives.<sup>129</sup>

In November 2012, Ryan Red Corn performed a sketch with comedian White Robertson. “More Indianer than You” began with Red Corn, playing a white individual and claiming that “anything Indians can do white people can do better.”<sup>130</sup> He then boasted that he was an American Indian just as White Robertson’s character. After this claim, the two began comparing their American Indian memorabilia. For instance, Red Corn’s non-Native character owned a larger and more elaborate rug than the American Indian. He owned well-kept lacrosse equipment compared to the Robertson’s. Red Corn also beat on a larger drum than the Robertson’s. Red Corn shot a cross bow well, compared to Robertson, and his Plains Indian tribal regalia was more elaborate.

Of course, Red Corn’s attire and possessions were stereotypes. His character encapsulated what many non-Native’s believed were Native traits and cultures. The goal of the 1491s was to show how American Indian cultures have been generalized by non-Natives and their cultures simultaneously appropriated.

In December of 2013, Dallas Goldtooth and Bobby Wilson uploaded a sketch entitled “Indian Store.”<sup>131</sup> In the video, they acted as two American Indian employees of a Native craft shop, typical of those found in the American southwest. These shops were often found in tourist areas such as Sante Fe

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<sup>129</sup> Ibid., 554.

<sup>130</sup> The1491s, “More Indianer than You,” *YouTube*, Published on November 9, 2012, Accessed on June 12, 2018, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=SGCCFFS7x74>.

<sup>131</sup> The 1491s, “The Indian Store,” *YouTube*, Published on December 23, 2013, Accessed on June 14, 2018, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=NuzPoidV4nI>.

and Albuquerque, New Mexico, where Native artisans also sold crafts and artifacts in accordance to the U.S. Indian Arts & Craft Act of 1990.<sup>132</sup> Owners often employed Natives as day-to-day workers, but not all of these establishments were owned by Natives. As with any business, revenue and profits often become stressed; therefore, directly affecting the authenticity of the goods sold in these stores. In short, due to the desire to make a profit, owners sell, at times, faux Native items instead of genuine Native made goods. Under this context of consumer culture and the selling of “Native” cultural traditions, the comedy troupe critiqued these “superficial, generalized, and limited representations of ‘Indianess.’”<sup>133</sup>

The sketch begins with the two walking into the store and discussing the climax of Steven Spielberg’s *Indiana Jones and the Temple of Doom*, and the infamous “Wrecking Ball” music video sung by Miley Cyrus, all the while sipping on their cups of Starbucks coffee. Even though the conversation seemed mundane, a message was here: this disrupted the Anglo-American view of “Indianess” by participating in and discussing aspects of popular culture.<sup>134</sup> The performers emphatically discussed contemporary world culture while in the setting of a contrived Anglo-Saxon version of “Indianess.” This artificial rendition of Natives often appeals to the non-Native consumer, and their misconstrued views of American Indian as beings of the past. The employees’ conversation of popular culture while in a shop selling faux Native goods, counteract one another.

Soon, the first customer arrived. The two employees then began to speak in a stoic monotone voice. They also advertised the jewelry supposedly crafted by the Washita Nation of Tennessee. In all actuality, this group of black Americans claimed sovereignty from the United States, and resided originally near Washita, Oklahoma.<sup>135</sup> They also promoted their Wi-Fi boosting dream catchers for only sixty-two dollars. The non-Native customers considered this information genuine, and did not question its

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<sup>132</sup> Jeff Berglund, “I’m Just as Indian Standing Before You With No Feathers...,” *AlterNative* 12, no. 2 (2016), 547.

<sup>133</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>134</sup> Jeff Berglund, “I’m Just as Indian Standing Before You With No Feathers...,” *AlterNative* 12, no. 2 (2016), 547.

<sup>135</sup> Paul Barton, “Ancient Africans in Recent America,” *New African*, (October 1, 2004), Accessed on June 14, 2018, <https://www.questia.com/read/1G1-124444699/ancient-africans-in-recent-america-in-continental>.

authenticity.

Finally, toward the end of the sketch, Michael Horse, an American Indian artist and actor seen on shows like *Twin Peaks*, *X Files*, and *Roswell*, and also the TV film adaptation of *Lakota Woman : Siege at Wounded Knee* entered the store. He asked for native books on tribal law, sovereignty, history of colonization, and treaty rights. He then got more specific, and asked if they sold any books by Vine Deloria, Jr. The two employees responded with books pertaining to spirituality, coyote stories, and mother earth; these, of course, were books which further perpetuated the colonizer's perception of "Indianess." Possibly unimpressed, confused, or perhaps after seeing through the employees' facades and their perpetuation of settler-made stereotypes, Michael Horse left the store.

The conversation with Michael Horse showed viewers how out of touch and unaware the two store employees were regarding American Indian social, political, and cultural realities, all while they traded in consumer simulations. This sketch poked fun at not only non-Native tourists, but American Indians as well. Berglund writes, "The two salesmen demonstrated little awareness of the origins and the context of what they were selling, offering inaccurate, simplistic, or exaggerated claims that play to consumers' limited...and/or stereotypical understandings."<sup>136</sup>

These employees exchanged their true heritage and culture, and presented an artificial version which catered more to non-Native customers' perceptions and sense of "Indianess."

As Berglund concluded in an article published in 2016, a portion of the comedic relief from this sketch revolved around the audience's ability to recognize the naïveté of customers, and these customers accepted the falsified crafts and employee demeanor at face value.<sup>137</sup> Comments from this video mirror the humor in this sketch. One viewer wrote, "LMAO. I'm dying because I actually do this at my aunt's store when I come home to visit. I make up interesting stories on the spot about certain items and tell

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<sup>136</sup> Jeff Berglund, "I'm Just as Indian Standing Before You With No Feathers..." *AlterNative* 12, no. 2 (2016), 552.

<sup>137</sup> *Ibid.*

people.”<sup>138</sup>

Overall, this sketch showed how artificial and disingenuous these craft shops are. But the 1491s cast the blame on the consumers, rather than on the shop owners and employees. Rather than pursue more knowledge and culture awareness of American Indians, these consumers fell into their own pre-conceived notions of American Indian cultures. The 1491s addressed these stereotypes, but also critiqued American Indians too; more specifically those who took on a false sense of “Indianess,” which perpetuated non-Native stereotypes of Native peoples. The dual purpose of this video showed how aware, and even self-objective, the 1491s were.

Comedy troupe members Bobby Wilson, Ryan Red Corn, and Migizi Pensoneau participated in the Comedy Central show *The Daily Show* with Jon Stewart in September of 2014. This American late-night television program fused comedy and satire with daily news, and prided itself on being the longest running program on Comedy Central for eighteen years.<sup>139</sup> This opportunity offered the 1491s a chance to expose a broad audience to Native issues, in this case, American Indians as sports mascots.<sup>140</sup> Their target—The Washington Redskins.

They challenged statements made by team owner Daniel Snyder who emphatically said, “The name of our team [Redskins] is the name of our team and it represents honor...pride...and respect.”<sup>141</sup> The 1491s responded that, “The name impairs, disables, and disenfranchises our [American Indians] population.”<sup>142</sup> They added that the most popular types of mascots involved American Indians or animals, and bluntly expressed that Natives should not be mascots. They then referenced the dictionary to show that the term “redskin” was a defined racial slur.<sup>143</sup> They likewise stressed the offensive context of the

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<sup>138</sup> Ibid.

<sup>139</sup> Chris Barton, “Everything Emmy: The Nominees, Reaction, Snubs, and Analysis as HBO Leads, Beyonce Scores, and Streaming Makes Inroads,” *LA Times*, Published on July 14, 2016, Accessed on June 18, 2018, <http://www.latimes.com/entertainment/la-et-st-emmy-nominations-live-updates-emmy-nominations-the-diminished-1468520690-htlstory.html>.

<sup>140</sup> Comedy Central, “The Daily Show-The Redskins’ Name-Catching Racism,” *YouTube*, Published on September 26, 2014, Accessed on June 18, 2018, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=loK2DRBnk24>.

<sup>141</sup> Ibid.

<sup>142</sup> Ibid.

<sup>143</sup> *Oxford English Dictionary*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed., s.v. “Redskin,” Accessed on June 18, 2018, <http://www.oed.com/>.

name by highlighting the fact that historically “redskin” meant a bounty or proof of a killing of an American Indian. Richard King, in his book *\*edskins: Insult and Brand*, tracked the meaning of the term and came to similar conclusions. He looked at the unrelenting use of the team’s name, recognized its offensive undertones and meaning, and concluded that this problem does not fall solely on the NFL franchise, but on America as a whole. He pinned this problem on the erasure of American Indian history in non-Native schools saying, “Americans likely cannot think about the team name and its significance because they have never been taught about American Indians.”<sup>144</sup>

A few minutes into this episode, Jason Jones (a representative of the comedy show) asked fans about the team name. Fans complained about the problems that they would endure if the name changed, equating it to the loss of a family member. Then they discussed the team’s theme song, and how the original lyrics included “scalp them,” and was changed for sensitivity reasons.<sup>145</sup> When the interviewer brought up of the Annenberg Report in 2004, fans embraced it as a source to further back up their stance, but the 1491s, and the crew at *The Daily Show*, used comedy as a means to devalue the source. This document claimed that ninety percent of those surveyed “did not find the name offensive.” However, the participants polled, as noted in the episode, were self-identifying as Indigenous.<sup>146</sup> Which, means, as one Indian in the episode said, “It could have been anyone off the street who said ‘my great-great-great grandmother was a Cherokee princess.’”<sup>147</sup>

After a skeptical question from Jason Jones wondering if anyone would falsely claim Native ancestry, the camera panned to a fan doing just that when he stated: “My great-great grandfather was full blood Cherokee.”<sup>148</sup> In fact, all four of the fans interviewed claimed American Indian ancestry. This

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<sup>144</sup> C. Richard King, *\*edskins: Insult and Brand* (University of Nebraska Press, 2016).

<sup>145</sup> Comedy Central, “The Daily Show-The Redskins’ Name-Catching Racism,” *YouTube*, Published on September 26, 2014, Accessed on June 18, 2018, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=loK2DRBnk24>.

<sup>146</sup> Natasha Dhillon, “11 Reasons to Ignore the Annenberg Survey,” *American University Washington College of Law*, Published on February 11, 2014, Accessed on June 18, 2018.

<sup>147</sup> Comedy Central, “The Daily Show-The Redskins’ Name-Catching Racism,” *YouTube*, Published on September 26, 2014, Accessed on June 18, 2018, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=loK2DRBnk24>.

<sup>148</sup> Comedy Central, “The Daily Show-The Redskins’ Name-Catching Racism,” *YouTube*, Published on September 26, 2014, Accessed on June 18, 2018, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=loK2DRBnk24>.

shock and incongruity offered comic relief for an otherwise serious issue.<sup>149</sup> This provided a comical juxtaposition between those who legitimately hold American Indian heritage and those who falsely do so in order to legitimize their support for a culturally insensitive name. Overall, the 1491s assisted in exposing a broader audience to the problem of American Indians as mascots. Through humor, Americans who tuned into the television show learned more about the issue and its cultural insensitivity.

In October 2017, the 1491s uploaded another sketch onto YouTube. They named the routine “The Halloween Hell No,” and tackled the topic of American Indian costumes at Halloween festivities.<sup>150</sup> Across America, many non-Natives wore stereotypical Plains American Indian attire during the Halloween season. The sketch began with members Dallas Goldtooth and Migizi Pensoneau dressed as characters from the PBS Kids television program *Arthur*. Goldtooth expressed his happiness that Pensoneau persuaded him to attend the celebration and mentioned that he enjoyed the festivities. Then his mood suddenly shifted once a non-Native individual loudly arrived at the party dressed as a plains Indian. After a short period of time, both Goldtooth and Pensoneau approached the man and addressed his costume choice for the evening. He promptly apologized for his insensitivity and said that his mother suffered from cancer and she needed his assistance earlier. This predicament caused him to scramble for a costume at a local store at the last minute and the American Indian costume was the only available choice. Shocked at the apology and for the man’s current struggles, Goldtooth and Pensoneau apologized for their abruptness and bluntness during the conversation. Then, the man stated he needed to leave the festivities anyway for a free speech rally that he coordinated himself. He put on a “Make America Great Again” cap which Donald Trump used as a campaign tool, and walked out of the party. He picked up his Tiki torch and exited the room. This, of course, resembled the white nationalist rallies that occurred in and around Charlottesville, Virginia, in July 2016. This left both Goldtooth and Pensoneau stunned. The action of aligning himself with Donald Trump and his divisive rhetoric, counteracted his previous impression of

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<sup>149</sup> Sophie Quirk, *Why Stand-Up Matters: How Comedians Manipulate and Influence*, (London, United Kingdom: Bloomsbury, 2015), 25.

<sup>150</sup> The1491s, “The Halloween Hell No,” *YouTube*, Published on October 12, 2017, Accessed on June 20, 2018, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=h0kJJ-DTGQQ>.

understanding and unity. This twist at the end of the sketch left viewers to conclude that Trump's divisive rhetoric has caused cultural regression.

A couple members of the group also participated in other forms of activism. Sterlin Harjo directed three feature length films on Native topics, while Dallas Goldtooth helped form an organization known as Indigenous Environmental Network. In July 2016, Goldtooth sat down with Arlo Ironcloud, an employee of the Pine Ridge Radio Station KILI, and discussed topics ranging from protests against oil pipelines, powwow emceeing, endeavors with the 1491s, and juggling the life of an environmental activist with being a member of a comedy troupe. Goldtooth mentioned that his grassroots efforts of protecting the environment from future oil pipeline construction seemed preferable compared to a top-down method from the federal government. He confidently said that his organization's work approached the pipeline issue from a more practical vantage point.<sup>151</sup> He mentioned that he viewed his work with the 1491s as a way to poke fun at activists and activism as a whole.<sup>152</sup> For example, the group uploaded a sketch onto their YouTube channel in which they comically portrayed oil pipeline protesters.<sup>153</sup> The sketch addressed that some protesters did not approach activism in a genuine manner. In the conversation with Arlo Ironcloud, Goldtooth admitted that he made fun of himself and people like him. He confessed that the sketch kept him humble and accountable for not taking himself too seriously.<sup>154</sup> Goldtooth explained that self-deprecating humor grounded him in his intrinsic goals as an environmental protector.

Towards the end of the conversation, Goldtooth clarified why the group seemed to be phasing out and not uploading new content onto their YouTube channel. He explained that the main problem lay with logistics and finances. The group's tours, video content, and merchandise paid little of the troupe's expenditures to support their families.

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<sup>151</sup> "Indigenous Environmental Network: About," Accessed on June 22, 2018, <http://www.ienearth.org/about/>.

<sup>152</sup> Arlo Ironcloud, "Dallas Goldtooth 1491s/Environmental Justice Warrior," (Podcast Stream), *Kili Radio: The Voice of Lakota Nation*, Published on July 13, 2016, Accessed on June 21, 2018, <https://player.fm/series/kili-radio/dallas-goldtooth-1491senvironmental-justice-warrior>.

<sup>153</sup> The1491s, "Pipeline Protest," *YouTube*, Published on November 18, 2015, Accessed on June 22, 2018, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=6Znd3rvf84A>.

<sup>154</sup> *Ibid.*



Migizi Pensoneau, Dallas Goldtooth, and Bobby Wilson also talked with Jessica Gibbs of Vision Maker Media in April 2014. They talked about a few of their favorite videos, balancing comedy with prevalent social issues, their efforts to highlight the different Native cultures in their routines, and the evolution of the comedy troupe over time.<sup>155</sup> During the conversation, the group noted that they wanted to make their audience laugh, and to think critically about social norms and issues in Indian country. In the conclusion of this brief discussion, the group mentioned that they saw comedy as a force for dialogue. Wilson also encouraged other American Indians to create their own indigenous content, and he viewed the 1491s as a role model for other aspiring activists.

In August 2013, Bobby Wilson and Migizi Pensoneau discussed the efforts of the 1491s in an episode of the web series known as “TEDx Talks.” This media organization routinely hosted speakers to discuss their “idea worth spreading.”<sup>156</sup> In this episode, Wilson and Pensoneau brought up American Indians and their place in the modern world. From the very beginning of the presentation, the 1491s influenced with their comedy. During the introductory applause, Bobby Wilson greeted the crowd the same way Charlie Hill did during his time on the “Richard Pryor Show” by chanting, “HiHowAreYa” repeatedly.<sup>157</sup> This nod to Hill allowed Wilson to borrow from his predecessor’s routine and both reassure and unsettle the audience.<sup>158</sup> This blunt joke aided the 1491s in connecting with the crowd; and laid a foundation for discussion of preconceived notions of “Indianess.” They then enlightened the audience by explaining the purpose and mission of the 1491s; “We generally talk about the reclamation of Native

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<sup>155</sup> Jessica Gibbs, “The 1491s,” (Podcast Stream), *Vision Maker Media: Native Stories for Public Broadcasting*, Published on April 7, 2014, Accessed on June 25, 2018, <http://www.visionmakermedia.org/listen/1491s>.

<sup>156</sup> “About TED: Who We Are: Who Owns TED,” TED Conferences LLC, Accessed on June 26, 2018, <https://www.ted.com/about/our-organization/how-ted-works>.

<sup>157</sup> TEDx Talks, “1491s Play With Themselves, Imagery and Reclamation: 1491s at TEDXManitoba 2013,” *YouTube*, Published on August 7, 2013, Accessed on June 26, 2018, [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=MqKvwRrgW\\_Q](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=MqKvwRrgW_Q).

<sup>158</sup> Amanda Morris, “Teasing the Funny: Native American Stand-Up Comedy in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century,” in Matthew R. Meier and Casey R. Schmitt (ed.), *Standing Up, Speaking Out: Stand\_up Comedy and the Rhetoric of Social Change* (Abingdon, United Kingdom: Routledge, October 29, 2016), 111-124.

American imagery, because the colonial mindset...warps everyone's view of what Native America is."<sup>159</sup>

The members detailed the many portrayals of American "Indianess" by non-Natives. Wilson and Pensoneau brought up the romanticized and mythological American Indian stereotype. They addressed the Hollywood stereotypes typified by the Plains head dress or the victimized American Indian that needed saving by the dominant society. They explained their comedy is designed to address these stereotypes and racism, but also providing Natives the means to have their own platform. Pensoneau said toward the end of the talk, "Go cry over someone else's tragedy because we are alive and thriving."<sup>160</sup> He admitted that, yes, their people endured numerous trials and tribulations, but they remained alive.

American Indian representations of beauty, intelligence, innovation, resilience, and wit manifested themselves in the work of the 1491s. While their body of work sheds light on the struggles of American Indian communities, the 1491s chose to fixate and revel in the fact that their peoples persisted. Through their activism via YouTube, Twitter, and Facebook, the group sought to change the representation and perception of American Indian peoples. Although humor was important, the motives of the members of the 1491s remained clear; they galvanized fellow American Indians and thrust them onto the interconnected medium of the internet.<sup>161</sup>

With the method of sketch comedy, the 1491s imitated Charlie Hill and worked as comedic activists. While their basic approach differed from that of stand-up comedians, the 1491s incorporated similar theoretical strategies such as incongruity, satire, visual sovereignty, and redface, into their comedy in order to assert American Indians into the public eye. Although their sketches elicited laughter, their topics offered serious critiques of American culture. Additionally, the group not only criticized non-Native society for its wrongdoings, but also Native people for their lack of self-determination and

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<sup>159</sup> TEDx Talks, "1491s Play With Themselves, Imagery and Reclamation: 1491s at TEDXManitoba 2013," *YouTube*, Published on August 7, 2013, Accessed on June 26, 2018, [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=MqKvwRrgW\\_Q](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=MqKvwRrgW_Q).

<sup>160</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>161</sup> Jeff Berglund, "Go Cry Over Someone Else's Tragedy': The YouTube Activism of the 1491s," *Australasian Journal of Information Systems* 21, No.0 (2017): 14, Accessed on May 10, 2018, DOI 10.3127/ajis.v21i0.1581.

guidance, and their apathetic willingness to promote the commercialization of their own ways of life.

The 1491s cemented themselves as one of the most relevant and influential indigenous comedic groups of their generation. Their popularization also shed light on more under-represented American Indian comics from across the country. These new and upcoming comedians approached their work in unique ways and their content deserves examination as well. Just as the 1491s picked up where Charlie Hill left off, so did these upcoming comedians find inspiration from the 1491s.

## CHAPTER 4

## Under-Represented Comedians

American Indian comedy did not end with the 1491s; rather, American Indian comedians proliferated throughout the comedic scene while the band of misfits rose in popularity. For instance, James Junes and Ernest David Tsosie III banded together and formed James & Ernie Comedy in 2002. As members of the Navajo Nation, they considered themselves “serious about being funny.”<sup>162</sup> Sober and drug free, the duo adopted an approach of fusing comedy and motivational speaking and, in 2009, won “Comedians of the Year,” at the North American Indigenous Image Awards.<sup>163</sup> The group often focused on topics such as day-to-day life, drugs, alcoholism, and child abuse in Indian Country during their performances. With the mixture of seriousness and humor, this duo owed a lot of their success to the groundwork of comedians such as Charlie Hill and the 1491s.

Not only male American Indian comedians, but also female comics followed in the footsteps of the 1491s. Deanna (MAD) Diaz, born in Southern California, and a member of the Tonawanda Seneca within New York state, viewed comedy as a medium of expression and an avenue in which to discuss taboo topics.<sup>164</sup> She joined the Ladies of Native Comedy, and credited a group member, Adrienne Chalepah, for helping her get into the profession.<sup>165</sup> Just as the 1491s gained popularity via social media, so did Diaz; however, her main ambition involved touring around the United States and performing. On March 16, 2018, the Ladies of Native Comedy performed on the First Nations Experience.<sup>166</sup> This American Indian themed and focused television network hosted a special featuring the comedy troupe which ultimately cemented Diaz’s popularity.

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<sup>162</sup> “James and Ernie Comedy Official Web-Site,” Accessed on July 5, 2018, <http://jamesanderniecomedy.com/>.

<sup>163</sup> Ibid.

<sup>164</sup> “Ladies of Native Comedy, Updated in 2018, Accessed on July 6, 2018, <https://ladies-of-native-comedy.com/>.

<sup>165</sup> Deanna (MAD) Diaz, interview by Jacob Ward, *Facebook Messenger*, March 9, 2018, Accessed July 6, 2018, <https://www.facebook.com/messages/t/deannamad>.

<sup>166</sup> “The Ladies of Native Comedy,” *IMDB*, Published on March 16, 2018, Accessed on July 7, 2018, <https://www.imdb.com/title/tt7782348/>.

Yet, even with this gain in popularity, Diaz's success came with the added difficulty of being a female in a male-dominated profession. In a March 2018 interview, Diaz acknowledged the struggles of women in a male dominated field and the affects this brought:

I think my material goes through many filters because we live in a male dominated world. If I make sexual jokes do I get away with it because I am a chubby girl making these jokes? Some will think I am doing it because overt sexuality is marketable, playing into the whole male gaze concept. Am I discrediting Native women? Breaking down that whole sacredness of the woman because I openly share "dirty" things? Or perhaps I'm just another liberal snowflake, social justice warrior who complains like all millennials. Like I said, in the end I'm just sharing my perspective because an ethnic unicorn such as myself doesn't have a voice. Which is why folks like you reach out, trying to hear from the folks you know are rarely heard.<sup>167</sup>

In some of her performances, Diaz discussed both courting men and sexuality as a whole.<sup>168</sup> In a way, she attempted to break down the pious and sacred American Indian stereotype established by Anglo society. However, she mentioned the struggle in her style of stand-up comedy, and the risk of playing into the heterosexual male gaze. Unlike men, female Indian comedians found themselves stuck between these two obstacles. On one hand, they wanted to debunk the Indian stereotype, but, in the process of doing this, they ran into the notion of possibly discrediting and oversexualizing Indian women.

In addition to challenging the female stereotype, Diaz addressed the stresses and pressures of an indigenous woman today: "I talk about my grandmother brainwashing me to 'stay with my own' which is a common thing for anyone who comes from strong 'traditions' it crosses cultural lines for me. But there's the added pressure of knowing that the perpetuation of an entire culture of people rests on your womb."<sup>169</sup> The continuation of an entire culture, way of life, and group of people, potentially weighed on American Indian women. This stress and responsibility of "staying with your own" and producing offspring of American Indian descent was very real.<sup>170</sup>

Diaz also discussed her opinion of the 1491s. She appreciated the fact that the group seemed

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<sup>167</sup> Deanna (MAD) Diaz, interview by Jacob Ward, *Facebook Messenger*, March 9, 2018, Accessed July 6, 2018, <https://www.facebook.com/messages/t/deannamad>.

<sup>168</sup> Gutnecklace Productions, "Deanna M.A.D. Stand Up," *YouTube*, Published on February 21, 2014, Accessed on July 6, 2018, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=aptKg9cFGws>.

<sup>169</sup> Deanna (MAD) Diaz, interview by Jacob Ward, *Facebook Messenger*, March 9, 2018, Accessed July 6, 2018, <https://www.facebook.com/messages/t/deannamad>.

<sup>170</sup> *Ibid.*

honest in their work, and credited the comedy troupe for assisting in the elevation of American Indian voices.

They have been, in my opinion, one of the strongest voices in Indian country. They make comedic sketches that are honest and critical. They have been able to not only call out mainstream society's ridiculous antics with Native people but also calling out our own people for the dumb shit we pull.<sup>171</sup>

Diaz noted that she felt the 1491s were sincere and failed to pander to a specific group of people; rather, they satirize everything. From stereotypes generated from Hollywood, to even activists such as Goldtooth, the 1491s kept honesty at the forefront of their comedy sketches.

Although Diaz acknowledged that comedians hold the power to influence via their craft, she remained adamant that she did not aim to do so with her own. "I'm not seeking to be anyone's moral compass. I'm flawed and human. I'm not trying to sell an idea, I'm just sharing the stupid shit that goes through my head. Getting it out. If you vibe, you vibe and if you don't that's fine."<sup>172</sup> This position is not uncommon in the comedy world. Although some comedians see their work as critiquing the social order or promoting social reform, other comedians find purpose only in laughs. Yet, Quirk argues that, even with this mindset of not attempting to question the social order, comedians did so unintentionally. "The imperative to be funny cannot be divorced from the imperative to deliver social commentary; the two things go hand in hand. Thus, all stand-up sets offer challenge and commentary, whether or not the authors themselves intend to recognize it."<sup>173</sup> Although Diaz may deem some of her comedy as simply trying to produce laughs, her work, nevertheless, was influential. For instance, Diaz's jokes addressing the stereotype of the pious Native woman also informed the audience of the pressures many Native women have to continue the bloodline.

Diaz also noted that some individuals became obsessed with branding themselves as a leader of

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<sup>171</sup> Ibid.

<sup>172</sup> Deanna (MAD) Diaz, interview by Jacob Ward, *Facebook Messenger*, March 9, 2018, Accessed July 6, 2018, <https://www.facebook.com/messages/t/deannamad>.

<sup>173</sup> Sophie Quirk, *Why Stand-Up Matters: How Comedians Manipulate and Influence*, (London, United Kingdom: Bloomsbury, 2015), 30.

change, and, therefore, became too self-righteous for her taste. She pointed to social media such as Facebook and Twitter, and linked these as mediums of convoluting intentions of positive changes in the pursuit of self-branding.

It's just something that's come up a lot over the years that I feel is linked to our use of social media. You're no longer just a human being, you're a brand, an image, and you're constantly curating that image. Living is messy. We're constantly trying to pretend our morals are black and white when I view most things as circumstantial.<sup>174</sup>

Finally, Diaz weighed in on the recent influx of scholars researching American Indian comedy. She questioned the intent of these scholars, wondering if they viewed comedians like herself as the reincarnation of Charlie Hill, or for the woman she actually was. "It's like everyone is looking for the Tyler Perry version of Native comedy."<sup>175</sup> She noted that she felt as if interviewers expect this replication of Hill during the interviewing process and that the outside world wanted to find the next generation's Hill-like-comedian.

Overall, Diaz's approach to comedy would seem to be antagonistic to the role of American Indian comics as activist. She stated, "Humor is definitely a coping mechanism, but I am starting to get the sense that Native comedians are being expected to do comedy like Charlie (Hill)... I feel like we have to get to the point where we can just show Native people being silly and having fun."<sup>176</sup> Yet, when her comedy calls for empathy from the audience she, perhaps unintentionally, questions society at the time and is influencing audience members in the process. As Quirk asserts, "It is probable that only a small minority of comedians ever think of their work as social commentary. This is perhaps a healthy tendency; the imperative to be the funny one."<sup>177</sup> Perhaps if all comedians knew the influence they had on their audience members, the funniness of their jokes might suffer.

Another member of the Ladies of Native Comedy added her perspective. Adrienne Chalepah,

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<sup>174</sup> Deanna (MAD) Diaz, interview by Jacob Ward, *Facebook Messenger*, March 9, 2018, Accessed July 6, 2018, <https://www.facebook.com/messages/t/deannamad>.

<sup>175</sup> Ibid.

<sup>176</sup> Ibid.

<sup>177</sup> Sophie Quirk, *Why Stand-Up Matters: How Comedians Manipulate and Influence*, (London, United Kingdom: Bloomsbury, 2015), 30.

originally from Flagstaff, Arizona, is affiliated with both the Kiowa and Apache tribes in the Oklahoma region.<sup>178</sup> After her performance at her first comedy show in college, Chalepah began to fall in love with the art form. Since that time, she joined the 49 Laughs Comedy troupe.<sup>179</sup> While Diaz claimed she restrained from using comedy as an avenue for addressing social issues, Chalepah more openly used her humor to cast light on Native issues. She clarified this statement by stressing that she addressed issues subtly, rather than overtly. “I do use comedy to make a political statement. But I try to be subtle. I don't want my comedy to be all politics because I want to be free to be a big goof too.”<sup>180</sup> Chalepah's mixed heritage of American Indian and white ancestry, allows her to focus on the problems for mixed bloods in Native and white society. Chalepah connected the two ancestral backgrounds by a joke involving disciplining her children. “When my child acts up in the grocery store the white side of me wants to tell him, ‘no more SpongeBob for you!’, but my indigenous side just wants to beat him.”<sup>181</sup> After she said this, she began to act out the scene of beating her child in public, and then taunting him by calling him a midget.

Chalepah, of course, used a bit of hyperbole in this routine. She did not seriously promote physical violence on children, but the purpose was to expose the stress of having one foot in each world: the Native community and the non-Native world. Another factor that made Chalepah's joke funny involved the use of incongruity.<sup>182</sup> Chalepah briefly introduced the joke by describing her mixed heritage. She then tied this to her parenting habits. She eased the audience in by describing how, when her children misbehaved, the “white” side of her merely desired to revoke television privileges. This provided the audience a backdrop, and also allowed Chalepah to implement incongruity with the next portion of the

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<sup>178</sup> Adrienne Chalepah, interview by Jacob Ward, *Gmail*, March 27, 2018, Accessed July 11, 2018, <https://mail.google.com/mail/u/1/#sent/1624a3d2b435e9f4>.

<sup>179</sup> Isaiah Montoya, “Native Comedians Stand Up,” *Native Peoples Magazine*, September-October 2011.

<sup>180</sup> Adrienne Chalepah, interview by Jacob Ward, *Gmail*, March 27, 2018, Accessed July 11, 2018, <https://mail.google.com/mail/u/1/#sent/1624a3d2b435e9f4>.

<sup>181</sup> Gutnecklace Productions, “Half Breed Age,” *YouTube*, Published on September 30, 2012, Accessed on July 11, 2018, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=cZ9vj1TwPoM>.

<sup>182</sup> Sophie Quirk, *Why Stand-Up Matters: How Comedians Manipulate and Influence*, (London, United Kingdom: Bloomsbury, 2015), 25.



routine. The audience, expecting a punishment similar to revoking television, became shocked when she divulged that the “Native side” wanted to beat her children when they misbehaved.

Another factor that helped the joke’s effectiveness involved the demographic of the audience. With this specific routine, Chalepah performed to a predominantly Native crowd. With this in mind, she catered her comedy to her demographic, and used the “our-jokes” method.<sup>183</sup> She directed her content, in this case mixed heritage, towards people with similar backgrounds and involved them indirectly in the routine.

Chalepah later brought up the issue of Thanksgiving. She opened up about how one side of her wants to cook the food, and the other wanted her to throw it away out of spite. Once again she incorporated incongruity into her routine, and associated her mixed heritage with her actions during Thanksgiving. This paralleling and grouping of one’s heritage with their actions during Thanksgiving offered the comedic relief. As Quirk notes, “Incongruity explains the pleasure received from jokes as the enjoyment of an incongruity between the set of associations...of the story which our experience...suggests as natural, and a different set of associations...provided by the...joke.”<sup>184</sup> In her incorporation of incongruity theory, Chalepah addressed the harsh historical undertones of the Thanksgiving holiday, in a humorous manner.

Chalepah also spoke about how a few of her jokes dealt with white privilege as well as the topic of police brutality. The acts of overzealous law enforcers affected Chalepah and her family directly when a relative of hers died at the hands of police. “It shattered our world. So, I use my voice to bring attention to the fact that the lighter your skin is, the less you have to worry about this, myself included, because I am light-skinned.”<sup>185</sup> Like Diaz, Chalepah also felt pressures and struggles as a female comedian. She mentioned the tremendous toll on American Indian women who carried the burden of raising generations

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<sup>183</sup> Ian Ferguson, “How to Be as Funny as an Indian,” in D.H.Taylor’s ed., *Me Funny* (Vancouver, BC: Douglas & McIntyre), 123-132.

<sup>184</sup> Sophie Quirk, *Why Stand-Up Matters: How Comedians Manipulate and Influence*, (London, United Kingdom: Bloomsbury, 2015), 25.

<sup>185</sup> Adrienne Chalepah, interview by Jacob Ward, *Gmail*, March 27, 2018, Accessed July 11, 2018, <https://mail.google.com/mail/u/1/#sent/1624a3d2b435e9f4>.

of “genocide victims.” She attributed humor as the most powerful tool to combat this burden, but she admitted that she received comments and suggestions about her appearance or parenting skills that men rarely got.

Although less recognizable and less popular than Charlie Hill or the 1491s, Diaz and Chalepah provide further insight into the field of contemporary American Indian comedy. Diaz, preferred to prioritize comedy over a social message, while Chalepah felt the need to stress social problems with her humor. Yet, as Quirk reminded us, even when a comedian deliberately failed to address social issues during a routine, they, nevertheless brought up those issues unintentionally.<sup>186</sup> Some of these under recognized comics, such as Adrienne Chalepah, fell under the created term “comedic activist.” However, others, such as Deanna (MAD) Diaz, failed to box herself into this category. Regardless of the desired purpose of their work, either to address issues or merely to provide a setting of laughter, these comics influenced audiences.

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<sup>186</sup> Sophie Quirk, *Why Stand-Up Matters: How Comedians Manipulate and Influence*, (London, United Kingdom: Bloomsbury, 2015), 30.

## CHAPTER 5

### CONCLUSION

Charlie Hill's appearance on *The Richard Pryor Show* in 1977 allowed non-Native viewers to witness the humor of an American Indian. He addressed topics such as racism, stereotypes, American Indian sports mascots, tribal sovereignty, and Hollywood's depiction of Native peoples. He mixed humor and social commentary during his performances because, as Hill said, "when it comes to Indian people, America is stuck on stupid. America will never be right until they make it right with the Indians."<sup>187</sup> And with this spiritual spanking via his comedy, Hill helped thin the divide between American Indians and non-Natives. He helped debunk the stoic Indian stereotype, he addressed the offensiveness of Indian mascots, he delicately, yet effectively, discussed his experience with racism, and, most of all, he produced joy and laughter.

Hill applied several theories, tactics, and strategies into his comedy in order for it to influence others. While chanting "HiHowAreYah" to the crowd on *The Richard Pryor Show*, he used the "trickster" tactic. This played into an Indian stereotype, disrupted audience expectations, and countered preconceived notions of American Indians.<sup>188</sup> Hill also implemented superiority theory to laugh at people outside of the gig. However, he used this tactic to covertly manipulate, inform, and educate the audience, making them feel more enlightened and superior to those outside of the gig.<sup>189</sup> Hill also subverted and warped expectations using incongruity theory.<sup>190</sup> He did so by introducing a joke with one set of associations, and then shocking the audience when he altered these set associations and applied them to something else. Through several jokes, Hill used this theory to address social topics by changing previously set

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<sup>187</sup> Isaiah Montoya, "Native Comedians Stand Up," *Native Peoples Magazine*, Published on September/October 2011, Accessed on July 17, 2018.

<sup>188</sup> Amanda Morris, "Teasing the Funny: Native American Stand-Up Comedy in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century," in Matthew R. Meier and Casey R. Schmitt (ed.), *Standing Up, Speaking Out: Stand\_up Comedy and the Rhetoric of Social Change* (Abingdon, United Kingdom: Routledge, October 29, 2016), 111-124.

<sup>189</sup> Sophie Quirk, *Why Stand-Up Matters: How Comedians Manipulate and Influence*, (London, United Kingdom: Bloomsbury, 2015), 21.

<sup>190</sup> *Ibid.*, 25.

associations in his comedy routines. He also used “in-jokes” in his routines. With these types of jokes, both non-Natives and Natives alike understand and discern underlying meanings in the humor.<sup>191</sup> This comedic tactic allowed for accessibility and catered to both groups of people, in order to influence and address politically charged topics and subjects through his comedy routines.

Hill’s approach of fusing the American Indian perspective with comedy allowed others to follow in his footsteps. The stand-up group known as the Powwow Comedy Jam brought together Vaughn Eaglebear, Marc Yaffee, and Howie Miller. The band of comedians credited Hill’s efforts in inspiring them to follow in his footsteps, and also called him the “godfather of Native American stand-up.”<sup>192</sup> The group continued to tour America well into 2018, fusing humor with political satire to address issues in Indian country.

The 1491s took Hill’s methods and took them to new and exciting heights. Rather than performing stand-up comedy routines, the 1491s used props, played as characters in scenes, and dressed in costumes, as a way to produce laughter. Their sketch comedy routines first became popular on YouTube, and called out many of the same issues as did Hill—racism, stereotypes, American Indians as sport mascots, and tribal sovereignty. But they also put a contemporary spin on their humor. Overall the 1491s challenged both non-Natives and Natives alike. They addressed social and political topics in the form of comedic sketches and asserted the Native point of view in the form of visual sovereignty.

The group did not limit themselves to performances across the country, nor did they merely focus their attention on producing satirical YouTube videos. They performed on television shows and Ted Talks. Just as Hill inspired others such as the Powwow Comedy Jam and the 1491s, the comedy troupe also motivated some lesser known comedians to step onto the stage. These less recognized comedians proved that they, too, can use comedy as a way to address issues with which Native peoples struggle. Just like Hill and the 1491s, these comedians adopted the identity of comedic activists.

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<sup>191</sup> Ian Ferguson, “How to Be as Funny as an Indian,” in D.H.Taylor’s ed., *Me Funny* (Vancouver, BC: Douglas & McIntyre), 125.

<sup>192</sup> Matthew R. Meier and Casey R. Schmitt ed., *Standing Up, Speaking Out: Stand-Up Comedy and the Rhetoric of Social Change* (Abingdon, United Kingdom: Routledge, October 29, 2016).

Some of these lesser recognized American Indian comedians include the comedy troupe known as 49 Laughs Comedy. Adrienne Chalepah (Kiowa/Apache) would go on to help form a strictly female American Indian group, The Ladies of Native Comedy.<sup>193</sup> One of Chalepah's fellow members of the group, Deanna (MAD) Diaz, also built a following within the comedy scene. These lesser known comedians still addressed social topics and influenced audiences with their craft, even if their popularity may not match that of Hill or the 1491s. Diaz and Chalepah used strategies and tactics in order for their humor to yield greater effect. Yet, Diaz viewed her comedy as less of a vessel for discussion and influence, but merely a way to cause audiences to laugh. Although Diaz failed to view her craft as a medium for social influence, she often times effectively addressed social issues in a manipulative manner. Sophie Quirk noted even when a comic's intent does not involve critiquing society, their craft does so anyway. "The imperative to be funny cannot be divorced from the imperative to deliver social commentary; the two things go hand in hand. Thus, all stand-up sets offer challenge and commentary, whether or not the authors themselves intend to recognize it."<sup>194</sup>

Comedians such as Hill, the 1491s, and lesser known individuals like Chalepah, offered a perspective into a different type of activism. Instead of marches, sit-ins, or overt protests, these comedians voiced their concerns via their craft. Comedy and humor certainly were the vessels in which these people felt most comfortable talking about social issues, and, simultaneously, they took stands on these issues with their jokes. To quote Carlos Maza of Vox, "comedy has become a big way in which we talk about politics."<sup>195</sup> Comedians who blend political topics with humor such as, Stephen Colbert, Seth Myers, Jordan Klepper, John Oliver, and many others, offer a refreshing approach to relating current events and social issues. The same applies to Native comics.

Although quantifying the influence of comedy to spark social change is problematic, it is reasonable

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<sup>193</sup> Adrienne Chalepah, interview by Jacob Ward, *Gmail*, March 27, 2018, Accessed July 23, 2018, <https://mail.google.com/mail/u/1/#sent/1624a3d2b435e9f4>.

<sup>194</sup> Sophie Quirk, *Why Stand-Up Matters: How Comedians Manipulate and Influence*, (London, United Kingdom: Bloomsbury, 2015), 30.

<sup>195</sup> "Comedians have Figured out the Trick to Covering Trump," *YouTube*, Published on April 3, 2017, Accessed on July 25, 2018, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=-fUDIucr2eo>.

to assume that it has the potential to cause listeners to reevaluate their opinions – even if the end result is the same. Quirk argues in her work that people were more prone to accept new opinions and stances on issues through the medium of comedy, than through serious settings such as political debates.<sup>196</sup> Comedy fused the opportunity for social criticism into a non-threatening platform and opened the door to be a tool of influence.

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<sup>196</sup> Sophie Quirk, *Why Stand-Up Matters: How Comedians Manipulate and Influence*, (London, United Kingdom: Bloomsbury, 2015), 178.

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