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Laughing Without Reservation: Indian Standup Comedians

DARBY LI PO PRICE

Our comedians were like the Lakotas called them "Heyokas," and there's trickster stories, dancers, singers, the contrary man. Everyone had something like that in their society. But that's a little different than a standup nightclub routine. The comic says I'm tired of talking about me, let's talk about you. —Charlie Hill¹

Contrary to the dominant conception of Indians as humorless, stoic, and tragic,² humor and comedy have always been central to Native American cultures.³ However, most people have never seen an Indian standup comedian. When I mention writing about Indian comedians, people often ask, "are there any?" Such a response reflects the scarcity of Indian comedians both in popular entertainment and in studies of humor.⁴ Most studies of Indian humor focus on rural and tribal rather than urban and individual forms of humor.⁵ Standup comedy is different than rural tribal comic traditions in several ways. Working primarily in urban comedy clubs or settings, standups perform as individuals conveying their personal sense of humor to their audiences. With comedy club audiences ranging from predominantly white to ethnically mixed, Indian standups serve as cross-cultural entertainers and educators.⁶ Drawing upon

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extensive ethnographic research and interviews I have conducted among comedians in California during the past five years, this essay analyzes how Indian standups mediate personal identity, convey cultural sensibilities, establish common ground across ethnic groups, and imaginatively expand consciousness. Going beyond prior studies of Indian humor emphasizing rural and collective forms, this study focuses on Indian humor within urban contexts among individual comedians.

PERFORMING IDENTITIES

In standup comedy individual performers stand on stage and say funny things directly to an audience to make them laugh. How they convey their self-identities in their routines is an integral aspect of their stage persona, character, and point of view. Al Hans explains, "You want to establish your personality and character so your way of seeing things or point of view opens up to them."⁷ Standups are expected to address how their distinguishing physical features such as ethnicity, race, gender, or body type inform their experiences and comic worldviews. Indian identities may serve as central, secondary, or even minor aspects of routines, and may be conveyed in numerous humorous ways.

Charlie Hill is the most prominent Native American comedian. An Oneida-Mohawk-Cree raised in Detroit and on the Oneida reservation in Wisconsin, for the past twenty years Hill has been living in New York City, Seattle, Sacramento, and Los Angeles where he is a regular at The Comedy Store. His comedy career has included televised appearances with Richard Pryor, Johnny Carson, David Letterman, Jay Leno, and Rosanne Carter. Establishing himself as an Indian who lives in the city but retains reservation ties, Hill typically walks on stage in tee-shirt and jeans, sometimes singing funny songs (accompanied by harmonica) about urban Indian life:

I got them reservation blues
I'm dressed up like a dude
In my high heeled shoes
I got my Visa and pay my dues
I left my family back on the res
big city lights
I miss my family and kids
been gone so long
I don't know who I is (laughter) . . .

Hill is known for doing humor with Indian sensibilities: "I was at UCLA last week: University of Caucasians Lost Among Asians" (laughter).⁸ Community ties inform Charlie's attitudes about his comedy. "I try to get people to laugh with us instead of at us. If I put on a headdress and acted stupid I could be a millionaire in Vegas. But people who do that don't have to answer because they don't belong to Indian communities. Real Indian humor is grassroots stuff, it's about things in the community." According to Hill, "I let my work talk for itself . . . I think whether an Indian writes a letter or brushes his teeth, in America that is a political act. It seems like everything we do is called political."⁹

While some Indian comedians grew up with strong Indian identities and ties to communities prior to becoming performers, others have found performance to be a catalyst to establishing their Indianness.¹⁰ This appears to occur more frequently among comedians who grew up in cities apart from reservations or large Indian communities. Abel Silvas, of Ajachamen and Spanish/Mexican American descent, grew up in San Diego vaguely aware of his Native American birthright.¹¹ When he initially began performing standup comedy, his Native heritage was not a distinguishing feature of his routine. Walking on stage with a beer in hand, he would (appear to) twist the bottle top in his eye socket and exclaim, "that's my opener" (laughter). "What's wrong? Isn't that how you do it? Or maybe you prefer to do it like this (bends over and twists bottle in his rear)" (laughter). Taking mime classes under the French master Marcel Marceau at the University of Michigan inspired Silvas to draw material from his Native heritage. Silvas recalls Marceau saying, "You're Native American, right?" "Yeah." "Well, you should go back to your people because your people always communicated in mime." Silvas wrote to the Bureau of Indian Affairs and found out he was "Juaneño." He learned that his tribe, the Ajachamen (pronounced "Ahashamem"), had been enslaved by Spanish missionaries at the Mission San Juan Capistrano and given the name Juaneño. He also learned that California Indians in particular used mime as a medium to communicate across the many different California language groups.¹²

Drawing from conversations with relatives, elders, and historical accounts, Silvas replaced his white greasepaint with characters that reflect his California Indian heritage. In the character of Running Grunion, Silvas incorporates rabbit furs,

shells, mime, storytelling, and comedy to enact how his people lived in precolonial, Spanish, Mexican, and American eras.¹³ His success with Running Grunion led Silvas to start a children's mime troupe on the Viejas Indian Reservation which performs for other schools and local cultural celebrations such as San Diego's annual Grunion Festival, which Silvas founded to acknowledge California Native traditions. Silvas performs in comedy clubs dressed as himself, a mixed-blood standup comedian clad in tee-shirt and jeans who teaches aerobics, mime, and storytelling in San Diego.

Comedians may switch between or embrace multiple heritages. "Beecher" Sykes, of Otami and Mexican descent, has spent most of his life in Palo Alto, San Jose, San Francisco, and the surrounding Bay Area. He initially began doing standup as a Mexican "Cholo" character with a black leather jacket, black pants, black gloves, black sunglasses, hair slicked back, a boom box radio, and he spoke in a high voice. He established a Mexican persona with jokes such as, "I'm Mexican which you may not believe since I'm six foot tall and don't have a mustache" (laughter). "I can tell you're surprised to see me on stage, not in the kitchen" and "a lot of people say Mexicans are lazy. That's not true, you try smoking a big doob and see if you feel like working" (laughter). Beecher says he was just trying to say that Mexicans are just like everyone else. Recalling his Cholo garb, Sykes reflects, "I think the Cholo character was a disguise I was hiding behind." He also recalls how some people didn't like his Cholo character, even though others had laughed. One club owner asked him, "could you be a little less Mexican so people could have something to relate to?" Another manager told him he was afraid of Mexicans.¹⁴

The general acceptance of and positive feedback for his Indian identity over his Mexican persona led "Beecher" Ed Sykes to change his stage persona entirely to an Indian. According to Beecher, a lot of people feel threatened by Mexicans, whom they see as illegal immigrants taking their jobs. He believes they have more empathy for Indians because they think of Indians as existing in the past or far away rural areas rather than in urban areas. He jokes about showing his mother a history book with an old picture of an Otomi woman captioned, "The sophisticated Otomi girl wearing a hat and shawl." "I'm like, 'Mom, what are you doing in this picture?' Since it looks like her" (laughter). Beecher gets away with saying critical things about whites when he performs as an Indian

much more than as a Mexican: "People empathize with Indians. Blacks will come to me afterwards and say, 'I can really relate to the hardships of your people,' and whites will apologize and I'll tell them, 'well you didn't do it.'"

For some comedians, ethnicity may play a secondary role to other aspects of their identity emphasized in their routines. This is often true for female comedians. Rebecca Ward is of Cherokee descent on her father's side. She has lived in Louisville, Kentucky; Santa Monica, California; Nabb, Indiana; Branton, Missouri; and San Francisco where she has done standup for ten years. Although she has a few Indian jokes, most of her routine involves issues she deals with as a woman, such as insecurities over body image or clothes, dating men, or life as a mother of two kids. Ward says she bases her Indian jokes primarily on what she thinks non-Indians stereotypically think of Indians. She introduces her Indian heritage with: "I should tell you a little about myself. I'm part Indian. Part Cherokee. My dad's half Indian and half Irish, so it's kind of a family tradition that every St. Patrick's Day we go out and scalp concert tickets" (laughter). "Dad was kind of cheap, half the time he'd pay our allowance in beads and trinkets" (laughter). "I'm part Indian but my husband isn't. So every time we play monopoly he likes to get me drunk and steal my properties a little bit at a time" (laughter). The concept of this joke is never far from the surface of Indian humor about whites.¹⁵

Ward explains that her grandfather lived on a reservation in Oklahoma. Recalling how their local radio stations only played country music, she says, "there's actually a country song called 'You're the Reason God Made Oklahoma' (laughter). Is that supposed to be a compliment?" (laughter). "Isn't that kinda like saying, 'you're the reason God made Bakersfield or Fresno?'" (laughter). "We used to visit my grandfather on the reservation in Oklahoma. People sometimes ask me what Oklahoma is like in the winter. Imagine a meat locker but it's a little colder and a lot less interesting" (laughter). "Our high school dances were never successful since it was mostly an Indian population. We'd get rained out every time we started dancing" (laughter).

Ward believes it is difficult for women to become successful standups, especially if they have kids, because it's harder for them to "hang out with the guys"—the mostly male comedians, managers, and club owners—and as a mother difficult to cater to the unpredictable and late-night schedules of comedy clubs.

Some comedians prefer not to be classified according to their ethnicity. Al Hans, of Bella Coola descent, lived on the Bella Coola reserve in Canada and then moved with his family to Vancouver. He began standup in Toronto in his twenties and currently lives in Los Angeles. He prefers to be thought of as Al rather than as a Native American. Believing that being identified according to ethnicity has a "provincializing effect," Hans asserts: "I'm individualistic, almost anti-collective. If I can get people to not look at me as Native American, but as Al, then it goes against preconceived notions of what I am." To establish himself as Al instead of "the Native guy" he tries not to give away his Native identity right away. He likes to joke about current events prior to his Indian heritage. He then jokes about his Indian background, "I'm Bella Coola. We're fish Indians. We have nine names for Salmon and twenty-nine names for beer, so when we run out of salmon we have to drink beer" (laughter). Hans says he has received criticism for doing this joke because the tragedy of Indian alcoholism is still too present in the minds of many people. Hans notes that despite intentionally limiting the amount of Native material in his routine, it seems to be the part that people remember him for. "It's a Catch-22; ideally I would have preferred to figure this out in Canada and come to L.A. as Al. . . I thought I came as Al, but people thought I came as the Native Canadian."

Establishing self-identities helps standups open audiences to their way of seeing things. In turn, making jokes about themselves or their own ethnic groups ingratiates themselves with their audiences and increases their ability to make fun of the dominant group. Otherwise, disparaging the dominant group would be too antagonistic.¹⁶

MULTIETHNICITY

Jokes about interethnic marriage and offspring are a staple of ethnic humor.¹⁷ According to Hill, multiethnic humor works well with urban audiences because they tend to be demographically mixed. Multiethnic jokes often combine stereotypical traits of the parents' ethnicities: "I met a guy, he was Jewish and his wife was Indian, they named their son 'Bargain Hunter'" (laughter). "In my own family I have relatives that are Irish and Indian—there's no drinking problem in that family!" (laughter). Hill continues, "I met some of the most beauti-

ful people in America that are of African and Indian heritage, and boy are they strong people because not only did they get their land stolen, they gotta work on it for free" (laughter). "We get interesting things when we get mixed bloods. I met a guy on the way over, he goes 'Ya know, I'm Chickasaw, Potawatomi, and Paiute.' I guess that makes him a Chicken-Pot-Pie" (laughter).

Finishing his "top ten things whites always say to Indians," Hill jokes, "The number one thing white people say to Indians, and I want you all to help me out with this one, 'My grandmother was _____'" (audience cheers "Cherokee!"). "Wherever I go someone says, 'I'm Indian too.' I was working somewhere one time and this white guy says, 'you know, I'm Indian too.' 'Right, Cherokee, your grandmother.' 'See he can tell'" (laughter).

Silvas applies the premise of multiethnic jokes to an opener about being a Mission Indian. "I'm California Indian. I'm a Mission Indian from the Ajachamen tribe—can you say it? (audience repeats 'Ahashamen') Bless you! (blank looks)—that's a Mission joke" (laughter). Playing upon the audience's assumption that Mission Indians must be doubly serious as Christianized Indians, Silvas breaks the tension by revealing that the joke is on the audience's seriousness. This opens the way for Silvas to explain that Ajachamen, or Juaneños, are Indians who were enslaved at the Mission, where members of his family still live. Silvas jokes about his color as a person of mixed descent: "I'm a California Indian. Actually I'm half California Indian on my dad's side and my mom's side is Mexican, so that makes me rust" (laughter).

Addressing global issues or placing local concerns in global contexts is a common feature of Native American humor.¹⁸ Multiethnic jokes often serve as a bridge to jokes that emphasize commonalities shared by different groups. Shared indigenous heritage among different groups can serve as a premise for such jokes.

In mixed audiences, Hill asks if there are any Latinos in the audience and, after the applause, jokes, "the Latinos, that's our first cousins. We've been here since before the white people in Europe were trying to figure out if they were monkeys. The Spanish came here in fifteen hundred and the Mexicans came nine months later" (laughter). Embracing Latinos/Mexicans in terms of shared indigenous roots, Hill then emphasizes shared history: "since there's Latinos here tonight I need to thank them for kicking Davy Crockett's ass!" (laughter). Inverting the

image of Davy Crockett as a heroic figure, Hill jokes, "They always say, 'Oh, Davy Crockett he was a famous Indian fighter.' That means, oh, he murdered people, in fact, he was a terrorist. What are we going to have fifty years from now? (sings) 'Oh Omar, Oh Omar Khadaffi!'" (laughter).

In the context of San Diego, border issues are common topics of debate. Silvas builds empathy for border crossers. Recalling his childhood Silvas jokes, "we used to play Cowboys and Indians and Mexicans. I used to play Mexican—'Aquí viene la migra!' (mimics running) which means 'here comes the border patrol!'" (laughter). Through the character of Running Grunion, Silvas explains that when the Spaniards came the Natives welcomed them but after a time, differences grew and borders were drawn that split people apart. Donning a red headband and plaid shirt, he impersonates Mexicans running to the sound of the "La Bamba" song (and laughter). He mimics climbing over a fence and being blinded by spotlights; he raises his hands then has them cuffed behind him. This border skit enacts how the border violates peoples' rights. "Since we were here before the border, we didn't cross the border—we were crossed by the border." He emphasizes that the border is the problem, not the border crossers. Moreover, his tribe was there before San Diego existed: "We didn't move to the city—the city moved to us."

Silvas is trying to include Indian and Spanish peoples in San Diego's public Old Town history. As a board member of Protectors of Historic Sites, he is challenging the California State Park's plan to build an American-style visitors center in Old Town over the remains of historic Spanish and Indian homesites. Silvas jokes about being the "underground tour guide" for a group of state officials who "seemed disappointed because there was nothing to see" since the historic sites are all buried:

I'm the underground tour guide for the Protectors of Historic Sites. We located old Spanish and Native American historical sites beneath San Diego's Old Town Historic State Park. But we're having a hard time getting the state to recognize the sites. I gave these officials a tour but I think they were disappointed because they couldn't see anything because it's all buried. I'm standing with this map and pointing "buried over there is an adobe house built by my great grandfather Silvas in the 1820s, and over there is a site

that was occupied for several thousand years by Kumeyaay Indians.

Hill establishes similarities among American Indians and Hawaiians. At a Native American benefit in which Hawaiian musicians participated, Hill bonds with Hawaiians by saying, "Aloha to the Hawaiians, and I love the Hawaiian people. They're the same as us. The only difference between the Hawaiians and the Indians here is the ocean, and that's the only thing, that's it, the same thing." Hill makes comparisons: "They have their medicine people and we have our medicine people. They have their tragedies like us. We have Wayne Newton. They've got Don Ho" (laughter). "The Hawaiians when they say hello they say Aloha, when they leave and when they come. The government has messed them up so much they don't know if they're comin' or goin'!" (laughter). Establishing common grounds across ethnic groups creates a collective sense of we-ness.

CULTURAL CRITIQUE

Perhaps the standup comedian has taken the place, in our present culture, of the story teller in primitive cultures—the grandfather or grandmother who could relate an experience through a story or tribal myth to communicate cultural knowledge . . . the comedian's routines are stories for the adult and like the myths in primitive cultures may answer his need for explanations of good and evil in human experience.

—Stephanie Koziski¹⁹

It's like being a mockingbird holding a mirror up.

—Charlie Hill

Poking fun at social beliefs, norms, and values, comedians often serve the role of cultural critics. Given the mainstream society's marginalization of Native Americans, it is not surprising that much of Indian humor is targeted towards revealing the shortcomings, errors, and contradictions of the dominant culture.

Indian comedians sometimes play jokes upon their audiences to reveal their lack of knowledge about Native peoples.

Hans explains that at comedy clubs “urban audiences have few Indians. The mystique and curiosity about Natives is high so I play with them because they are nerdy and naive. For example, I’ll tell them I can’t eat hot dogs, or go to a place because it’s sacred. Then let them know I’m just kidding.”

Silvas demonstrates how he can play on audiences’ misconceptions about the meaning of Native in the following exchange:

Silvas: So where’s all the Native Californians? (cheers)

Silvas: From what tribe, dude? (laughter)

Audience member: Sioux.

Silvas: That’s not California, man, I’m saying I’m Native Californian Indian (laughter).

The very existence of Indian standup comedians challenges stereotypes of Indians as lacking a sense of humor. Silvas jokes, “My great-great uncle was the first comedian, Rodney Danger Bear. He’d make jokes like ‘hear the one about the deer with diarrhea? Yeah, it’s all over town’” (laughter).

Comedians can play upon audiences’ lack of exposure to Indian comic traditions. Beecher jokes:

A lot of people think this comedy boom has only been in the past ten or twenty years. But that’s not true, you see, Indians used to do standup way back before there even was a United States of America. The history books tell you that Indians were a bunch of wandering nomads following the buffalo. But actually what they were doing was going from village to village putting on comedy shows.

To reenact a Native American comedy show, Beecher turns his back to the audience, loosens his ponytail, and turns to the audience with long hair covering half his face. In a markedly lower and exaggerated, stereotypically “Indian” tone of voice, he begins:

How (pause) is everybody doing tonight? (laughter). It’s good to see everybody at the Club Minnehaha (laughter). Last time I was here, I really massacred the place (laughter). This place is really packed tonight. You must have made reservations (laughter). . . . My name is Wind in His Drawers, let me tell you about myself. . . .

After a series of impersonations of an Indian character from the rural past, he switches his persona to a contemporary urban Indian. Emphasizing that *Wind in His Drawers* is an impersonation, Beecher laughs about a woman who mistook *Wind in His Drawers* for a “real” Indian: “True story—this woman comes up to me after a show in Sacramento and says, ‘Wind,’ like she knows me, ‘do Native Americans find white people as hard to understand as white people find Native Americans?’ I said ‘what do you mean?’” (laughter).

Beecher challenges the dominant practice of equating American with the United States or white:

It’s very complicated being who I am. People look at me and ask, “Are you Indian?” to which I reply, “Yup.” “Are You Mexican?” “Si.” “Are you Spanish?” “Uh huh. . . .” When people just ask, “What are you?” I say “American,” which really seems to confuse them. They seem to forget that America is a continent not a country. . . . When I’m being really pissy and someone asks me what I am I say, “Californian” (laughter).

Beecher explains that many of the names of states and cities across the country—Oklahoma, Minnesota, Wichita, Kansas, Winnebago, Massachusetts, Ohio, Wyoming, Utah, Tennessee, Tacoma, Manhattan, Napa, Sonoma, etcetera—are Native names rather than English names, reflecting their prior existence as Indian lands. “When the ‘settlers’ were migrating across the country they would meet the people that were already there and, being lost, one of the first things they’d ask is ‘where are we?’ or ‘what do you call this place?’ To which you might get the reply, ‘Arkansas’ or ‘Idaho.’” According to Beecher, “white folks need to learn that they are not the only ones on the planet”:

Right now we are getting a lot of rhetoric that people should go back to where they came from. Okay fine. Let’s go with that: Everyone go back to where they came from. Whites are not native to America, Hawaii, South Africa, New Zealand, Australia. Work with us because you owe us a lot. If not, go back to where you came from, Pilgrim.

Making fun of New Agers, Hill jokes, “You get this a lot in the Bay Area: ‘I was an Indian in a previous life’” (laughter). “But not now, so get out of my driveway!” (laughter). Hill

makes an appeal to New Agers to quit appropriating Native cultures:

And all the New Agers stop pimpin' our religions and our ceremonies. You can pray with us in our circles but you need to figure out who you are. This Lynn Andrews bullshit, or this guy Swift Deer—we call him Fast Buck. Anytime you see a medicine man with a 900 number, run (laughter). We talk to our ancestors with our ceremonies. White people can't talk to their ancestors with our ceremonies. It's impossible because they're the ones who killed them (laughter). So relax, find out who you are. Then we can all get healed together.

After joking about white tourists who flock to reservations and ask dumb questions such as, "what Indian tribe was the fiercest," or "can I take your picture?" (laughter), Hill exclaims, "we Indians ought to be tourists in the suburbs in a white neighborhood and see how they like it: 'Are you really white people? Goddamn! Can I take your picture? How do you survive in these suburbs? My god!'" (laughter).

Having lived in Los Angeles off and on for the past twenty years, Hill exclaims, "There's so much crime in Los Angeles, the women, this is how they rock a baby to sleep at night" (makes siren sound) (laughter). "Third-graders bring handguns to school. Third-graders with handguns, when I was in third grade all we shot was spit wads" (laughter).

Taking a crack at mainstream political orientations, Hill gibes, "Last week I did a show for the American Indian Republican Party. Three of the nicest gentlemen I ever met in my life" (laughter). Putting liberals in perspective, he quips, "liberals aren't quite sure about Indians: 'Oh, we love the Indians.' Then give us back our land! 'Okay, we're not that liberal'" (laughter). Hill jokes about people who are offended by his humor:

I had a heckler last night. I know I shouldn't judge a man by the color of his neck or anything like that, but he said, "I don't want to hear any of that crap, I'm an American goddamn it, why don't you go back to where you came from?" So I camped in his back yard (laughter).

Hollywood portrayals of Indians are a common source of humor for Indian standups. Hill elaborates upon his experiences as an actor:

Dances With Wolves—that was a good movie because the Indian actors were in it—that’s what made it for me. I was in *Dances With Wolves*. But they took my part out—pissed me off!—“overacting” you know. I’d never been in a movie where the Indians won the battle! I was grabbing white people over my shoulder, they were going “Cut! Cut!” and I’m grabbin’ and slashin’ I didn’t care what the script said—I was fightin’ goddamn it! Turns out the guy wasn’t even in the movie either—he was the guy with the lunch wagon—I didn’t have my glasses on (laughter).

Hill jokes about how Russell Means, the once militant leader of the American Indian Movement, transformed from a symbol of Red Power to a Hollywood commodity:

When I was a young guy in college Russell Means was a bad dude. Now he’s a bad actor. I was listening to him the other day and he said “it’s a good day to die.” Yeah, I didn’t know he was talking about dying his damn hair, Jesus Christ! (laughter). *Pocahantas*, ha, I saw Russell Means in the *Last of the Mohicans*, to me that’s like watching Malcolm X in *Happy Days*. I’m sorry, he ruined his credibility. Now they have the Pocahantas doll. They should make a Russell Means doll. You wind it up and every six months it quits the American Indian Movement (laughter).

Hill laughs about Means being checked by airport security: “I saw Russell Means at the airport, it took him twenty minutes to take off all his jewelry” (laughter). “I mean, where’s an Indian going to hijack a plane to anyway? ‘Take me to Oklahoma!’” (laughter).

URBAN/RURAL

According to Hill, differences between urban and rural Indians are less than they were a generation ago due to greater ability to travel between cities and reservations. However, because of the prevalence of portrayals of Indians in the rural past, some people still consider urban life to be the antithesis of Indian-ness. Hill jokes:

I met another tourist one time, he said, “Like, you know, like, my dad is Indian, man.” This really threw me because

they always talk about their grandmother or something. I said, "That means you're Indian then, man, be proud of who you are, damn it." He said, "Oh no, man, I just, like, live out here in L.A. and I don't practice Indian." How do you practice being an Indian? "Yeah, uh, I've got Indian practice tonight" (laughter).

Andrew La Capa, an Apache, Hopi, and Tewa comedian in his late thirties, has lived all his life at the Fort Apache reservation in Arizona (except for eighteen months in Oakland and a year in San Diego) and provides a contrast to urban Indian standups. One thing that is recognizably unique as a standup is his dress. He does part of his show in an Apache work dress made of cloth with a string. He explains that people from where he's from (Fort Apache) laugh when they see him wearing the dress because they know his dress is just a performance costume. However, he recalls overhearing kids in Oakland arguing over whether he was a transvestite. He says urban kids usually don't know much about rural or traditional life. He explains his dress to urban audiences as a way to teach them about traditional culture. He recounts a confrontational encounter during a performance in Oklahoma City with a woman who yelled at him for twenty minutes for wearing a dress. He says he took that as an opportunity to explain that he wears a dress because in the Hopi tradition the dress shows respect for matriarchy. He told the woman, "As a man you shouldn't be afraid to wear a dress. I have three kids and have been married for ten years and as soon as you get out of your Levi jeans, I'll get out of the dress" (laughter). La Capa explains that "in the Hopi way, when clowns are made, it is a way of serving penance, so the more outrageous, the more the return will be. Many people in the city have no inkling of what a clown does."²⁰

Demonstrating a rural point of view, La Capa jokes, "The city is too fast for me, I like kicking back and walking through the woods. I'd rather be chased by bears than people with guns" (laughter). "Oakland is a funny place because of all the Plexiglas. You go to Circle K and have to ask for potato chips through six inches of Plexiglas" (laughter). Observing differences in material wealth, he jokes, "People in Marin are so rich, they even got chastity belts for their dogs to restrain them when they're in heat!"

Despite some differences, La Capa says there are more similarities than differences. For one, the comedy tours are in the

cities, which brings rural comedians to urban audiences. La Capa finds that most urban Indians can relate to similar issues such as drugs, alcohol, violence. He says the main difference is generational: "People from forty years old in an urban setting will understand res jokes about no hot water, washing clothes by hand, washing ourselves in the river. Younger urban kids will understand drugs, gangs, violence, rap, MTV, and view reservations as a secondary experience." He believes rural kids understand jokes about animals better. For example, La Capa says that urban kids don't get the joke—"the only thing like a mangy dog is John Wayne—he walks sideways"—but res kids do because they've all seen sick dogs. According to La Capa, urban Indians are universally aware of powwows, snagging, relationships, Indian love, how people laugh, people from the reservation. Finding common ground with other peoples, he muses, "there's a lot of wannabes and a lot that have to be—Mexicans, Filipinos, they love Spam and fry bread too, ha, ha."

Indian standup comedians expand conceptions of Indian-ness, undermine expectations, and reveal dominant truths to be fictions. Lucy Lippard writes:

[I]rony, humor, and subversion are the most common guises and disguises of those artists leaping out of the melting pot into the fire. They hold mirrors up to the dominant culture, slyly infiltrating mainstream art with alternative experiences—inverse, reverse, perverse. These strategies are forms of tricksterism, or "Ni Go Tlunh A Doh Ka"—Cherokee for "We Are Always Turning Around . . . On Purpose" . . . subverting and "making light of" the ponderous mechanisms to "keep them in their place."²¹

Always cracking jokes on purpose, Indian standups perform as intercultural mediators who share their comic worldviews both to entertain and educate their audiences.

NOTES

1. Personal interview with author, San Francisco, September 28, 1996. Additional materials from Hill are also drawn from his performance of the same date, a performance for Native American Studies at the University of California, Berkeley, December 4, 1997, and other sources as cited.

2. The humorless, stoic, tragic "Indian" is the overriding image in literary, film, and television depictions of Native Americans. See Joseph Bruchac,

"Striking the Pole: American Indian Humor," *Parabola* 12:4 (Winter 1987): 22-29. According to the mandates of Manifest Destiny, Indians are a tragic race unfit for civilization and, therefore, destined to perish. Easton writes of nineteenth-century white perceptions of Indians: "Wit and wisdom were qualities associated with civilization and, therefore, not to be expected from a 'savage'." Robert Easton, "Humor of the American Indian," in *The American Indian*, ed. Raymond Friday Locke (Los Angeles: Mankind Publishing, 1970), 183. According to Gerald Vizenor, "These stereotypes and several others, such as idiotism and 'genetic code' alcoholism, are *hypotragic* impositions that deny a comic world view—the racist denial of tribal languages and ceremonies." Gerald Vizenor, "A Postmodern Introduction," *Narrative Chance: Postmodern Discourse on Native American Indian Literatures*, ed. Gerald Vizenor (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 1989), 11. According to Susan Purdie, the ability to tell jokes is a form of sociolinguistic competency that dominant groups historically have denied to certain groups as a way to deem them socially incompetent. Susan Purdie, *Comedy: The Mastery of Discourse* (Toronto: Toronto University Press, 1993).

3. When asked, "Why do you suppose that Indian humor has been so little recognized by the majority culture? And so little understood?", N. Scott Momaday responded: "It's probably been kept a secret. It's one of the strongest elements of language within Indian cultures" and "humor is really where the language lives, you know. It's very close to the center, and very important." In Kenneth Lincoln's *Indi'n Humor: Bicultural Play in Native America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1993), 3.

4. Lincoln's *Indi'n Humor* is the most extensive work on Indian humor and focuses on rural literary humor. Exemplifying his view of Indians as rural, Lincoln writes in his introduction, "Some 2 million diverse 'Indians' survive today and tribally control 53 million acres of reservation lands in the United States. Every twenty years or so, given an oil shortfall or another frontier revival, we rediscover them," 3. Lincoln briefly refers to Charlie Hill:

Charlie Hill keeps the Moccasin Telegraph humming with one-liners on and off "The Tonight Show." The first English immigrants, he snaps, were illegal aliens—"whitebacks, we call 'em." Hill imagines the Algonquians asking innocently, "You guys gonna stay long?" His Custer jokes are not printable ("Look at all those f——ing Indians!"—a barroom nude painting of Custer's last words). A Sioux fast-food chain: "Pups on a Pole." Getting the "munchies" while watching "Lassie" on the tube, Hill's Sioux roommate ate the landlady's dog. (6, 7)

Hill doesn't think his jokes or sense of humor are accurately represented by Lincoln—"Half those jokes aren't even my jokes—and he got most of the other ones wrong." Charlie Hill, personal interview with author, San Francisco, taped September 9, 1996.

5. See Keith Basso, *Portraits of "The Whiteman": Linguistic Play and Cultural Symbols Among the Western Apache* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1979).

6. Comedian Bo Irvine observes, "Audiences at shows are mostly white, who else would pay for humor except people from a humor deficient society?" When Charlie Hill sees a noticeable number of Indians in an ethnically mixed audience, sometimes he'll ask, "Are there any Indians here?" (applause). "Well, that's one truckload" (laughter).

7. Personal interview with author in Berkeley, California, July 10, 1996. Subsequent references are taken from this interview.

8. Performance at the University of California, Berkeley, December 4, 1997.

9. In Wishelle Banks, "Comedian Charlie Hill," *Cowboys and Indians* 21 (November 1997): 166-169.

10. For a discussion of performance as a means of searching for and securing self-identity, see Glen D. Wilson, *Psychology for Performing Artists* (London: Jessica Kingsley Publishers, 1994).

11. While the literature refers to this tribe as Juaneño, the tribe calls itself *Ajachamen*. For the purpose of this paper, I will use *Ajachamen* rather than *Juañeno*.

12. Videotapes of performances in San Diego from 1989-92, and several personal interviews with author in California, 1996-1998.

13. Abel Silvas, "Running Grunion: Southern California Native Storyteller," KPBS, 1992.

14. Material from Beecher Sykes from a performance at the Ohanna Cultural Center's Color of Funny Comedy Competition in Oakland, August 29, 1993; a performance at UC Berkeley, August 29, 1993; several interviews with the author between 1993 and 1997; and letters sent to the author, February 7 and 17, 1997.

15. Performance August 8, 1993, Ohanna Cultural Center's Color of Funny Comedy Competition in Oakland, and personal interviews w/author in 1993 and 1997.

16. See Christie Davies, "Ethnic Jokes, Moral Values, and Social Borderlines," *British Journal of Sociology* 33 (1982).

17. See John Lowe, "Theories of Ethnic Humor: How to Enter, Laughing," *American Quarterly* 38 (1986): 439-60. However, mixed-race identity has been historically constructed in popular culture as well as social science as a tragic situation. See Freda Scot Giles, "From Melodrama to the Movies: The Tragic Mulatta as a Type Character," *American Mixed Race: The Culture of Microdiversity*, ed. Naomi Zack (Lanham, MD: Rowman and Littlefield, 1995).

18. Allan Ryan, "Postmodern Parody: A Political Strategy in Contemporary Canadian Native Art," *Art Journal* 51:3 (Fall 1992): 59-65.

19. Stephanie Koziski, "The Standup Comedian as Anthropologist," *Journal of Popular Culture* 18:2 (Fall 1984): 57-76.

20. Interview with author, 1996.

21. Lucy R. Lippard, *Mixed Blessings: New Art in a Multicultural America* (New York: Pantheon, 1990), 199.