

**HUMOUR IS GOOD MEDICINE:
THE ALGONQUIN PERSPECTIVE ON HUMOUR IN THEIR CULTURE AND
OF OUTSIDER CONSTRUCTIONS OF ABORIGINAL HUMOUR**

by
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ABSTRACT

This thesis presents the experiential viewpoints of Algonquin people who participated in a research project that examined the role humour plays in Algonquin society, looking at Elders humour, healing, spirituality, creativity, family, social, and inter-cultural relations. The exploratory research was framed within Canadian Studies discourse, written from an Aboriginal perspective crediting indigenous knowledge. Areas of discussion included the place of humour in Algonquin society, outsiders' cultural constructions of Aboriginal humour, and influences acting on the transmission and preservation of Algonquin humour heritage. It considered the influences of outsiders' cultural constructions of Aboriginal humour in mass media, and in historical, sociological and anthropological discourse.

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I owe a great deal of thanks to the Algonquin people I interviewed for this narrative: Pete Bernard, Caroline & Wesley Cayer, Sandra & Frank Decontie, Natalie Armstrong & Chad Smith, Mary Jane Stevens, Catherine Wallin, Fred Wallin, Louise Wawatie-Pien, and the two anonymous participants.

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A Note About Sources

The information contained in this narration originates from my interviews with ten Aboriginal people, and three of their spouses, who belong to the Algonquin Nation. These interviews span a period of two-and-a-half years that began in June of 1997 and ended in December of 1999. The ideas, opinions, insights, stories and jokes shared with me for this research belong to the Algonquin people. In the following list I have included the names of the participants, the date and location of the interview, and the participants' reserve community.

Louise Wawatie-Pien Interviewed in St-Famille d'Aumond, Quebec	June 14, 1997	Lac Rapid Reserve
Pete Bernard Interviewed in Nepean, Ontario	November 88, 1997	Golden Lake Reserve
Catherine Wallin Interviewed in Nepean, Ontario	January 16, 1998	Maniwaki Reserve
Wesley & Caroline Cayer Interviewed in Ottawa, Ontario	January 22, 1998	Maniwaki Reserve
Fred Wallin Interviewed in Ottawa, Ontario	January 29, 1998	Maniwaki Reserve
Chad Smith & Natalie Armstrong Interviewed in Vanier, Ontario	March 15, 1998	Maniwaki Reserve
Mary Jane Stevens Interviewed in Messines, Quebec	December 04, 1998	Maniwaki Reserve
Frank & Sandra Decontie Interviewed in Maniwaki, Quebec	December 04, 1998	Maniwaki Reserve

The Algonquin names of the participants home Reserves are,

Golden Lake

Ininwezi (we are people here alone)

(Hessel 1987: 72)

Lac-Rapide Reserve

Mitchikanibikonginik (people of the stone weir)

(Matchewan 89: 140)

Maniwaki

Kitiganzibi Winniwag (the people of the garden river)

(Hessel 1987: 93)

I have listed secondary sources consisting of journal articles and books in the Bibliography. I will cite *The Report of the Royal Commission on Aboriginal Peoples, Volume three*, as RCAP in the narrative.

A Note About Terminology

In this narrative I will be using the following terms as used in *The Report of The Royal Commission on Aboriginal People*,

Aboriginal people: “. . . refers to the indigenous inhabitants of Canada when we want to refer in a general manner to First Nations and Métis people, without regard to their separate origins and identities.”

Aboriginal peoples: “. . . refers to organic political and cultural entities that stem historically from the original peoples of North America . . . ”

Aboriginal nations: “. . . a sizeable body of Aboriginal people with a shared sense of national identity that constitutes the predominant population in a certain territory or collection of territories.” (RCAP 1996: xii)

I will be using the terms inside/insiders (emic perspective) when discussing location of people or place in relation to the Algonquin Nation. I will be using the term outside/outside (etic perspective) when referring to people or places who are not members of the Algonquin Nation. The term outside/outside will replace such terms as non-Aboriginal, Euro-Canadian, White.

To provide common definitions between the participants and myself, I have used the following words as defined in *The Canadian Oxford Dictionary*.

Culture: “The customs, civilization, and achievements of a particular time or people . . . the mode of behaviour within a particular group.”

Humour: “the conditions of being amusing or comic . . . a sense of humour is the ability to perceive or express humour or take a joke.”

Stereotype: “a preconceived, standardized and oversimplified impression of the characteristics which typify a person, a situation, etc.”.

(Barber 1988: 342, 478, 690, 967, 1424)

The term ‘humour heritage’ is of my own creation and it refers to the humorous myths, legends, folktales, jokes, personal remembrances and anecdotes that emerge out of Aboriginal oral tradition. The use of the word ‘narration’ suggests an act of recounting in the tradition of oral story telling. It is my way of presenting and incorporating the words of the Algonquin research participants into both theory and text. It is my way of validating, recognizing and respecting the world view of the participants.

CHAPTER ONE

1.1 INTRODUCTION

Anyone who has ever known an Aboriginal person is familiar with the richness and variety of their sense of humour. Yet in the mass media the prevailing image of the humourless 'stoic Indian' continues to dominate as an icon of Aboriginal peoples' emotional range of expression. I had often wondered where individual and tribal humour had disappeared and what effect this lack of humorous imagery had on other Aboriginal people. I designed this study with the intent of finding out what Aboriginal people thought of the humourless imagery present in Canadian media and in their society. I formulated the following thesis question to act as a guide in the research process:

What is your perception of the portrayal in mass media (movies and television) of Aboriginal peoples' sense of humour and of the place of humour in Algonquin culture?

Two axioms influenced my approach in formulating the research methodology and philosophy. First, humour is present in most cultures and most people can express humorous thoughts and emotions. Secondly, each of the First Nations in Canada has a unique world view, cultural framework and humour heritage. Out of the second axiom evolved my desire to focus the research on the viewpoints held by members of one Aboriginal Nation. As I wanted to learn more about my own tribal humour heritage, I decided to ask members of the Algonquin Nation to participate in this research.

While acting as a cultural researcher, I was careful not to appropriate the cultural property of the Algonquin people I interviewed. To safeguard against appropriation, I informed the participants of the ethical guidelines for research set out by the School of Canadian Studies. In this way each participant knew their opinions and stories belonged to them and were limited to my use in this study. If the participants decided to share aspects of their Algonquin humour heritage, I have included them in this report where appropriate.

Although I am the principal narrator of this document, I have woven the voices of the participants into the ethnographic, theoretical and analytical material presented in this report. To accomplish this I have used a discursive writing style currently accepted and recognized in anthropological discourse as a valid method of reporting culturally based material. (Clifford 1988: Rabinow 1986) And, I have called this paper a 'narration' since it reflects the multiple 'voices' of the research participants.

In my research proposal I had outlined my research techniques as consisting of a literature review; a review of audio tapes in the Museum of Civilization folklore collection and interviews. The analysis process involved open coding and the sorting of data into themes and generalizations. I applied an exploratory and a non-comparative framework and I wrote the final report from an Aboriginal perspective within Canadian Studies discourse. The analysis incorporated Western and Aboriginal scholarship on the subjects of colonization, cultural identity and humour. In addition, an interdisciplinary approach guided the

analysis as the theoretical material originated in the disciplines of anthropology, sociology, Canadian Studies and Native Studies.

The literature search of ethnographic studies dealing with the role of humour in Aboriginal society in Canada produced little material similar in scope to my research. For example, I found papers on humour as used in Ojibwa social control (Brown 1952); in the play potlatch ceremony of the west coast Kwakiutl (Codere 1956); in the singing, laughing and playing of the Inuit, Dene and Yupik. (Horn 1974: Beaudry 1988); humour wordplay in the Blackfoot language. (Ayoungman-Clifton 1995) None of these documents provided comprehensive information on the role of humour in Aboriginal society.

In the body of literature on other First Nations there may exist references to humour, however searching for this material was beyond the scope and limits of this thesis. In the material concerned with the Algonquin Nation I have found one article on the subject of humour which was Roger Spielmann's *What's so funny? Laughing Together in Algonquin Conversation*. Spielmann's work contains an analysis of the use of humour as an interactional resource in conversation and this material was not applicable to this research. (Spielmann 1988: 211)

The remainder of the literature about the Algonquin Nation is concerned with generalized cultural overviews: (Rue III 1961: Day and Trigger 1978: Hessel 1983, 1987: Clément 1996); material culture (Johnson 1928: Speck 1928: Assiniwi 1972: Gidmark 1988 & 1989); botanical knowledge (Black 1980); folklore (Davidson 1928); religion (Speck 1928: Polson and Spielmann 1990);

hunting territories (Speck 1915, 1929); and politics (Sarazin 1989: Beaulieu 1986: Matchewan 1989). I have used this material in the cultural and historical review of the Algonquin Nation.

In the remainder of this chapter I have presented my study design, research execution and a brief description of the Algonquin Nation. I included the historical and social material to provide a sketch of the participants' cultural and historical background.

In Chapter 2, I have presented an overview of tribal humour; the participants' opinions regarding outside construction of Aboriginal people's humour; and other issues that emerged from the interviews. The chapter concludes with a summary of the findings.

In Chapter 3, I have presented how the Algonquin participants view the role of humour in their society, and how it manifests in their lives and in their communities. The chapter concludes with a summary of the findings.

In Chapter 4, I have provided a summary of the material presented in this narration; some tentative conclusions; and I have addressed the implications of the research along with suggestions for new lines of study.

1.2 METHODOLOGICAL CONSIDERATIONS

Scope, bias and methodology

I chose not to provide an exclusive Western theoretical framework in writing up this study. Instead I decided to use an innovative methodology that combines and respects both Indigenous and Western academic knowledge. The structure that underpins this narration belongs to Western scholarship, is text-based and organized by Western pedagogic standards. It includes references to Western scholarship concerned with the psychological, anthropological, historical and sociological issues discussed in this study.

Woven onto this structure I have crafted an analysis that privileges the experiential and Indigenous knowledge of the Algonquin people. My analytical framework is as much concerned with format as with content, guided by my desire to preserve the integrity and scholarship of the Algonquin people. To adapt to this dual interest I have produced a particular style of presentation that incorporates and validates knowledge originating in the oral traditions of the Algonquin participants.

I believe the methodology was appropriate as it provided a means by which I could overcome the lack of research on Aboriginal humour in social settings. In addition, it provided a way of presenting an analysis of Algonquin humour in a way that did not expose it to the colonizing effects of Western discourse. Besides these points, the difficulty in researching humour and the

fragility of its analysis demanded a unique approach which I provided in the analysis and presentation of this document. In the conclusion of this paper, I will return to an assessment of my methodology.

I have limited the scope of this research to Algonquin viewpoints concerned with humour in social settings. Although it is beyond the scope of this narration, it would be interesting to pursue a study of humour in Algonquin art, folktales, literature and play.

Karl G. Heider claimed everything about us as researchers contribute to bias in our work. (Heider 1988: 73-81) Given the multiple possibilities this idea suggests, I have chosen to contain my remarks to what I perceived could have limited my research efforts. Although I am a mix-blood woman of Algonquin and Acadian heritage, I do not claim insider status within the Algonquin community. I considered myself an outsider as I did not possess knowledge of the Algonquin language, tribal norms, or aspects of Algonquin tribal humour heritage. It may be that my outsider status restricted access and understanding of certain aspects of Algonquin humour. Hopefully, I have overcome this bias by providing a methodology that favours the Algonquin voice over my own.

In addition, I make no claims to representing the world view of the Algonquin Nation in this narration. It would be unrealistic to say the opinions of ten individuals represent an entire community. Although limited in the number of participants, the material provides insight to issues raised in the thesis question.

Research Methods and Analysis

As outlined in my research proposal, secondary material such as journal articles and books provided ethnographical studies, historical narratives, and theoretical support to my research. A primary source of data was to have come from the audio tapes held in the Museum of Civilization in the folklore collection. However, the material was unusable as the information concerns Algonquin material culture and not humour. The collection's librarian, and Louise Wawatie-Pien, a translator of the collection, informed me about the contents of the collection. I based my decision not to use the audio tapes on the information they provided regarding its contents.

In June 1997 I received approval to conduct the interviews from the Ethics Committee of the School of Canadian Studies. I held the interviews between June 1997 and March 1998, and in December 1999. I prepared for the interview and data analysis processes using Russell Bernard's and Grant McCracken's guidelines for unstructured interviews, fieldwork and analysis methods. (Bernard 1994: McCracken 1988) I used an intensive, open ended, semi-structured approach during the interviewing process. I found this approach and methods suited my research agenda, goals, and the time restrictions of the research participants.

The process of searching for participants began by faxing posters outlining my research to the Golden Lake and Maniwaki Band, the Odawa Friendship Centre, and the Elder's Kumik. As I had no response from this approach, I contacted friends and family members for referrals. In total I interviewed thirteen

adults, ten were Aboriginal with the remainder being non-Aboriginal spouses.

In arranging the interviews I contacted people, explained my research and asked if they were interested in participating in an interview. Next I arranged the location of the interview which always occurred in the participants' homes. On arriving I was welcomed, introduced to anyone present and made to feel comfortable by the participants. Although English was a second language to most of the participants, it was the language of the interviews.

Before beginning the interview I explained my research interest and gave each participant a 'Letter of Informed Consent' to read and sign. I asked for permission to record the interview, how they wish to be identified and for permission to use the interview. Of the thirteen participants only two wished to remain anonymous. I made sure the participants understood they were under no obligation to let me use the interview material; they could refuse questions; they could stop the interview at any time; they could ask me questions; and they could give or withhold their consent at the end of the interview. In ending the interviews I thanked each participant for their cooperation and contributions to the research.

While I recorded the interviews I took no written notes as I felt it would impede the interview process. Overall this system worked well and only failed once when I missing hearing the machine stop and missed recording twenty minutes of Frank and Sandra Decontie's interview. When I discovered the problem I immediately informed the Decontie's, apologized and took responsibility for the lost interview material. After this experience I resolved

always to take notes and not rely completely on technology.

Next I transcribed the interviews, delivered copies to the participants, and returned after two weeks to accept any revisions. Only one participant did not respond to a request for revisions and of the remainder none made changes to their interviews. In the spirit of oral tradition, I have presented the material as recorded and have written the text version of the interviews as close to narrated speech as possible. Punctuation has been kept to a minimum. I have noted pauses in the conversation as (. . .), and indicated material not included as (. . . , . . .). To protect the privacy of third parties I have replaced personal names with the relationship of the person to the participant.

The analysis of the interviews began at the end of December 1999, when the interview material was sorted using a system of coding, cutting and pasting, and multiple photocopying. (Lofland and Lofland 1995:188) Although this system is simple in its design and application, it was effective in filing, sorting and retrieving the interview material. The next stage involved my development of a reporting methodology which could fit my world view regarding indigenous knowledge and respect for the Algonquin people I interviewed.

1.3 THE ALGONQUIN NATION

In Algonquin oral tradition, 'long ago', the Algonquin people lived near the sea. After this period they migrated west to settle the north shore of the St. Lawrence River and along the Ottawa River. (Speck 1929: 106-107) Today the Algonquin Nation continues to live in the area occupied by their ancestors. The Algonquin Nation's traditional territory included all of the "lands and waters" of the Ottawa River watershed that straddles both the provinces of Ontario and Quebec. (Matchewan 1989: 141) Presently the area where the Algonquin people live is smaller in size, but it exists within the footprint of the traditional territory of the Algonquin Nation.

Traditional Aspects of Algonquin Culture

The Algonquins use a language that is part of the larger Algonquian language family spoken by Eastern Woodland tribal groups. Traditionally the Algonquins were nomadic hunters and gatherers who moved within their territory as governed by the seasons and the supply of game animals. The annual cycle revolved around single or multi-family groups travelling to family hunting territories in the winter and to larger regional band gatherings in the summer. (Johnson 1928: 175; Speck 1915: 4) For instance, Morrison Island on the Ottawa River was one location where large multiple family gatherings took place during the summer time. (Hessel 1987: 27)

The Algonquins produced a variety of material goods such as birch-bark canoes, snowshoes, toboggans, bark containers, hammocks, cradle-boards, deer and moose hide clothing and moccasins, drums, fibre bags and mats, and tools. (Day and Trigger 1978: 796: Johnson 1928: 175-176)

Traditionally Shamans took care of the spiritual and physical well being of band members. Algonquins believed in a supreme being (*Kitch Manitou*), a trickster-transformer (*Wisekedjak*), a disembodied starving being (the *Windigo*), and a race of powerful little men (the *Pakwacininiwak*). (Beck 1964: 262: Day and Trigger 1978: 796: Leitch 1979: 35: Speck 1928:167, 1915:4)

Elders gave children their names at naming ceremonies when babies were a year old. (Speck 1915: 20) Youth had a fast-vigil at the age of ten to seek out and receive their guardian spirit (Johnson 1928: 178), and hunters followed rituals and taboos concerned with hunting. At death people were buried laying on their backs under cairns or in wooden structures. (Day and Trigger 1978: 795)

Post-European Situation

After the arrival of the Europeans in the sixteenth century, the fur trade, the wars, the expulsion of the Algonquins from the Ottawa River, lumbering, European settlement, starvation and epidemics of smallpox and cholera, almost destroyed the original way of life of the Algonquins. Another major change to traditional ways happened when the Canadian government moved what remained of the Algonquin people to reserves in the nineteenth century. (Hessel 1987:

Matchewan 1989: Sarazin 1989)

Today the Government of Canada recognizes only ten reserves, and nine are in the Province of Quebec: Grand-Lac-Victoria, Hunter's Point (Wolf Lake), Kebawoek (Kepawa), Rapid-Lake (Barrier Lake), Lac-Simon, Maniwaki (Kitigan Zibi), Pikogan (Abitibiwinni), Témiscamingue and Winneway. The reserve of Golden Lake is the only recognized Algonquin reserve in the Province of Ontario. Due to variations in data collection techniques by the Federal and Provincial governments, population statistics for the Algonquin Nation are approximate. Daniel Clément, the editor of *The Algonquins*, lists the current Algonquin population at around 7,000 people. (Clément 1996: iii)

The reserve system changed the Algonquin way of life from nomadic self sufficiency to sedentary dependency. Algonquins tried to maintain a traditional subsistence lifestyle but failed over time as mining, hydroelectric development, clear-cut logging and sports hunting by outsiders eroded their hunting territories. Algonquin reserve economy is based on employment provided by the band council, government aid programs, service industries, light manufacturing and traditional craft production. Overall, economic conditions in Algonquin communities are poor. Economic resources are scarce and providing for the development of housing, social support networks, cultural centres, educational and sports facilities, and economic development is very difficult and impossible at times. (Montpetit 1996: 214-216)

Currently the Algonquin Nation is negotiating Land Claims settlements

with the Provinces of Ontario and Quebec and the Government of Canada. The Algonquin Chiefs involved in the negotiations see this as the only way of improving the current and future economic situations of the Algonquin people. (Matchewan 1989: Sarazin 1989)

CHAPTER TWO

2.1 CONTEMPORARY TRIBAL HUMOUR

More than thirty years ago in *Custer Died for Your Sins, An Indian Manifesto*, Vine Deloria, Jr., commented on the enduring presence of the humourless 'Indian':

It has always been a great disappointment to Indian people that the humorous side of Indian life has not been mentioned by professed experts on Indian Affairs. Rather the image of the granite-faced grunting redskin has been perpetuated by American mythology.

(Deloria Jr., 146: (1969) 1988)

Recently Kenneth Lincoln critiqued the 'humourless ethnocentrism' of outsiders in *Indi 'n Humor, Bicultural Play in Native America*:

The noble savage, the 'poor Indian', the stoic warrior, the libidinous princess, the dogged squaw, the medicine witch, the cigar-store totem, the tearful ecologist, and the rainmaking shaman - these humourless stereotypes, ludicrous in themselves yet permeating American culture today, have been invented by non-Indians for roundabout reasons (Lincoln 1993: 4 & 127)

In the period since the publication of these critiques, Elizabeth Bird and Drew H. Taylor have described how outsider discourse on Aboriginal humour remains the same. (Bird 1996: Taylor 1996) Any changes that have occurred are coming from within the Aboriginal community as Aboriginal people begin to express publically their humorous cultural realities. In Canada for example, Basil Johnston released

Indian School Days; Drew Hayden Taylor wrote *Funny You don't Look Like One, Observations from a Blue-Eyed Ojibway*; and *The En'owkin Journal of First North American Peoples* devoted an edition to humour. (Johnston 1988: Taylor 1996: Joe & Beaver (eds.) 1997)

To introduce tribal humour I am reproducing George Longfish's and Joan Randall's observations as quoted in Alan Ryan's *The Trickster Shift, Humour and Irony in Contemporary Native Art*:

Stand on the back of the Turtle, our Mother, and look at the land and wonder what it would have been like if Columbus (had) been successful in his pursuit of India and avoided the eastern shore of this continent. Wipe your Indian hands on your Levi jeans, get into your Toyota pick-up. Throw in a tape of Mozart, Led Zeppelin or ceremonial Sioux songs; then throw back your head and laugh - you are a survivor of a colonized people. Paint what you see, sculpt what you feel, and stay amused.

George Longfish & Joan Randall (Ryan 1999: 253)

Tribal humour is full of irony, jokes, quips, teasing, self deprecating humour, linguistic humour and the reworking of media stereotypes. It lives in Aboriginal languages and within cultural frameworks. Thomas King, the Cherokee author, has explained it this way:

Very bad puns and lots of them and having to hear the same jokes over and over again. I think the majority of Natives in Canada, if they're not bilingual, they come pretty close to it. Some are even trilingual. It means you can play with language. And because many of the communities still have a strong basis in oral storytelling, play with language, punning, joking is crucial to that thing we call Native humour . . . We all know what he's going to say. But we all have a good time, probably because we come together in communities.

(Ryan 1999: 181)

I believe contemporary expressions of Aboriginal humour are the continuation of ancient tribal humour practices. I have seen similar opinions expressed in the literature of other scholars involved in the historical and modern analysis of tribal humour. (Ryan 1999: Lincoln 1993: Vizenor 1991: Basso 1979: Edmunds 1976: Easton 1970: Deloria (1969) 1988) For instance, Vine Deloria, Jr., describes how teasing is an integral part of tribal humour:

For centuries before the white invasion, teasing was a method of control of social situations by Indian people. Rather than embarrass members of the tribe publicly, people used to tease individuals they considered out of step with the consensus of tribal opinion. In this way egos were preserved and disputes within the tribe of a personal nature were held to a minimum. (Deloria (1969) 1988: 147)

In Gerald Vizenor's 'trickster discourse', he describes tribal cultures as comic where the process of staying amused becomes an individual and tribal exchange of humour:

The comic spirit is not an opposite but it might as well be. You can't act in a comic way in isolation. You have to be included. There has to be a collective of some kind. You're never striving at anything that is greater than life itself. There's an acceptance of change. Sometimes things just happen and when they happen, even though they may be dangerous or even life threatening, there is some humor. Maybe not at the instant of the high risk, but there is some humor in it.
(Ryan 1999: 4)

Much of the pain spoken about by Vizenor results from hardships imposed on tribal cultures through colonization. Gary Farmer describes some of these hardships and their effects on Aboriginal people and their sense of humour:

Because Native communities have gone through probably the worst situations in North America that any peoples have gone through they had to have the ability to laugh. If they didn't they wouldn't be existing today. So humour has been a means of survival, the only means . . . for the last two hundred years they've had everything taken away from them, their ability to think, practically. Everything: what language they could speak, what religion they could do, and the things they couldn't do. It was all set out for them. They couldn't even make money in order to create a decent living for themselves. All those decisions were taken away from them. The only thing they had was their ability to continue to laugh their way through life because if they didn't . . . they would vanish. (Ryan 1999: 72)

From this experience emerged what Gary Farmer has coined 'toxic humour'

which he describes as:

. . . a form of humour based on toxicity. You have to laugh because there is nothing else to do but laugh at (the situation) in order to face the reality of it, in order to get past it . . . if you don't laugh at it then you can't deal with it. (Ryan 1999:168)

Ryan argues toxic humour and irony are the prevailing themes in Aboriginal art which serve as a way of: "exposing and subverting oppressive hegemonic ideologies." (Ryan 1999: 8) Humour theorists have described this type of humour as the humour of the oppressed, where humour becomes a defence mechanism to deal with anxiety. (Driessen 1997: 223; Ziv 1984: 3 & 55)

Although Aboriginal artists are working hard at changing colonial ideologies, they exist as a lone voice in the wilderness of Canadian television and movies. In Drew H. Taylor's review of Canadian television shows and movies during the last ten years, Taylor mentions fewer than half a dozen that have portrayed Aboriginal humour. (Taylor 1996: 62-65, 78-83) Cultural researchers have recognized the power

of media images to influence perceptions and attitudes. They see media representations as powerful ideological tools that oppressors have used for more than one hundred years. (George & Sander 1995:429) For instance, in discussing the photographic images of Edward Curtis, Gerald Vizenor suggests the power and influence such images can have:

... there we have a power in an image, real social power, political power in an image ... we're actually capturing the image of people and you can control them with their own images or with these images you possess. You can determine how people will be seen and how they will be presented. (Coltelli 1990: 170)

According to Stuart Hall, societies are constantly constructing their cultural identities therefore the possibility exist these identities can be influenced and controlled. Hall claims cultures may accept outsider representations as insider cultural reality. (Hall 1990: 222: 1996:4) In Canada the dominant representation of Aboriginal peoples is one of a humourless and troubled people. Fred Wallin described his reaction to these images and the decisions he has had to make regarding his identity as an Aboriginal person and as an Algonquin:

On *The Rez* and *North of 60* they'd all be dead now ... too many problems ... it's not real ... it's a stereotype ... I don't even think it's a non-Native stereotype anymore I think they've taken that ... well you go to a Pow-Wow and you get all these people that are wearing different types of regalia from different tribes and it's almost like we've become our own stereotype ... Yea ... I'm just an Algonquin that's all I care about ... if I was to be a drummer I would play Algonquin songs ... I don't play Ojibway songs ... I appreciate Ojibway songs ... I like to hear them and I like to hear other Ojibway ... and I like to hear Mohawks ... Mohawks are ones ... I kind of like them more because their culture ... they're

very protective of their culture and they practice it . . . Mohawks only do Mohawk songs and you don't get Ojibway doing Mohawk songs and I like that . . . I just like to be an Algonquin.

Sorting through these images is not an easy task and Chad Smith believed age and an exposure to a variety of cultures are factors that played a role in whether people accepted or rejected the images:

They just don't stereotype people as much because there's such a wide variety of multi-cultural people . . . especially in Ottawa . . . you don't see it too much . . . it's not a big issue Because a lot of . . . I'm only twenty-two so that generation from that age down . . . I guess most of the stereotypes . . . people at that age you still see the stereotypes but I guess the parents . . . their parents start to realize that stereotypes aren't actually true and this is how it is . . . but again you run into some people that are . . . that live by those stereotypes so to speak . . . most of the people that I know or that I've met and encountered don't use the stereotypes too much except for quote 'the older generation' . . . they still have that . . . "Oh can you do a ceremony for me to get rid of the snow?" . . . or . . . "Oh . . . can you do a ceremony to make the rain stop?" . . . and that's the older generation of forty or above.

Attitudes toward the representation of humour in the mass media were not the only issues that emerged during the interviews. In the remainder of this chapter I have featured ideas and opinions on the subjects of stereotypes, expectations and attitudes expressed by outsiders in their cultural constructions of Aboriginal people. In addition, I have presented a discussion of issues concerning changes in the use of the Algonquin language that have affected the expression and preservation of Algonquin humour.

2.2 OUTSIDER CULTURAL CONSTRUCTIONS

As discussed in the preceding section, outsiders have set the parameters governing the production and reproduction of Aboriginal images in mass media. In her work Wendy Rose suggests there may be other assumptions behind this ideology:

... a subset of a much broader assumption within the matrix of contemporary Eurocentric domination holding that non-Indians always (inherently) know more about Indians than do Indians themselves. (Rose 1992:406)

Others share Rose's viewpoint: in the literature concerned with the history of visual images in paintings, photographs, movies and television researchers often refer to this underlying ideology. (Francis 1997: Bird 1996: Mihesuah 1996: Berkhofer 1979) For instance, Robert Berkhofer claims these images provided the 'moral' and 'intellectual' justification for the cultural imperialism of outsiders. (Berkhofer 1979:113) And Vine Deloria, Jr. believes these images will continue to exist if conflicts continue between Aboriginal people and outsiders. (Deloria, Jr., 1992:398) Given the current tensions between Aboriginal people and the Canadian Government, (Boldt 1994: Dickason 1992: York 1990) it is possible these culturally imperialistic images will continue to exist for some time into the future.

During the interviews the participants discussed issues related to the impact of cultural imperialism on Algonquin culture. These issues are as much a part of the cultural identity discourse within the Algonquin community as they are with other Aboriginal peoples across Canada. (RCAP 1996:621) The following excerpts from

the interviews suggest the variety of ways outsider cultural constructions and attitudes have affected Algonquins. Pete Bernard has this to say about the portrayals of Aboriginal humour in Canadian society:

Oh definitely . . . the stereotype exists in society in that we are always perceived to be very serious . . . very withdrawn . . . very standoffish . . . a lot of it is with the media in that we are always portrayed as being drug addicts . . . alcoholics . . . unemployed and you know . . . there is the general . . . there is the entire Oka incident . . . you see if a Caucasian . . . if the teachers go on strike that's considered a bargaining position when Aboriginal people do it . . . it's automatically considered a confrontation and that stereotype has always existed . . . so I think that when I came from my reserve to Ottawa I was probably the typical wooden Indian . . . although I've always had a very good sense of humour . . . because I knew I was fighting against over five hundred years of opinions and stereotypes and so I felt the need to . . . maybe not being as outgoing as I should have been or could have been.

After we discussed the 'wooden Indian' stereotype, Pete Bernard mentioned how his newly immigrant classmates believed the stereotype to be real. I asked him why they thought this was so and he replied:

Well it's what I asked . . . Why would you think I was like that? And they said . . . "Well you know . . . when I'm watching Dances With Wolves or if I'm watching . . ." and of course they're watching it in subtitles where they came from.

Later we were reflecting on the characteristics of the 'generic Indian' who always seemed disconnected from the everyday concerns of emotions, worries and family life and Pete Bernard suggested why this stereotype exists:

. . . for some reason I think most people have a predefined definition of Indian in their mind . . . where it came from . . . it could be a combination of media and stereotypes that have been passed down . . . their own perceptions and we really don't know what that

is . . . only that we know that we're not what they think we are . . . and so when they see us they try to fit what we are into this mould and if you don't fit there's something wrong with you and if you do fit it just goes to reconfirm their belief in what is . . . because most people . . . I thought your hair would be longer or . . . , . . . Like my eyes are hazel . . . , . . . I can only say this . . . is that the Indian that we are that we could portray is not nearly going to get as many sales at the box office . . . than the Indian they've created . . . , . . . What my grandfather said . . . I think it's the best thing . . . he said it was . . . men especially . . . tend to see what they want to see and hear what they want to hear as opposed to seeing what's there and hearing what's been said . . . if that's what they want to do that's fine as long as we don't forget who we are . . . he always said that the White men built great sailing ships and travelled all over the place . . . that was their journey because they were too afraid to look where the real journey is . . . which is inside of you . . . how many people really want to turn that magnifying glass onto their own life to look at the things you've done . . . when you say I've reflected a lot . . . I have . . . I always look at myself saying why have I did this and what have I learned from this . . . what can I use from this to go on and make myself stronger and that's the philosophy I've carried with me throughout my life.

Wes Cayer suggested the perception held by Canadians of Aboriginal people as non-deserving wards of the government is an attitude that has contributed to negative attitudes and expectations:

In today's society a lot of people believe that Native people are . . . how do you say . . . shouldn't have things that they don't work for . . . that's the way I'd put it and if you work for it than you get it especially when it comes to land claims and all that so they say . . . "Why should they get it they're not going to do anything with it." and stuff like that . . . but to me we will do things with it we used to hunt from it . . . and lots of people used to think that way they look at a Native person and they say there he is . . . especially in the urban . . . like in Ottawa . . . now what they see . . . they see a Native guy they think of drunks.

Catherine Wallin suggested the perception of Aboriginal people being childlike

and in need of governance has led to the unreasonable treatment of Aboriginal people:

Ok . . . in a political context I still see people who view us as wards of the government treating us as little children as if we don't know how to govern ourselves or stuff like that . . . they did that even through history when they made all these policies of trying to assimilate us . . . from when all the Europeans come into the country they felt that they needed to protect us that we weren't able to take care of ourselves . . . that's just political stuff . . . that's how I feel sometimes they've stereotyped us . . . that we're still wards of the government that we can't take care of ourselves . . . it's about time that people and society and the Government have to see that we're not like that . . . they just use that as a . . . as a means to do what they want to do with us . . . that's how I feel . . . sometimes I do even when you get White people looking down at us as if we're less than nothing . . . I think it's because through history . . . as the government portrayed us . . . I think so . . . even society has to start looking at us differently now . . . treat us as equals and quit viewing us as that stereotype.

An anonymous participant contributed ideas on the subject of political pressure and the loss of rights of reserve and off reserve Algonquins:

Me right now I think our freedom is going . . . slow but sure we won't be free like we used to be . . . there's too many laws coming out . . . even on the rez itself we're not feeling free like before . . . even the kids are telling me that too . . . it seems like we're going the same way as the White people are right now . . . that's what affects more of my Blood . . . and for an Indian like me I don't live in the reserve but I can't get any help from the Indians that are there either because I live outside the reserve.

Besides existing visual images, political attitudes and cultural perceptions, other participants believed historical portrayals created inaccurate images of Aboriginal peoples. Sandra Decontie explains:

If you look at history and everything that's been written in the history . . . it's been portrayed in a certain way . . . and it's carried on even to today . . . but they look at it as one time of . . . savagery

... and it's hard to try to bring them away from that to see the other side of them ... you know ... so society's taken it to a place where they're only this way and that's the only way they are ... now when they try to begin to show the other side ... oh no ... that's not the way they really are ... they're this way ... it's to change the frame of mind of the people ... show them that no they're not just this way they can be this way also and this is how they live their life.

Pete Bernard's critique of historical discourse includes this assessment of historical bias as it applies to Aboriginal people:

People they're used to criticising us and to putting us under all that heavy observation ... I think a lot of it is because they're afraid of looking at themselves ... it's always been and throughout history ... that history is rewritten by the winners the victors those who have oppressed ... maybe they need to do that so that they don't have to look at themselves ... everybody needs a scapegoat and I think a lot of why the Europeans came here ... as is my understanding of history ... is that in Europe they weren't granted land ... they didn't have rights and they were not the cream of the crop who came ... they were people who didn't have land and so their answer to solve that problem was to come to a race who didn't have their advanced technology and take ... and they spend years of history justifying it ... my founding nations' theory is that there were three founding nations ... there were the Aboriginals the French and the English ... wrong ... there were the French and the English and there were no Natives ... there were coureurs de bois ... they were the ones who solved the world's problems ... I think a lot of it ... seriously ... does come through the translation of our culture which isn't even understood by the people who've written it ... over five hundred years of history ... there's always been a bias when writing against Native people because they don't understand the culture ... because we've never had any prominent Aboriginal authors who are really coming out as historians ... who have said this is how it was ... this is what we are like.

Louise Wawatie-Pien spoke about the impact these attitudes and perceptions had on her as a child and of her amazement at the differences she saw between the world views of Aboriginal people and outsiders:

Native history wasn't portrayed as a . . . we weren't a kind people we were murderers or whatever . . . we were portrayed as a mean culture or whatever in the history books . . . from what I read . . . and I was totally negative about that so I kind of stepped back . . . but just watching them . . . I found it funny the way they would allow their children to learn such nonsense in a history book because we never thought of . . . I was never taught that way from my grandparents or my own people . . . to hate . . . but to understand and to learn from that experience . . . so to me . . . I found inside myself . . . I found it was humorous . . . that they would allow that in an educational system.

Wes Cayer spoke about his reaction to outsider images and the impact they had on his identity as an Aboriginal child:

When I was really young I used to keep saying I wish I was White . . . that's what I used to think . . . gee I wish I was White . . . back then . . . and when I grew older I looked at it differently . . . right now I wouldn't even let my kids watch it . . . if I see it on I'll turn the channel . . . I'll say no . . . no that's not for you.

Catherine Wallin worried about the images of Aboriginal people drinking on television and the impact this had on her children:

We were watching *The Rez* one day (daughter) looked at me and she goes . . . "Mom . . . they're drinking!" . . . , . . . But I told her we're not the only ones that do that . . . there's lots of White people that do it . . . she was kind of shocked when she saw it on TV . . . because it's the stereotype thing when you hear the word drink . . . so it does have an effect on them on how they feel.

Fred Wallin expressed similar views and discussed how he had to take on a censoring role to protect his children from negative images:

Like I said . . . I don't agree with them . . . I don't let my kids see them or if I do I say that's not Native life . . . they know enough native people to know that . . . because we've all gone together and they have a good sense of humour . . . and I let them know this is television it's not real life and they can distinguish that . . .

and I tell them . . . just pretend you're watching a cartoon . . . that's what it is a cartoon . . . daddy's never met anybody that can live their whole life and have all those things happen to them in fifty minutes.

In Barry Corenblum's research he discussed how conflicting images and stereotypes can have a negative impact on the development of identity and self-esteem in Aboriginal children. (Corenblum 1996: 91-95) Although not within the scope of this narration, I wonder what the lack of positive humorous images has had on Aboriginal youth. Would positive images help Aboriginal children? Would it change the suicide rate of Aboriginal youth, which is currently the highest in the world? (Dickason 1997: 411) Perhaps future solutions exist in the newly inaugurated Aboriginal Peoples Television Network whose mandate consists of developing positive images of Aboriginal people. Hopefully they will be humorous ones.

Not everyone in this study answered questions related to how outsiders perceived Aboriginal people's sense of humour. However, of those who did, most agreed media images are still portraying old and outdated colonial images of the childlike, irresponsible, inept and emotionless 'wooden Indian'. The participants mentioned other stereotypes during the interviews and although some were of concern many were the source of humorous exchanges. Concerns about Aboriginal languages were another issue mentioned during the interviews and I have devoted the following section to this topic.

2.3 LANGUAGE ISSUES

The impact of colonial policies on the political, legal, economic, cultural and social life of Aboriginal people is well documented in scholarly research in Canada.

(Monture-Angus 1995: Boldt 1993: Dickason 1992: Sioui 1992: York 1990)

Although beyond the scope of this narration to review the material of these scholars, I have included some observations regarding one aspect of colonial policy. My concerns are directed at the impact of the educational policies of the Federal and Provincial governments on Aboriginal languages and culture.

The assimilative policies of the Canadian government involved the forced removal of children from their home communities, whom they then sent to residential schools. The government and missionary societies operated the residential schools with the intent of suppressing Aboriginal culture and language in the children. In some schools, administrators and teachers used harsh and abusive methods to accomplish these goals. Philip Commanda's experiences at residential schools were presented in Peter Hessel's article *The Algonkians of Golden Lake*:

I was born in 1932 in a log house . . . It was here on the reserve. I was one of 14 children. My father died when I was twelve. When he died, I got into trouble and was caught breaking some windows. They sent me away to a boarding school for Indian children at Spanish, Ontario, because I was supposed to be hard to handle. I stayed there for two and a half years until I finished grade 6. The teachers were priests. They treated us quite harshly, strapping us and punishing us for every little thing. One reason for punishment was speaking our native language. Sometimes I was locked up in solitary confinement and forced to work without pay in the kitchen, on the school farm or in the workshop. (Hessel 1983:57)

The forced removal of children from home communities and the punishment given for speaking the Algonquin language had long term effects on the children who experienced this abuse. The loss of language meant the loss of one of the principal ways Algonquin people had of transmitting knowledge and traditions. Language loss created a 'rupture' in language transmission from the older generations to the younger ones. (RCAP 1996:602-603) Lost was the ability of one generation to understand another and with it the means whereby Algonquin humour heritage was shared inter-generationally.

Frank Decontie describes the impact of this loss of language in his community and on the expression and comprehension of humour:

And yes I would say that the language makes a big difference in humour and I would honestly say that today even with the Algonquin people . . . they are lacking that connection because . . . that connection with that humour . . . because of lack of communication and the language is missing there . . . , . . . I'd also like to mention about the language that's got to do with humour and I'll give an example . . . in 1993 when I was with the Elder in New York City at the United Nations . . . we . . . when we ate over there they provide menus of salads . . . we were always eating salads . . . oh three meals a day . . . salad in the morning . . . noon . . . suppertime and so on . . . so the Elder tells me . . . he says . . . "Do you recognize all this salad we're eating?" . . . I said . . . "No . . . some of this I do not recognize but I hope there's no poison ivy. " . . . and . . . I said that in Algonquin . . . in our language and we're in a big crowd . . . so there was only two Algonquins that were laughing like crazy and the people are saying . . . "What are they laughing about?" . . . it was just something that came out because how we work with our humour when there is a situation happening . . . so this is an example . . . so when people asked me or the Elder afterwards what we were laughing about we told them about it and they didn't find that funny.

Besides communication problems, Menno Boldt attributes cultural disintegration to be a direct result of language loss. (Boldt 1993:168-169) Micheal Green claims one can see such disintegration as: “. . . severe psychological disorientation, such as, the dissolution of self, a sense of meaninglessness, aimlessness, and depression.” (Green 1995:7) Frank Decontie described how these problems surfaced in Algonquin communities and their impact on the expression of humour by Algonquins:

We have to remember something of what our people went through . . . our people went through a lot of hurt and pain in recent years concerning residential schools and so on and one of the areas that was affected at the time was their humour . . . they were not allowed to enjoy themselves . . . they were not allowed to have a good time . . . they were very strictly disciplined and this lack of humour was affected in their life . . . back one or two generations ago . . . three generations ago this is what happened and as a result this affected their lives when they return back in their communities and live with their people . . . some was able to begin to recollect the humorous parts of themselves and share this humour with others . . . some became isolated and they never . . . they very seldom regained this gift of humour that was once provided.

Besides the problems faced by the older generations, Frank Decontie described the problems faced by the younger children and how he encouraged their use of the Algonquin language through humour:

Today there are younger generations that begin to know their language here and begin . . . but they're shy to speak it . . . they're very shy . . . the reason why . . . for whatever reason if they're afraid to make a mistake . . . they're afraid of embarrassment . . . whatever . . . but I always try to talk to young people in Algonquin whenever I see them out in the public and try to mention something that would be humorous in our language as well . . . and they understand . . . they know what I'm talking about . . . but they will

respond in English and they won't respond in Algonquin . . . I know they know how to say it.

Sandra Decontie is a generation removed from the residential school experience and she explained how the language policies have affected her:

Well I think that's a language barrier . . . for me . . . I know very little of my language . . . I'm not Algonquin I'm Mohawk and my mother she speaks the language . . . writes the language . . . and knows the language inside out and the very little that I was taught growing up today it's some type of barrier you want to . . . you may not have been taught it . . . you know it's your language and you wonder how come you haven't been taught the way you were supposed to be taught . . . but of course in those days with residential schools . . . missionaries and all these things . . . schools were run by nuns . . . to speak the language in schools was a no-no . . . you were taught English so that was one way and now when you carry that into adulthood . . . because you're being told you can't speak your language you only speak English here . . . you grow up with this . . . when you come to be an adult you're looking at that and wondering why did they allow that to happen.

Mary Jane Stevens discusses language training at the community school and recalls how her grandmother's desire to teach her English affected her language skills and story heritage:

They have Algonquin immersion . . . , . . . But I'm sure they do have a lot of stories and plays . . . they do have plays for all the parents to go to . . . , . . . Yea and humour too . . . they do have humour . . . , . . . (MP: Trickster stories?) . . . Oh yea . . . definitely . . . , . . . But before they even had them transcribed into books our grandparents told us . . . I remember those stories from my grandparents and my grandmother would tell a story . . . but I . . . when you're a kid you listen to a story and that's it after that . . . , . . . I didn't pass it on . . . unfortunately . . . what I heard to my children . . . I had wished that maybe I could have recorded them . . . I always thought of doing it . . . but later . . . , . . . but I don't remember . . . you see . . . I don't remember the . . . and a lot of it . . . my grandmother didn't speak to much English but she wanted us to learn

English so she'd try . . . some of the words were in Indian . . . and I don't speak Indian myself.

An anonymous participant mentioned how the loss of language in the older generation has reversed some traditional roles in the Algonquin community:

Losing language . . . it's like you lose the culture too . . . but me I've learned a lot through my son . . . Well me . . . I'm glad . . . in a certain way . . . I'm glad he's not here . . . he lives on the rez and where he lives most of the time they show him all the Indian stuff . . . like hunting and all kinds of things in the bush and he likes it . . . he walks in the bush with me and he says . . . "Dad . . . this here can cure your headache or whatever" . . . it's something I don't know . . . not everybody has that . . . a lot of people have lost their Elders . . . that knowledge is gone.

In summary the Canadian government's language policy destroyed traditional linkages and methods of communications in Algonquin communities. For instance, the removal of the desire to be humorous, the loss of the ability to share traditional stories, a fear associated with using the tribal language, and the necessity of having to retrain community members in the use of their ancestral language. In the following section I have presented the viewpoints of the participants who felt there exists a need for outsiders to become familiar with Aboriginal cultures.

2.4 HUMOUR AND CULTURAL FAMILIARITY

Vine Deloria, Jr. has described cultural stereotypes as problems of misinformation and ‘perspective.’ (Deloria, Jr., 1970:44) The participants echoed Deloria’s observations when they wished outsiders would get to know Aboriginal people and in the process remove cultural misconceptions. The participants suggested humour could play a part in this process. Pete Bernard commented on the changes he experienced by using humour as a communication tool:

I think the most accurate thing to say is that I’m a start . . . a start of what’s to come . . . they know that from what they’ve devised of me is that I don’t really look Native as they thought I’d be . . . I don’t really talk the way they thought I’d talk . . . I don’t really act the way they thought I’d act . . . so I’m this person but I’m Native because I say I’m Native . . . they believe that so they ask questions every now and then about . . . “Do you have arranged marriages?” or “Do you still hunt?” or “Now tell me about the way you date?” . . . So I’m very patient to answer all these questions . . . and I do because I know I’m replacing misinformations with information . . . , . . . It’s almost made me a changeling to an extent . . . in that I can adapt to what it is they expect through my sense of humour . . . once they know that because I’m so very open and joking and I have a good sense of humour things that would normally be too awkward to say to somebody . . . if they thought you were very serious . . . would never be asked . . . so it’s the humour that’s allowed for the information flow . . . , . . . Yes it’s weird . . . once they meet a Native person . . . after they’ve met me they find them much more approachable . . . just because of first contact . . . has been made . . . , . . . Exactly that’s what it is . . . first contact 500 years later.

Louise Wawatie-Pien believes many outsiders are trying to understand Aboriginal cultures and explained it this way:

But now a lot of people that have . . . that have opened up in learning more about the Aboriginal people and have really connected

with Aboriginal people . . . , . . . I mean certain people that really want to know more about the social aspects of the Indian people . . . they know that there is humour . . . , . . . Let's say anthropologists that want to know about Native people and how they socialize . . . have never mentioned in any of their documents about what do they do for excitement . . . where do they find humour . . . I mean where's the humorous part in their social lives . . . that has never been researched . . . but we do have our ways of having fun and finding humour . . . like you say . . . humour . . . humour is laughter . . . It all comes in . . . it's part of . . . you can say a life cycle . . . I mean is there any life on earth that doesn't have that? . . . , . . . But if I'm not understanding it . . . if I don't understand the language . . . I would miss that richness of humour wouldn't I?

One anonymous participant directed their comments to Aboriginal

children:

If there's a message I could tell to the young ones . . . if they want to do something they better get involved with the White people and make them equal . . . I mean have more contact . . . friendly . . . they see a group playing whatever . . . broom-ball outside . . . or a group of them . . . they could show them stuff and the White people could show them stuff.

And Mary Jane Stevens suggested using humour to establish communication

between outsiders and Aboriginal people:

I would like to say that a lot of people that are non Native or even other communities would come to the reserve here . . . what I notice is they're uncomfortable . . . they're strangers . . . but the majority of the people would crack a joke right away to put them at ease . . . and then they're relaxed . . . and they're not going to bite you or eat you . . . , . . . And a lot of people that visit the reserve always have good comments and say the Native people here are very friendly and open . . . , . . . and they make you feel very welcome regardless if you're non-Native . . . it doesn't matter.

In summary, some Algonquins believe humour can open inter-cultural communication which can ease tension and help remove cultural misinformations.

2.5 SUMMARY

Chapter two began with an overview of contemporary tribal humour and its links to tribal humour heritage. The discussion began by an examination of the ways outsiders present Aboriginal humour. Next I presented an overview of the expression and use of humour in tribal cultures.

In the discussion which followed on the cultural constructions of Aboriginals by outsiders, the following emerged: how these images affect the perception of what an Aboriginal should be, how an Aboriginal person could either accept or reject these images as part of their tribal heritage, how the treatment received from outsiders or insiders could be positive or negative depending on what they believed an Aboriginal person should be, and how outdated these cultural images were.

Next I presented how the participants viewed outsiders cultural constructions' impact on their children. I suggested more research into the links between self-esteem and the lack of positive humorous images should be undertaken.

After this, came a discussion on the impact of past assimilative language policies of the Canadian government. The Algonquins felt the loss of tribal language had compromised access to tribal humour heritage by fracturing inter-generational communication and transmission.

Following this I related the participants' viewpoint regarding how they perceived the need for outsiders to become familiar with Aboriginal culture. The participants deemed humour important in establishing communication with outsiders

as a way to dispel cultural misconceptions and misinformation.

In the following chapter I have presented information on the Algonquin participants' views regarding the place of humour in Algonquin society. The material addresses the second aspect of my thesis question and presents an Aboriginal perspective on the role of humour in individual and community life.

CHAPTER THREE

3.1 INTRODUCTION

In Chapter Two I described how the Algonquin participants regarded outsiders' constructions of Aboriginal humour. The consensus which emerged from the interviews is a recognition in the continual presence of old colonial attitudes which are expressed in negative images and attitudes today. The participants expressed how outsiders' cultural constructions were cultural fiction when contrasted with Aboriginal reality. In contrast to outsider perceptions, the participants presented the reality of tribal humour in Algonquin society. The material in this chapter presents the Algonquin perspective on the role of humour in this Algonquin society.

An introduction to the role of humour in the personal lives of the participants begins the chapter. The material covers the uses of humour in thinking, creativity, healing and spiritual connection. Following this are sections on humour as expressed in families and in Algonquin communities. Contained within these sections are the special uses of humour as a community healing tool, Elders' humour, gender and inter-generational differences in humour.

3.2 THE PLACE OF HUMOUR IN ALGONQUIN CULTURE

I have begun with Frank Decontie's overview of Algonquin humour to introduce the place of tribal humour in Algonquin culture. First however, I want to acknowledge how Frank Decontie's words are part of the title of this narrative, 'Humour is good medicine'. Meegwetch Frank.

My name is Frank Decontie . . . my spirit name is Thunder Bird That Cries and I'm here this afternoon for an interview and the topic is humour . . . so I will mention how humour is a part of our culture . . . humour is very important because we call it good medicine . . . medicine that our people need through laughter and through humour . . . this humour has always been with our people . . . because we believe as Algonquins anyway . . . and this is a philosophy how we think and how we believe how humour is very important in life . . . because humour provides the balance what people need . . . we all know today that in life's situations people tend to be serious and sometimes too serious and sometimes they lose their balance because of lack of humour . . . so humour provides this balance and how to enjoy life and how to look at good things in life . . . how to perceive life and so on . . . and this is the reason why I say humour is good medicine . . . humour is healing and humour is . . . has a lot to do with our language because when we mention something in our language . . . and because of the way it's mentioned in language . . . it's very humorous and when we translate that to English or to French there is no humour in there . . . it's very different . . . people don't see the point of the humour is what I'm saying . . . this language and the way it's mentioned has a lot of humour when the person understand and speaks the language they receive a lot of good medicine from that . . . so humour is very important within our culture and also is very important in our language and very important in spirituality . . . so humour plays a strong and powerful role within our people and also within our culture . . . I find that humour is implemented within the children . . . they have their way of working with humour and also adults they have humour when they use . . . when they feel it's necessary to enjoy life . . . and also I feel that Elders . . . this is what they use humour as a way of sharing with people . . . in a good way . . . to try to bring their messages across so people will understand . . . in a good way . . . so this is what I

have to talk about my concerns about humour in our culture and in our life as Algonquin people.

The following remarks contribute other viewpoints regarding the place of humour in Algonquin culture:

Pete Bernard:

And on my reserve especially . . . humour is number one and everything else revolves around that . . . , . . . But I definitely see the value of laughter . . . it's probably the most important part of Aboriginal culture whether it's the part that doesn't want to be acknowledged by the people who . . . for whatever the reason . . . for not thinking we don't laugh . . . I laugh a lot and I smile a lot.

Wes Cayer:

Well the only thing I can say is . . . being Algonquin . . . is that if I didn't have a sense of humour I'd be a very bitter person. You've got to have a sense of humour . . . everybody's got to have a sense of humour to be able to express yourself and to have people like you . . . that's what it really comes down to . . . is expressing yourself then other people will accept you and if you don't have that sense of humour what is life for . . . nothing . . . You have to have a sense of humour to be human . . . it's part of nature . . . I hate getting right into depth and being so serious about things.

Sandra Decontie:

You know humour comes out in so many different ways and even as adults being silly and working with humour we look at the child within each of us . . . the child within that's beginning to bring out something and there's humour in that way . . . a lot of people don't recognize that even as adults . . . and then you have humour where somebody will try to be the clown of the family and they bring out humour in that way and then . . . you have humour where . . . through the language . . . you know you can put humour in many different places and it's always something that's happening at that time which is bringing it out.

Mary Jane Stevens:

I think that humour plays an important role in the Native people . . . that's one of their ways of coping and . . . a lot of people laugh . . . a lot of people have their own sense of humour and to maybe an outsider or somebody that doesn't know it they would think it's either not funny or it's an insult . . . but that's their way of coping.

Catherine Wallin:

I think that humour is a gift . . . , . . . To me humour is . . . like I said earlier it was . . . it's part of me . . . I think it's actually part of me this humour it's actually the thing that kept me sane throughout these years and helped me get by . . . so I'm kind of glad that I'm able to see it that way.

Louise Wawatie-Pien:

Well . . . it doesn't matter what we go through in life . . . , . . . Sometimes . . . day to day life we find very difficult but some good things happen in our lives that make us happy and that we can . . . later on as we grow older we can look back and laugh at it and then we can say our life was fulfilling . . . and it's filled with education . . . educational tools that we can hand down to our children . . . and also to make it . . . to make life more fun and interesting and looking for that happiness and sharing that happiness and this is what . . . to me humour is very important in life . . . you can't look at it as sadness . . . happiness is part of everyday life . . . you can't just look at the sad parts.

Fred Wallin:

I find some of the stuff that I see very stereotypical not only stereotypical in a White sense or a non Native sense . . . but also in a Native sense . . . that the portrayals I see of Native people are not really Native people . . . they're somebody's idea of what a Native person should be and it's filtered into some Native cultures . . . so I find I have a problem with that . . . I don't believe what I see on TV and I don't believe . . . even what I read in books sometimes . . . I don't believe anthropology reports of what these people are . . . all I know is myself as a Native . . . myself and that's how we work we know ourselves . . . humour for me . . . I can't really give a good

definition of it . . . but I can just tell you what it means to me . . . humour is a part of my life that I put a lot of importance in because I find that it has helped me a lot in my recovery and it's helped to define me as a person and that's why it's kind of hard to tell you how it feels be a Native person because my humour is not . . . I can't clearly define it but I just know what I feel when I see things . . . I don't see them in a typical Canadian way or even the European way . . . it's just that things look different to me because of the cultural aspects of . . . of anything . . . it's kind of hard to say . . . it's kind of hard to explain . . . it's like the story of how the Algonquin's got their name how they became know as the Algonquin people . . . you must have heard this story . . . , . . . No . . . the real story of how the Algonquin's got their name . . . , . . . Ok . . . now this happened in this area because this area is Ottawa-Hull . . . the Outaouais region is populated by the Algonquin years and years ago many hundred . . . well not many hundred but at least we're talking about a hundred . . . a hundred and fifty years . . . , . . . But the Algonquin's got their name . . . this is how the story was related to me and actually it was William Commanda that related the story to me . . . one day there was a Native male and he was in a canoe and he was coming down the Ottawa River where E.B. Eddy is . . . but of course it wasn't all blocked off then . . . it was a clear flowing river and his name was Quin . . . so he was just paddling down the river and doing what he was doing . . . taking in the day . . . enjoying the day . . . and he happened to look toward the shore and he saw a friend of his . . . somebody he knew over there and he looked over and there was something shining . . . his friend was holding something and it was making a reflection . . . so he went over to get a closer look at it and his friend was still there and he could see the flashing so he got a little closer to see what it was and he still couldn't make it out so he got closer and closer to shore and when he finally got close enough he saw that it was a flask . . . he was holding a flask . . . a metal flask . . . so he went up to him . . . he went up to his friend and his friend stood there holding the flask and he turned it upside down and he said . . . 'All gone Quin' . . . that's how it was related to me . . . that's how we got our name.

According to the participants, humour has always been a part of Algonquin life and they regard humour as a gift from the Creator. It is this attitude which is incorporated into Algonquin philosophy and which is expressed as humour being

'good medicine'. Algonquins use humour to define themselves as individuals and it plays a significant role in health, spirituality and social relations in Algonquin culture. Additionally, humour has a special place in the Algonquin language, in its role as a teaching and sharing tool. In the following section I have presented material which develops on a more personal level how Algonquins use humour at a personal level in family and in community.

3.3 PERSONAL HUMOUR

Creativity, Physical and Emotional Healing

In the interview with Pete Bernard a discussion developed on the Algonquin use of humour as part of the creative process. Pete Bernard tells how this use of humour is a part of the Algonquin approach to creativity:

One of the guys in my class . . . he was a civil engineer and he was with two Native guys out West when he was going to school and these guys hit it big in money somewhere and so what they'd do is buy the class their textbooks . . . they take them out and they were the funniest guys he said that he'd ever met . . . so when he met me he just goes . . . "Oh I know you're going to be a lot of fun" . . . and I have been I guess according to him . . . so he's really pro-native . . . he likes the culture because when he's an engineer the engineering philosophy is very close I guess to the Aboriginal way of life . . . it has to be relaxed to allow for creativity . . . to allow for personal freedom which allows them to problem solve . . . so he said he got a lot done and learned a lot from the Natives . . . not directly related to engineering but through the process of creative flow.

Another use of humour emerged in discussions with Frank Decontie where he talks about the Algonquin perspective on the role of humour in health:

When a person is lacking humour they are lacking something very important in their life and therefore they are out of balance because of that . . . we mentioned how humour can provide good healings and give out good medicine . . . is what I'm talking about now . . . one of the reasons when a person is lacking humour can get very sick in their life . . . , . . . Physically sick . . . emotionally sick . . . mentally sick and spiritually sick . . . this is very important what I'm talking about because our Elders often mention that . . . so in this way when a person works in this way . . . they look at life in a good way . . . in that balanced way.

In Algonquin communities the process of regaining health includes traditional and modern healing techniques. Traditional methods can range from the teachings of

the medicine wheel (Hjartarson 1995), sharing circles (Hart 1996), ceremonies and the use of traditional healers. (Cronin-Schaffnit 1996) Fred Wallin talked about his use of humour in both a traditional and modern approach to healing:

Humour is used for teaching that's how . . . that's why I have a hard time explaining what humour is for us . . . humour is part of our teaching we always had to look at . . . no matter how bad . . . I can relate it to my life . . . bad aspects of my life . . . but because of the teachings of the four directions and the four colors . . . particularly the four directions which said that if you're having a bad time in one area like in . . . like in the North . . . if you're in the North you're a North person and you're having all kinds of problems . . . you should maybe go into the South and then look back toward the North and see what those problems are and you'll find that a lot of the time those problems are first . . . it's funny . . . it's not exactly a bad thing . . . it's funny . . . if you look at it from a different point of view . . . a different direction and if you can't see it there then you go into the East and look toward the South or whatever . . . from another direction and you can find the humour in it . . . humour is . . . we use it to get our point across . . . it comes from our Creator . . . it's a gift from our Creator . . . so we look at humour as a gift . . . when we have our meetings and we do have serious meeting but there is always humour in it because that humour is the gift and we share our gift . . . we share it among ourselves and sometimes there is only Algonquin's who understand that kind of humour because it relates to us in our own world there . . . , . . . Our humour is a little bit jabbing but it's meant to draw the person out . . . we all know that we're Algonquins and we all kind of jab at ourselves . . . we don't take ourselves too seriously . . . I don't think me and (friend) have ever sat down and had a serious conversation without breaking into something and having a good laugh . . . we can't do that . . . , . . . It takes a lot of work to be serious all the time . . . you're missing the point . . . whereas if you can laugh anytime no matter what the situation . . . I've had problems in my life that I could not see the humour . . . I could not see the good side of it . . . or the funny side . . . I could not see that . . . and the only time I was able to go on in my healing path was to see the humour of it and when I saw the humour of it I wasn't tied into that seriousness of it . . . I was able to work with it more . . . like ok . . . I'm getting a divorce and I felt bad . . . but I'm going to be single again . . . actually just being single again is funny . . . , . . . More time at the

book store . . . thank God for Chapters . . . you can sit there all night with a book . . . and I have to look at that . . . I look at that . . . it's funny . . . I had a relationship with this woman . . . it turned out bad but now I kind of laugh at it . . . there is an edge to that laughter but there is still laughter and I realize that the humour is for me . . . helping my recovery and also keeping me grounded . . . because if you couldn't laugh at anything . . . I try to find the humour in everything . . . I don't try to be serious all the time . . . I can't . . . it's impossible where I can't do it any more . . . , . . . Yea . . . in my home life with my parents and my brothers there was not a lot of humour . . . it was very bad . . . it was a very abusive upbringing . . . , . . . It's only recently that I started seeing the humour in it because I admit that stuff was bad . . . it wasn't good and now I see the humour in it . . . it's painful sometimes to see the humour in it but you have to.

Mary Jane Stevens contributed her ideas regarding how her sense of humour helped her to heal from a painful divorce and the role humour played in her emotional healing:

Most definitely . . . and I still have it . . . I'm still a survivor . . . go back to the time . . . to the point where my husband left after twenty-seven years . . . within six weeks he was . . . lost it all more or less . . . so what helped me to overcome that was my sense of humour cause . . . like there are days I would be crying and in the middle of my tears I'd say something and I'd laugh . . . so they'd say you're lucky you can laugh . . . and that's what helps . . . it helps a lot I find . . . for my part anyway.

Catherine Wallin talked about using humour to heal the emotional trauma from the abuse she suffered as a child:

Yea that's a big issue with me . . . that's like I said . . . I came from a very dysfunctional family and there was a lot of abuse going on . . . and I think the thing that's saved me through all those years is the humour in . . . seeing the lighter side of it . . . you know I think that saved me . . . I have an older sister and when things just go bad we get together and talk about stuff and we just laugh about things . . . that just helps us . . . get through things . . . , . . . I remember when I was growing up as a child there . . . we didn't have time to see the

humorous side of everything . . . everything was so serious and so many problems going on . . . you know that's why we decided to look at the lighter part of it . . . at the humorous side . . . , . . . So humour is a part of my personality . . . it's just there . . . I have to look at it right in the face . . . like lighten up a little bit . . . , . . . I started getting a sense of humour . . . , . . . the more I'd talk about it the more my sense of humour started coming out.

Algonquin communities and the individuals in them have suffered a great deal from the effects of colonialism. Today humour has become very important in the healing and the recovery process at an individual and community level. The opinions expressed by Algonquins regarding the healing and beneficial effects of humour reflect those of the humour theorists' Frank MacHoven and Herald Greenwald. Frank MacHoven's literature review of the therapeutic impact of humour on the body supports the experiences of the participants. MacHoven discussed how positive chemical changes in the body (release of endorphin, the blocking of cortisone and epinephrine) help to reduce stress. (MacHoven 1998: 188-193) Herald Greenwald explained how humour helps us to deal with negative feelings, to reflect upon our lives, and to see the absurdity in the situations we encounter. (Greenwald 1977: 161-164) As Frank Decontie stated, humour is 'good medicine'.

Spiritual Connections

Healing the spirit and communication with the Creator is another use of humour for Algonquins and what Fred Wallin calls 'having a spiritual moment':

Yea . . . we learn how to . . . and sometimes it takes a lot of work to see the humour in things it's also like a game . . . a test . . . if

I can see the humour in all the bad things that have happened to me well I still see the humour in it . . . I do see the humour now . . . it took a while but I found the humour and now it's easier to deal with it and I can look at it and laugh That's Murphy's law . . . even when I go to bed at night and I offer my little prayers and I thank him for whatever . . . for what he gave me during the day today . . . and sometimes when I'm praying to him I say . . . oh yea . . . thanks I just keep laughing and I can honestly feel he's kinda laughing at me and I say thanks for that . . . I don't mean it maliciously . . . I go to bed and if I can't get everything organized in a day and to make sense of some of it . . . if I don't know what it is . . . it's a spiritual moment . . . if I don't know . . . it's a spiritual moment . . . that's another use of humour . . . is just to admit you don't know what you're doing but for some reason it's going to work out so just give it away . . . I don't know . . . I don't say I don't know any more I just say I'm having a spiritual moment.

Michael Mulkay suggests ceremonial occasions have little room for humour as they are 'preordained ritual interactions', and solemn events. (Mulkay 1988: 159) I was curious to know if humour was part of Algonquin ceremonies and of the participants I spoke to about this, all mentioned the place of humour in Algonquin spirituality. I asked Fred Wallin if he used humour in sweats and in ceremonies and he replied:

It's hilarious We've had fun . . . I've known people who do not laugh when they are doing a smudging . . . they are so dead serious . . . but when we go to a meeting they smug . . . I say . . . "Hey what are you trying to do . . . signal the people across the road" . . . and we have a good laugh about it . . . I'm just surprised how many of these so called traditional Natives are so serious No I don't think so . . . I mean you should keep it in your heart . . . it's not serious . . . it's like Christianity I found it is very serious.

Fred Wallin's comments about the seriousness of Christianity reminded me of John Morreall's discussion in *Taking Laughter Seriously*, about the place of humour

in world religions:

If Christians heeded the words of their Bible, they would undoubtedly be more solemn in everything they do. Activities for mere amusement would be suppressed or eliminated, and it is hard to see how laughter might survive. "A fool lifts up his voice with laughter." as we read in Ecclesiastes, "but a wise man scarcely smiles a little." If Jesus is to be our model, then there seems no place for humor in our lives. Judging from the Gospels, Jesus's attitude toward life was uniformly serious. He is never spoken of as laughing.

(Morreall 1983: 125-126)

In contrast to this approach, Aboriginal people weave humour into the practice and expression of their spirituality. In Paula Gunn Allen's *Grandmothers of The Light, A Medicine Woman's Sourcebook* and Vine Deloria Jr.'s *God Is Red, A Native View of Religion*, both Aboriginal writers discuss the important role of humour in Aboriginal spirituality. (Deloria, Jr. 1994: Allen 1991) As with Fred Wallin, the participants whom I asked about the place of humour in Algonquin spiritual practices confirmed humour had a place within ceremony and belief. Chad Smith is a ceremonial drummer, when asked if he could be humourous around the Drum or if was he prevented from doing this, he replied:

No . . . because when we're around the Drum it's important that we have a balance and that we use our emotions . . . humour . . . and then there is a time for seriousness . . . so when we're in the public we don't really just sit there and be stiff and not show any emotion . . . we're just the same . . . we have to try and ease the tension with humour so people can relax and it makes things easier . . . so a lot of the time that's what we have to do . . . I guess no . . . being in the public eye it doesn't eliminate that . . . that sense of humour.

Earlier in the interview I had been talking to Catherine Wallin about spiritual

requests and had shared with her my story about two Crows. Catherine then shared this story about her humorous communication with the sacred:

CW: Yes I remember one time I wanted crow feathers . . . I wanted Crow feathers to do some stuff with them . . . so one day I'm thinking . . . um . . . I'm always saying to the Creator . . . "Ok I want some . . . just one" . . . I was saying to the Creator . . . "Can I just have one Crow feather somewhere?" . . . so the next day I rode my bike and I found a dead Crow on the side of the road.

MP: Oh yea . . . ok . . . that's a lot of feathers.

CW: So I'm saying to the Creator . . . "I only asked for one feather . . . I didn't ask for the whole bird" . . . but thanks anyway.

MP: . . . Oh yea . . . about these birds . . . my sister said to me . . . "Well the way these Crows are dropping out of the sky it's a good thing your guardian animal isn't a dinosaur"

CW: Oh yea . . . that would be something!

Catherine Wallin disclosed this story about a Sweat Lodge ceremony and how its participants found humour in the sacred:

Who was talking about sweats one day . . . (friend) . . . and he saw an Elder . . . oh it was so funny . . . he put humour in it too . . . the funny part was it was real and it happened . . . one time they were doing a sweat and this lady was there in the sweat lodge . . . it was windy that day . . . anyhow she had a blanket over her in the sweat . . . it was winter and it was windy and she was sitting there and he said I guess they wanted a West wind to blow and to come in and well as if it didn't blow . . . it blew and when it blew it really blew . . . so when it blew the door open and the lady that was sitting there . . . near the thing . . . caught on fire . . . her blanket caught on fire . . . so the Elder had to take her out and put her in the snow and take all the fire off her . . . than he was teasing . . . "Well when I really ask the West wind to blow it really does!" . . . then when he started laughing I couldn't stop laughing . . . so I see a lot of humour in that.

In summary, humour has an important role in the spiritual life and practices of the Algonquin participants. It was noted how the seriousness of Christianity seemed at odds with the humorous expression of the Algonquins. It would be interesting to do additional research on how Christianity has supported, changed, or devalued Algonquin humour heritage. As documented in this narration, change has happened and additional research would reveal the extent of the influence of Christianity on Algonquin humour.

Urban Survival

Urban centres provided unique challenges, adaptations to new social environments and different ways of communication for the participants. Pete Bernard describes how his family prepared him for off-reserve life and the role his sense of humour had in his survival in the urban world:

Yes it was talked about . . . actually probably at great lengths . . . my grandmother she was sent to residential school . . . and so obviously I knew what to expect and I think that did prepare me very well . . . whereas a lot of other people in that situation may have caved in or ran . . . I was at least able to keep walking at the same speed . . . walking with my head up and of course I'd always seen the movies and the books on how Aboriginals are always portrayed and I knew that was probably going to be . . . probably an issue when I came here and I think I was probably very self conscious the first five or six months that I was here but after that I became more comfortable and I'm not the exact same Pete I am when I go back home . . . I feel more comfortable . . . I joke with everybody because I know them . . . but here . . . I know that if I didn't have my sense of humour when I first came I would still be that guy walking around the school not saying anything . . . people do say "You have a very serious face." . . . which I do have but I think I've probably got the best sense of humour

... but I do have a very good sense of humour and it's allowed me to leave the confines of the small reserve.

Aboriginal people in Canada's inner cities face the emotional, social and cultural difficulties mentioned by Pete Bernard. Carol LaPrairie has documented the severity of the problems faced by Aboriginal people in *Seen But Not Heard, Native People in the Inner City*. (LaPrairie 1994) Wes Cayer spent a period of his life as a street person and he discussed with me his uses of humour as a healing and survival tool:

Yea but you have to have a good sense of humour today to be able to live in this kind of society ... you have to have a sense of humour and if you don't have a good sense of humour you're going to be ending up probably either a suicide or ... I was going to say suicide or killing yourself ... , ... When I think about Native people I always think 'street' because that's where I classify myself as from ... is the street ... a lot of them don't have a sense of humour ... I look at it as people on the reservation they do have a sense of humour but in a different view ... I don't know if I'm making sense here?

Other participants felt the city was a difficult environment to live in, and as Catherine Wallin pointed out the difficulty of finding a public place where she could be comfortable: "I think it's as if there are only certain places Aboriginal people can have a good time right now and that's at a Pow Wow's." Fred Wallin felt the same about living in the city: "The city is hard because they don't ... they think if you're laughing or having fun you're making a fool of yourself ... but that's not what we're doing."

It appears as if the humourless stereotype has created an environment in outsider culture where outsiders perceive humorous Aboriginal people in a negative

way in some situations. Although beyond the scope of this narration, it would be interesting to explore whether these attitudes developed from the 'stoic' stereotype or from issues arising from other stereotypes related to alcohol and drug abuse by Aboriginal people in urban cores. In next section of this narration I will present the participants' comments on the uses of humour in nuclear and extended family relationships.

3.4 FAMILY

Humour in spousal relationships was demonstrated as playful teasing and in anecdotal form during the interviews. For instance, in the interview with Caroline and Wes Cayer, Wes had just finished explaining the meaning of the word *Anishnawbe* as meaning ‘a real man’ when his wife Caroline told this story:

Caroline : And I’m closer to wrestling a bear than what he would be

Wes: Well that’s true . . . I don’t go near bears

Caroline: I was pregnant for my first one . . . and we were up at Maniwaki for our honeymoon . . . that’s where he took me . . . that was fine because I couldn’t go too far and his dad took off for the night and he say’s . . . “You guys are leaving tomorrow . . . I’ll leave the house to you . . . do what you want but make sure you feed the dogs” . . . so we said . . . “Ok . . . no problem.” . . . and he said “Do you hear me Wesley . . . don’t make her do it.” . . . so it started getting dark and I said . . . “Wes feed the dogs . . . feed and water the dogs” . . . well it got really dark out and he wouldn’t go out

Wes: I said . . . “No way”

Caroline: There is lots of bears up there . . . so he turns around and he said . . . “I’ll stand here at the door . . . you go feed and water the dogs” . . . now I’m pregnant for my first one . . . and he says . . . “You go feed and water the dogs and if a bear comes I’ll yell ‘run’ and I’ll hold the door open for you”

Wes: I’m not going out there

Caroline: And I’m out there feeding and watering the dogs while he’s standing there at the door holding it open for me.

Wes: I’m a real ‘Anishnawbe’

During the interview with Catherine Wallin the use of humour with spouses surfaced several times. Catherine and I were talking about the effects of stress and she

said:

Oh . . . that's what happened with my ex one time . . . oh a bad combination . . . he quit smoking and he was going through withdrawal and I was going through PMS . . . I thought . . . I'd better leave the house for a while

Later in the same interview, Catherine and I were laughing at the oddities life

sent our way when she said:

It's funny too . . . this guy I used to hang around with many years ago . . . every time he came to my place it would be snowing . . . I said . . . "What do you do . . . bring snow with you? . . . shovel my lane way now!"

And Catherine shared this story about using humour in a playful mood with

her current partner:

One time we did . . . one time it was funny . . . the other night we were just sitting and all of a sudden (partner) said . . . "I'll just tell a bedtime story" . . . he started talking about the three little bears but we were making it more funny . . . I put (friend) there . . . I put (friend) in the story which made it more humourous . . . we were just . . . the kids were downstairs and we were upstairs telling the story and we were laughing so much and the kids were down here . . . "What are you laughing at Mom?" . . . we made it so funny . . . we put characters in it that we knew . . . people we knew and we made it funnier . . . so we have a good sense of humour sometimes.

Humour is evident in Louise Wawatie-Pien's story of her wedding day when

extended family members contributed to the humourous goings-on:

There was another experience in my life . . . this is when I got married . . . me and my husband kind of think back to the day we were wed . . . we were sitting . . . at the altar and my brother-in-law were nervous . . . I mean my husband and my brother-in-law were nervous . . . I wasn't nervous . . . it was a big day for me my father gave me away . . . and all of a sudden my brother-in-law is passing out this gum and of course we took it we didn't know it at the time we

weren't suppose to chew gum . . . because we had to have communion after . . . and we're chewing gum and the Priest was reading a reading in the book . . . and he's looking at us and he's trying . . . he's making all these funny faces and we're going . . . "What?" . . . and he's trying to say something and I go "What?" . . . and I ask my husband . . . "What is he saying?" . . . he looks over to his brother . . . "What is he saying?" . . . "I don't know." . . . I asked my bridesmaid who's my cousin Virginia . . . "What is he saying?" . . . she said . . . "I don't know." . . . and we're all bending over toward him trying to make out what he's saying . . . and then he says . . . "Take your gum out of your mouth." . . . "Oh!" . . . it was so funny and now we're stuck with the gum because my husband gave my brother-in-law all the wrappings and he's passing over the wrapping and I'm passing it over to her . . . it was so funny that we had to stick all this gum in my brother-in-law's pocket where the ring was of course . . . that's nothing . . . when we stood up in front where he made us stand besides the altar . . . this is where we got to drink the blood of the lord . . . let's say . . . so . . . again my brother-in-law is the first one to drink this and he didn't know he had to share it and he drank the whole cup . . . he say's . . . "Oh that's good." . . . and the priest is looking at us . . . so he had to pour some more wine and water . . . , . . . I mean that was very funny . . . I was trying to hold back my laughter . . . that was so funny . . . and then it came to the part where he puts the ring on my finger and the ring didn't fit . . . cause my fingers are all swollen . . . oh boy . . . of course his goes on easy . . . my husband tries it on . . . "Don't laugh" . . . , . . . I mean my uncle . . . , . . . He was half tooted and he says "There is my niece she's getting married" . . . he's trying to cry . . . and his wife . . . he wasn't married at the time . . . and she says "William will you shut up." . . . "That's my niece." . . . and he's talking real loud in the church . . . "She's getting married." . . . he's trying to cry and he can't cry so she say's . . . "You can't cry anyway . . . go on . . . get out of here . . . you're not supposed to be in the church" . . . , . . . That's nothing . . . usually you know . . . when the bride and groom get in the car you have a chauffeur and they start honking the horn . . . it started out honking then the honker broke in the car . . . so my uncle again drives up with his motorcycle so than he goes toot- toot- toots instead of honk it goes beep . . . beep . . . lead the way . . . that was a very exciting day . . . , . . . Very funny for sure . . . that was the best . . . like I said humour is the best medicine for anytime.

Children are very important in Algonquin culture and when they were present

we included them in the interview process. We shared crackers, drew pictures and laughed. On reflection they brought a wonderful playfulness to the interview process and I was thankful to have them present.

Even before Algonquin children are born laughter is part of their lives as shown in Louise Wawatie-Pien's story of the time she was carrying her son Andy:

We're going to jump into my life again and go forward . . . we'll be jumping back and forth in life . . . ok . . . sometimes women during their pregnancies they have a hard time either the heat or their swelling-ness or their weight or wobbling around like ducks again . . . well one of my pregnancies I remember . . . it was my son Andy . . . I was carrying him and my mother wanted to go check her traps . . . so she invited me and I said . . . "Good can we go visit my grandmother." . . . she says "Yea" . . . and at that time she had a truck . . . and she goes . . . "We'll go straight and visit Kokum and on our way back we'll check the traps" . . . and I said . . . "Oh great" . . . and I think I was about six and a half or seven months pregnant . . . and we finished our afternoon meal with my grandmother and I told her . . . "It was nice visiting you" . . . and as we were leaving she said "Be careful . . . I don't want you to slip and fall . . . you'll slide under the truck" . . . "Sss sh enough" . . . I said . . . "I'm ok Kokum . . . I've got good boots on" . . . and she's standing at the door and she's watching us and my mother is already inside the truck . . . and sure enough I'm taking my time watching my every footstep . . . anyway I'm watching my footsteps and I'm going up this little bank because it's plowed . . . I'm going up this little bank and all of a sudden . . . it goes down to the truck . . . and I miss my step on the truck and I fall . . . and I fall on my back . . . and I'm sliding down this little slope . . . Do you know what happened? . . . My legs went under but my round belly kinda of stopped me from going underneath the truck . . . I was wedged in . . . I couldn't move . . . I'm laughing and my mother and my grandmother are screaming . . . "Ah . . . get her out of there . . . get her to the hospital . . . check her out . . . is she ok?" . . . "Yea I'm fine" . . . and I'm laughing cause I can't move . . . I'm wedged underneath this truck . . . and she says . . . "Can you pull yourself out" . . . and I said . . . "Mom I cannot move my legs . . . I can't bend them to push myself up . . . you're going to have to pull me" . . . and here's my mother and grandmother trying to pull me out from

under the truck . . . , Actually it was pushed up to my lungs . . . so I was pretty lucky I didn't have a miscarriage . . . I was pretty solid . . . me and my grandma were laughing at that last year . . . , . . . It was funny . . . but you know that night I was ok . . . I told my husband and my mother-in-law and they were laughing . . . but she was kind of worried . . . , . . . I think it was the laughter that kinda of pulled me through and pulled him through . . . because sometimes when we worry too much it makes things worse . . . but it was a funny experience . . . it was fun.

Louise Wawatie-Pien acknowledged and valued the stress reducing effects of laughing. In humour theory, theorists have called this the healing power of humour.

(Nilsen 1993: 288) According to Louise Wawatie-Pien laughter and humour are encouraged in Algonquin children and even a newborn's smile is special:

It's like the example I gave you from birth . . . we teach our children to laugh . . . I mean you know a newborn child . . . where does his smile come from when he's born? . . . What is he smiling about? . . . We ask that question . . . we don't know why . . . because it's all born inside that person it doesn't matter what colour that child is . . . what nationality that child is.

The encouragement of laughter and play is what Wes Cayer believes is the key to having a sense of humour throughout life:

I think that if you teach your kids the right way they'll be raised the right way . . . they can express themselves when they get older a lot better to others . . . it's like with the laughter thing . . . if you teach kids how to laugh when they're young they'll be laughing the rest of their lives.

According to Frank MacHovec young children are the embodiment of the term 'a playful mood' as they show: ". . . a spontaneous joy, sense of fun and appreciation for the funny." MacHovec describes humour in children as 'pure' composed of smiles and not in words. (MacHovec 1988: 6-7) Fred Wallin talked

about the playfulness of his children and of how he encouraged it. He described this exchange with his son and his son's playful response:

Oh my kids they have their . . . they've picked up the humour . . . yea my little guy always says to me . . . "Dad . . . I fell down today and I hurt my knee" . . . "Oh yea . . . what knee?" . . . "I'm only joking Dad"

And Catherine Wallin described one instance of playful teasing with her children and her son's response to her comments:

Oh yea . . . I do use it . . . let me give you a few examples . . . here's one example . . . with (son) one night . . . we were coming home . . . we've got new neighbours . . . and we were walking and (son) says "We've got new neighbours and we hardly see them" . . . and I looked at him and said "Yea . . . they only come out at night" . . . I just couldn't resist that . . . he really got a kick out of that

Louise Wawatie-Pien stories about the early childhood experience of her children demonstrates how Algonquins let children experience life in a humorous and playful way under the watchful eye of their parents. The following stories describe how humour forms part of a holistic approach to the raising of Algonquin children.

Well . . . I guess my personal experience not only as a child but also being a parent . . . we teach our children to . . . we learn from children's behaviour . . . that we find humour in watching them grow . . . sometimes even though it's something that we don't want them to do but we still find humour in it and it reminds us of our days of how we learned . . . but it was fun . . . it's all about fun and being happy and laughter . . . a lot of laughter.

Well from my experience as a . . . watching my children grow . . . there was one certain point where me and my mother-in-law . . . she's teaching me how to raise my son and to be very watchful of his growth . . . we were washing clothes downstairs . . . in her house although it's not in the bush . . . now my son was on a jolly-jumper

and this was the first time that jolly-jumpers at that time came out and so my son who was only about . . . maybe three or four months old . . . was in a jolly-jumper and he was jumping around like crazy and he enjoyed it . . . so I ran downstairs to help my mother-in-law with the washing and all of a sudden he starts crying and we wondered why and we both ran upstairs because before that we could hear him thump-thump-thump-thump as he's jumping in his jolly-jumper then all of a sudden we heard a big 'thump' and he's crying . . . so we ran upstairs to find out what was wrong and . . . as soon as we got upstairs . . . he was upside down in his jolly-jumper . . . and he was smiling away . . . now that's what I call humour . . . I mean we see these things.

Another thing . . . when he started crawling . . . we all went swimming and my mother said, "Keep an eye on him . . . we don't want him to fall in the water." . . . I said it's pretty safe . . . because it just went down . . . the elevation of the water went down slowly and it wasn't too deep . . . and to me we all enjoyed it because it was safe . . . you would gradually go into the deep water and my son was on his four legs and crawling and he wanted to follow everybody . . . like a puppy . . . and sure enough he started coming on his fours and next thing you know he was elevating his legs and all of a sudden he was choking on the water and he found it funny . . . and we brought him to shore and he's smiling away . . . he went wagging and it was humorous

Another one . . . my other son . . . he was in diapers and he was walking . . . and I was pregnant for my other child . . . and I couldn't go swimming that time and me and my sister-in-law were just watching our children as they were swimming in the water . . . and my little son is standing beside his uncle . . . in diapers . . . and you know there is like a drop off and these kids are diving in because we allowed them and we were watching them . . . all of a sudden this kid is only what . . . a year and a half old and he doesn't know how to swim . . . all of a sudden he dives in. . . . although it seems . . . it's dangerous . . . when we grabbed him he was laughing when we pulled him out of the water . . . it's humorous . . . but . . . I find life experience it doesn't matter where we are there is humour all over.

Elder Tom Rankin an Algonquin from Val d'Or, Quebec gives other aspects

of traditional education. Freida Hjartarson reported Tom Rankin's observations:

“Traditional Native education, to him begins with young children at home learning their language and culture. Food, being together, talking, hunting, dancing, sweat lodges, shaking tent, ceremonies, and respect are all ingredients of traditional Native education.” (Hjartarson 1995: 167)

Beyond teaching these cultural values and skills, Louise Wawatie-Pien believed humour should always be part of the education of Algonquin children:

I think education should be humourous . . . there has to be a lot of humour to make it more interesting for kids to learn . . . , . . . Oh believe me when I was taking university courses I made sure that I put humour into what I learned . . . , . . . Well look at the way the teachers teach the children kinder-garden and grade one . . . humour . . . play . . . why not through all the academic educational system . . . I think it should be done . . . makes this world a better place to live in.

Don Nilsen’s analysis supports Louise Wawatie-Pien’s opinions regarding the role of humour in education, he claims humour can increase children’s alertness and receptivity. (Nilsen 1993: 290-291) In Algonquin culture educators integrate humourous storytelling to transmit knowledge. (Hjartasson 1994: 225) When I asked Chad Smith if he planned to use traditional Algonquin stories with his daughters he replied:

If I remember them . . . when they’re old enough I probably will . . . like there is stories that I remember and I’ll use them but then again . . . it’s really at my discretion I guess . . . there are some stories that were kind of odd and I guess scary . . . but then I guess they put the point across . . . I don’t know . . . I probably will use those stories.

As children grow up in Algonquin communities, more formalized types of learning occur. The reserve in Maniwaki has its own elementary school where several participants’ children attended. I asked Mary Jane Stevens and Louise Wawatie-Pien

if the teachers told traditional stories in the Algonquin language at the school.

Apparently the teachers teach the Algonquin language and children use this knowledge to act out humorous stories and plays for the parents.

Learning for Algonquin children is not limited to the classroom for children.

Louise Wawatie-Pien shared her 'duck story' which shows how Algonquins combine humour and nature in learning:

I guess I was about fourteen or fifteen or sixteen . . . I mean being forty-two . . . , . . . This was in the spring time and there was this little opening of a small lake on the side of the road . . . there was a hole in ice I guess this was like spring water coming out from under the ground and it was just allowing the flow to come up . . . anyway . . . ice is usually black when it starts melting and you can see . . . you can see it was melting but with our eyes we know . . . by experience we know this . . . so here is this duck . . . there is ducks all over this ice and they're all standing on the ice and some are just swimming in the little black hole and here comes flying this duck . . . and he lands . . . he lands on the hole of the water and all of a sudden he doesn't know that there is this ice underneath. . . . and it's like a crash landing and he's flapping all over the ice and he kinda squabbles to his feet and he's shaking . . . he's shaking his whole body and he's shaking his head . . . what happened? . . . you can almost read what's on his mind . . . and it was so funny . . . but I was so sad that day because I was going back to school . . . because spring allows us to learn a lot of things and to see a lot of things . . . and learn a lot of things about nature and what it has to hold . . . to educate us . . . so that's my little duck story.

In summary, humour appears in family life from courtship, marriage, childbirth, child rearing, teaching, and interpersonal relationships within the family. In the following section I will be presenting humour within a community context.

Included in this discussion is a look at Elders and humour, community healing, and gender and inter-generational differences in regards to humour.

3.5 COMMUNITY

Humour and politics

According to humour theorist Gary Fine, most humorous exchanges in society occur within small group settings and consist of: “. . . nicknames, repeated insults, local slang and humour.” (Fine 1977: 315) In addition, Don Nilsen claims the use of humour can encourage sympathetic listening in people that can make them receptive to other points of view. (Nilsen 1993: 291) Pete Bernard’s description of the humorous climate on his Reserve illustrates and supports Fine’s and Nilsen’s ideas:

And when I come down here for their board meetings everything is so formal . . . perfectly typed out agendas . . . everything is stopwatch timed and they’re so serious . . . whereas if there’s a board meeting back home it’s very informal . . . you come and there’s a lot of joking . . . humour for us has been a way to avoid conflict when there could have been conflict and also has a great healing purpose in our own culture . . . it’s how we talk with each other . . . everyone back home has a nickname and very few people are called by their actual real names . . . like we’re having elections and people write their real names on the ballots and you have a hard time figuring out who it was . . . because we always go by nicknames . . . it’s just part of everyday life to bug somebody . . . just jokingly . . . just bugs the hell out of them and they do it to you . . . it just makes a much more relaxed environment.

In Aboriginal society decision making involves consensus building techniques.

Iroquois educator Oren Lyons describes these techniques as involving “long discussions” which go on until all community members agree. (Lyons 1984:5)

According to Pete Bernard humour plays an important role in keeping these discussions productive and successful on his reserve of Golden Lake. However,

according to Pete Bernard, these humorous consensus building methods might not be transferable to discussions with outsiders. In the following statement Pete Bernard describes how Algonquin's use humour, contrasts it with outsider methods, and gives reasons for caution in using humour when dealing with outsider culture:

I think it's a combination of things . . . one . . . I don't think we would be taken seriously . . . two . . . I think it is a confrontational situation . . . , . . . Now that we are in confrontation there's no room for humour and three . . . yea it probably does have some promotional value . . . if they want distinct we have to give them distinct . . . , . . . also at negotiations with the government . . . in the culture that conducts the negotiations . . . which is the White culture . . . there's no room for humour . . . , . . . If they want seriousness and severity that's what you have to give and that's what you have to sell . . . , . . . I still think we have the advantage in that . . . even though . . . yes negotiations are stressful . . . at least we know when they're done for the day we can go back to being our humorous selves . . . , . . . That's what I think our strength has been with humour . . . is that we know how to use it . . . but to appreciate and respect it . . . it's always had healing properties . . . they say laughter is the best medicine.

Frank Decontie presents a different perspective regarding the use of humour in political negotiations and suggests some effects of a lack of humour in political discussions:

Well I guess to a point conflict resolution . . . it probably could be used in a humorous way . . . but . . . I can speak for myself that I'm a serious person myself . . . but there are times where I enjoy having humour in my life because I know how important humour is . . . , . . . When we look at humour . . . what humour delivers is good energy not only to the person who is working with this but to others and it brings out a happy atmosphere and this is very important because . . . like what's been mentioned about politics . . . this is a very serious type of business and people tend to . . . be in that category . . . and if lack of humour is involved there it begins to be a very tight atmosphere.

I asked Wes Cayer if he could use humour with outsiders in political negotiations and he replied:

No . . . no there's no humour what so ever . . . especially when it comes to politics because everybody is so serious about things . . . it's like . . . how do you say it . . . if I turn around and I went up to them and I said we should do this and laughed about it . . . why don't we do it this way . . . and smiling . . . they wouldn't take me seriously.

Although not within the scope of this narration I wonder what the emotional and humorous costs are to Algonquin politicians and their communities. In addition, I wonder if race relations would improve if outsiders adopted the traditional humour focus and consensus building skills of Aboriginal people. In summary, Algonquins recognized, valued and expected humour in community politics in Algonquin communities. However they recognized the use of humour may not be possible when dealing with outsider culture.

The humour of Elders

Throughout the interviews the participants mentioned the special humour of Elders. In the beginning of this chapter Fred Wallin introduced the humour of the Maniwaki Elder William Commanda in the 'how the Algonquins got their name story'. Later in the same interview Fred Wallin discussed the unique characteristics of Elder humour when he talked about William Commanda, his grandfather and his uncle:

My Grandpa was the funniest person I knew . . . he was seventy years

old . . . he had all kinds of bizarre stories . . . he was the funniest guy I knew . . . my uncle was forty years old and he had all kinds of good humour . . . he made us laugh . . . when we laugh we're happy . . . our spirit is shiny . . . our spirit comes out . . . we're at peace when we're laughing . . . , . . . William Commanda has always been my Elder and he's a very quiet person . . . but I got caught in the same stereotype one time . . . he became this serious Indian one time . . . giving me all this information that would help me in my life and it turned out he was just making a joke . . . oh no I got caught . . . sucked in again . . . when I grow old I want to be like that too . . . just to have people in front of me just to sucker them in and then zing them with a one liner or something at the end of it . . . there that's your lesson . . . don't take things so seriously . . . look at the good side of life . . . life is laughing . . . I see you guys all serious around me and it makes me sad . . . it does kind of make me sad too when I see a bunch of Native people around and they're so serious . . . it makes me sad because they missed the point . . . , . . . Elders know the power of healing in humour . . . and they know when to use it . . . but it gets the point across . . . the lesson that we learned was not to be too serious with ourselves or even to anybody else either . . . we can respect and honour that person but kind of have a little laugh with them too . . . were we meant to be put on this earth to suffer? . . . I don't think so.

Just before I interviewed Chad Smith I had read in *The En'owkin Journal* of a type of humour being exclusive to Elders. (Beaver 1997) I was curious if Algonquins considered certain humour as exclusive to Elders and I asked Chad Smith about it:

I don't think it's exclusive use . . . it's more . . . I guess in terms of respect . . . , . . . If you think of the word respect and Elder you don't expect certain humour and it comes out at a certain time when you don't expect it . . . so I guess maybe that's what they're referring too as Elder humour. . . . , . . . Most of them understand people . . . understand their emotions . . . understand at what point and where they are at that point in terms of anxieties angers sorrows and they can pinpoint and they know when to use that certain kind of humour and . . . , . . . Exclusive rights . . . there is really no exclusive rights it's more . . . I guess a lot of people see it as humorous because they don't expect that coming from a person who's eighty-five years old . . . referring to a sexual comment or referring to . . .

whatever it may be . . . something to just break the ice or break the tension and people don't expect it to come and they don't expect it at that time . . . but again humour is integral part of our society and who we are and it's important that humour is used and the Elders I guess understand that and they know when to use it and I guess maybe that's their licence.

The following stories shared by Louise Wawatie-Pien are from her humour heritage and the legacy of her grandmother Dr. Lena Nottaway. Dr. Lena Nottaway, previously of La Vérendrye Park near Rapid Lake, Quebec, had passed away one month before I interviewed her granddaughter. Dr. Nottaway was a recipient of an honorary doctorate from Carleton University in 1993 and these are her stories:

LW: She made every thing fun to learn . . . she made it easier to understand by using humour with everything that she taught us.

MP: Something in particular?

LW: Hides . . . , . . . Tanning hides with her . . . I remember the time when we were pulling the hides and she says "Pull." . . . I said . . . "Are you sure you want me to pull." . . . she goes "Yea pull" and so I pull and I pull her . . . she says . . . "Not that hard." . . . "Well you said pull." . . . she said . . . "We're not playing tug of war here . . . we're pulling hides" . . . And there was another time when we were pulling she says . . . "You've got to have a good grip . . . take a good grip . . . do it this way." and she says . . . "Ok pull." . . . and I said . . . "Ok." . . . I'm pulling and all of a sudden she falls flat on her back . . .

MP: Was she laughing?

LW: Oh was she ever . . . she said . . . "Oops I lost my grip." . . . Ah my mother could have told you about the time they were on one of their trapping sprees . . . , . . . Hunting sprees . . . trapping . . . well they were out checking their traps and I guess they were going through a portage . . . and it was like a hill on it . . . and I don't know something happened to my grandmother where she kind of tumbled down . . . down the hill into the lake . . . things like that

happen you know.

MP: Was your grandmother laughing?

LW: Oh yes she was and she was mad . . . she says . . . "That's not funny." . . . "For you yea but for me no" . . . There were so many things that my grandmother did . . . There was one time when she was beating the hides . . . "She says you really have to have a lot of strength in beating this hide." . . . she made me do one hide and beat it and I said . . . "Kokum." I said . . . "You'd better watch out and be careful how you beat the hide because there's a string there." . . . and she says . . . "Oh no that's ok." . . . sure enough she hits the hide with this plough . . . hoe . . . a hoe . . . and I said . . . "Kokum be careful." . . . and I told her about the strings . . . I said . . . "You're going to hit the strings." and she said . . . "No no no . . ." she says . . . "Don't tell me what I can do and what I can't do." and I said . . . "Ok but you're going to hit that string." . . . sure enough she hits that string . . . and it just pulls her back . . . and knocks her off her feet.

MP: She's lucky she didn't get that thing in her head.

LW: She did . . . I'm laughing . . . but I didn't see it hitting her head . . . I just saw her flying back because it happened so quickly . . . and I'm laughing and she's holding her head . . . she says . . . "Don't laugh." . . . she says . . . "It's not funny" . . . and she's sitting up and all of a sudden I see tinkles of blood coming . . . and I said . . . "Kokum did you get hurt?" and stopped laughing because I was scared and she says . . . "Hey you . . . get me some Aspirin." . . . at the time it was Aspirin . . . she says . . . "Hey you .. go get me some Aspirin because I think I'm getting a real bad headache." . . . I went to get her the Aspirins and I gave her two . . . I cleaned out her wound . . . and I'm sure she must have had . . . I was afraid she was going to have a concussion . . . and so she sat there for awhile and she says . . . "Ah . . . go get my pipe . . . I'll be ok" . . . she says . . . "You beat the hide." . . . so I went to get her pipe and all that . . . and I was beating her hide and so I was kinda of worried will she be ok . . . and I guess my mother was watching from a distance she was kind of giggling . . . she didn't know what was happening . . . and later on she decides to cook her supper . . . she's very quiet about this you know . . . and so I said . . . "Kokum are you ok?" and she goes . . . "Yea I'm ok." she says . . . "Fold up the hide and put it in a plastic bag we'll start over tomorrow." . . . and so she's cooking and so I went home to see mom

and I told my mom about it and we were laughing about it and I guess my grandmother heard us laughing . . . she calls us over and she says . . . “Come on I cooked up a good meal.” . . . and she starts telling my mom about how she was beating the hide and how it bounced and hit her head and now she’s laughing about it . . . the pain is gone . . . the Aspirin worked.

There was another time when my grandmother was . . . when my grandmother was alone in the bush . . . at that time she used to have a lot of dogs . . . she had about three or four dogs . . . and she stayed alone a lot in the bush by herself where we stay now . . . and the one thing that she always did was . . . she used to have these old metal wire bedsprings and she used to nail that on her windows so the bears wouldn’t break her windows and steal the food in there . . . so . . . that’s what she used to do . . . and anyway her dogs were in Rapid Lake and she had went back and she had forgotten her dogs . . . so one morning she wakes up and she’s cooking her breakfast inside the house . . . and these two . . . apparently she didn’t know it was a bear . . . and the bear kind of put his paws up onto the screen and she picks up a broomstick and she hits the paws of the bear and she goes . . . in our language . . . *awish* means . . . telling the dog . . . get away . . . she hits the paws of the bear . . . “*Awish* . . . get out of here . . . go on.” and she’s eating and all of a sudden she stops eating . . . that wasn’t a dog that was bear . . . so she runs into the bedroom and get her gun and she goes outside and the bear’s gone . . . she wasn’t afraid though . . . those were all the stories that she shared with us . . . there’s so many of them . . . there’s a lot of humour that other people don’t see.

Healing the community

In Avner Ziv’s analysis of the social functions of humour he says: “ And just as tension and conflict are causes of division and separation, so humour and shared laughter are factors that join and unite.” Ziv ties his ideas to those of W. Martineau’s ‘task’ model which outlines how humour helps groups whose members are in crisis. Groups can use humour to raise group morale; maintain a consensus; and reduce the

social distance in the group. (Ziv 1984: 32-33)

Ziv's account matches Louise Wawatie-Pien's analysis of the present and future role of humour in her community:

In my community right now we're going through a lot of healing . . . where people are learning about their inner needs . . . how would I put it . . . they have been in a lot of oppression . . . the oppression has really pushed them to the limit where they're really suffering from all kinds of trauma . . . abuse they had . . . they kind of dwell on it and there's so much sadness and there's so much hate . . . I think humour plays a lot in our lives where it can and will eliminate all these negative feelings . . . hatred . . . jealousy . . . even the abused part of our lives that many of us have experienced . . . and I think it's a . . . humour is like another door to happiness.

One of the anonymous Algonquin who preferred anonymity suggested that sports can contribute to the development and expression of humour that may be of help to Algonquin youths and adults. I am grateful for the suggestion because I would never have thought of it. Since the interview I have considered how sporting activities (travel, banquets, tournaments, sharing equipment) can increase the positive humorous interaction of Algonquins within their communities and with outsider communities. The anonymous participant claims it has been an effective way to knock down barriers and increases the self esteem and happiness of the young Algonquin players.

Here it's not too bad . . . me I coach (sport) . . . my team is always mixed and there's no difference in my team . . . , . . . usually I could see Indians sitting on one side and the White on the other . . . together there behind me . . . not too long after that the Indians were all behind me and the White people too . . . and they start to talk to each other . . . "Hey your son's good . . . hey." . . . and stuff like that . . . Well it's hard to work as a team . . . when they grow up like that

... they work for the same team to fight for the same ... to win a game so they're equal there ... equality ... , ... I used to make jokes with the players and I used to have three Indians who were working very good together ... , ... And I said ... "Ok ... no tax line on the ice."

In summary sports, play and humour are all aspects of community healing in the Algonquin nation.

Differences

As the interviews progressed, I noticed a difference between the younger and the older Algonquins I interviewed. Since Frank Decontie has had extensive contact with all age groups, I asked him about the younger people and what he thought about the differences:

Our younger generations I find that they're in a healing process these generations and they're able to find the fun in their life ... they're able to do that because they haven't endured something that their parents and grandparents have endured ... severity ... it's more loose ... It's more convenient for them now ... and I see that ... as an example even with the children here ... I pick up on that when children try to provide something of humour implemented within the family atmosphere ... so I support this area ... what the younger people are saying that they are able to implement that humour in their life ... within themselves and within others.

When I asked one of the younger Algonquins if they had noticed differences in inter-generational humour, Pete Bernard replied:

Two different views of humour ... one is for healing ... facilitating ... comfort and one was maybe escapism ... being able to laugh at jokes and situations.

And Catherine Wallin offered another point of view on the subject of

generational differences in regards to expression of humour:

CW: I think they probably didn't have an opportunity to express it . . . maybe because there's a lot of stuff going on.

MP: But are they expressing it now?

CW: Yes I think so.

Chad Smith commented on different inter-generational styles of humour and on the social conditions he felt contributed to these differences:

Well no . . . among the same age group and it depends on who and how they were raised . . . I guess it's hard to say . . . because if you look at a reserve a lot of it is basically a . . . European society sixty years ago in terms of how they don't let each other get ahead . . . they'd rather keep this person down rather than have them succeed and help them . . . rather than let one person succeed and everybody help them . . . they don't . . . they'd just rather see everybody in the dumps and that's it . . . that's how they want to see it . . . and it's unfortunate but I guess through it all . . . I guess humour has been an integral part of it . . . and I guess the people most . . . I guess not so serious are . . . I guess the generation between thirty and fifty they're the ones that laugh a lot that use laughter as . . . I guess it's their scape goat as they try and forget what happened or use it as a tool to say that I'm ok and laughter is a major tool.

After this I remarked on how oppressive society had been for this generation of Algonquins and Natalie Armitage said:

You hit a good point . . . I like what you said about the age of abuse that a lot of Native peoples went through and your response was to use humour to counteract that . . . with Chad's grandfather I noticed . . . , . . . My grandfather's the same way . . . they like to be telling stories and they'll just take an ordinary incident and they'll make funny tales out of it and a good old yarn and you'll sit back and you'll listen and you'll laugh . . . and the next generation is more self analysing but also . . . I'm going to put myself down before somebody

else does . . . that kind of humour . . . where I guess maybe it stems from an abusive environment or an abusive generation . . . , . . . You turn that humour on yourself . . . maybe you understand what I'm trying to say? . . . , . . . Like a put down.

Humour theorists have positioned humour within a cultural and historical framework, (Nilsen 1993: MacHovec 1988) therefore it makes sense for differences to exist between generations. Although not within the scope of this narration I wondered what effects, these differences will have on the transmission of humour heritage in the future. For instance, what happens when the younger generations do not find the humour heritage of the senior generations humorous? Who judges what is worth saving by remembering it? What is the impact of television and movie images of Aboriginal people on the type, style and expression of tribal humour?

The participants mentioned how they had observed a noticeable difference between the humour of Algonquin men and of women. In other societies gender differences in humour appear where 'men's discourse and men's humour is dominant'. (Mulkay 1988: 150) And as Regina Barreca suggests these develop into differences in style and uses for humour by men and by women. (Barreca 1991) It is unclear from the interviews if the gender differences in Algonquin culture are the result of traditional Algonquin practices or if they are adoption by Algonquin men and women of the humorous gender patterns of outsider culture.

I will submit some observations of the participants on the gender differences they have observed. Mary Jane Stevens describes the gender differences she has noticed between Algonquin men and women:

I believe . . . in my opinion there is . . . yes there is a big difference . . . men like to be the serious types . . . the ones that provide . . . , . . . And then their humour is more . . . how do you say it . . . like it only has be related men to men . . . not so much with women . . . with their partner or whatever . . . they'll laugh and joke with the guys more or less . . . I mean that's what I think anyway.

Fred Wallin contributed several observations on gender differences in humour in Algonquin culture:

You want to talk about Native humour . . . you talk about the women . . . you'd be surprised even with all this pain and suffering they went through they're funny as hell . . . my grandmother . . . well when she was young . . . she was funny as hell . . . , . . . I think of humour as female if you want to give it a gender . . . I think of it as female . . . men are always having problems laughing at themselves . . . women laugh at themselves . . . I see it when I go home and there is a big gathering or something and you see these older, Elder women and they're laughing . . . they're having a hell of a time . . . I laugh at that too . . . the younger guys go in to see the Grandmothers and listen to them laughing . . . we've forgotten how to look at ourselves in a humourous way.

Later after we had been talking about how serious the Roman Catholic Church was Fred Wallin added this about women and humour:

I had a problem because there were no women priest . . . I thought they should have women priest because first of all it would give us guys something to look at instead of these guys who look so serious and we would probably learn better because they teach better . . . women teach us humour . . . I always thought . . . and I still believe that . . . we get our humour from our female side . . . men are serious and then it could be from stereotyping . . . but I personally believe I got humour from my mother.

Although pursuing the topic of gender differences was not within the scope of this narration, it would be interesting to pursue the issues raised.

3.6 SUMMARY

In summary, the material in this chapter relates to the second part of my thesis question that asks how the Algonquin participants placed humour in their culture. Overall the material presented was concerned with self-representation as opposed to outsider representations covered in Chapter Two.

I began the chapter by presenting an overview of how the Algonquin participants perceived the place of humour in Algonquin culture. Next I presented humour in the participant's personal lives such as in its uses in creativity, clear thinking, and relaxation. In addition I presented the ideas of the Algonquins on the role of humour in physical healing, emotional health, and spirituality.

The role of humour in kinship-based relationships within the nuclear and extended family was presented. It included discussions on the use of humour between partners, within family relationships, and in education and child-raising. The section included a wedding story that presented humour between various extended family members.

Humour was presented as a tool in negotiating political solutions, and solving problems in the community. I questioned the cost to the Algonquin community of not being able to use their traditional problem solving methods with outsiders. The participants spoke of the role of humour in retaining mental health for those who worked or went to school in urban centres. Algonquins described humour as vital to their survival in cities. They used humour for dealing with stress, negative

stereotypes, racist attitudes and for breaking cultural barriers.

In the section on healing the community, the participants discussed how humour was necessary as a healing tool and as a way to reach traumatized community members. The section on Elders presented material on how Elders used humour to teach, convey stories and help in the healing process of community. The chapter closed with a discussion of inter-generational and gender differences as related to the style and uses of humour.

CHAPTER FOUR

SUMMARY AND CONCLUSIONS

In John Morreall's philosophical study of humour *Taking Laughter Seriously*, he suggests the possession of a sense of humour will show a flexibility and openness to life's experiences. (Morreall 1983: 121-130) The Algonquin participants displayed just such a sense of humour throughout the interview process and they were open to discussing humour in their culture. Often we would start laughing because we had become so serious about the subject of humour. We had taken laughter seriously.

Sometimes we could not help being serious as we discussed issues that generated irritation and anger. In the material reported in this narration, they have made the point repeatedly how the images and cultural constructions of outsiders have affected Algonquin humour. What follows in this chapter contains my impressions of the information provided by the Algonquin participants regarding issues discussed during the interviews. The interviews focussed on Aboriginal humour in mass media and humour's place in Algonquin society. I will now discuss what I believe are the main areas of concern that emerged from the interview material.

The following comes from the discussion concerned with the representation of Aboriginal humour by outsiders. Overall the participants relegated the images

produced by outsiders to the world of cultural fiction. It was felt these images were old colonial images of fantasy 'Indians' created by outsiders from their need to define and place Aboriginal people. At times these images were the cause of laughter as they were so ridiculous as to be funny. However, most of the time these images were a source of anger to the Algonquins as they felt these images perpetuated misconceptions about Aboriginal people. Usually the participants felt outsiders represented Aboriginal cultures as depressed and dysfunctional with little humour in their culture.

The lack of humorous movies and television shows were so severe, finding examples to talk about during the interviews was difficult. Most of the participants did not want to discuss the images as they were so overwhelmingly negative. Overall, the participants believed outsider images promoted racist attitudes and unrealistic expectations of Aboriginal people. Perhaps it was a good thing we did not spend a great deal of time on this material as it refocused the discussions to other issues. The focus shifted to the expression of humour in their families, communities and to how humour helped to define them as Algonquins.

The devaluation of Aboriginal humour and the creation of humorous misrepresentations by outsiders negatively affected the participants. For instance, because of their acceptance of these images, outsiders expected Aboriginal people to be serious people or they questioned their Aboriginality. In a strange application of resistance humour, some participants described how they had to adopt stereotypical

behaviour to counteract racist remarks and attitudes about 'stoic Indians'.

When I first heard descriptions of these events, I thought of Coyote stories, where Coyote would take on another identity to trick his victims. Perhaps this is an Algonquin version of Gerald Vizenor's 'trickster discourse' which is a method of turning the tragic into comic. Regardless, I cannot imagine going through life without laughing, being silly or happy because other people have said I cannot express myself in a certain way. I believe this is a tragic consequence of the 'uncomic' discourse of outsiders.

Although the humourless stereotype was problematic, other attitudes contributed to negative perceptions of Aboriginal people. The participants discussed anthropological misrepresentations, inaccurate historical discourse and bias in political representation of Aboriginal people. Not all opinions concerned with outsiders were negative. The participants acknowledged some outsiders were trying to get to know Aboriginal cultures and were receptive to Aboriginal perspectives and ways of being. The participants felt changes in Canada's multiracial makeup were having an impact on the rejection of old cultural stereotypes and racist attitudes about Aboriginal people.

Issues involving the participants' identity as Algonquins emerged as an area of concern in the interviews. As Aboriginal people they had to balance what they believed to be their tribal identity against images that flooded mass media. Personal connections to Algonquin traditions helped them sort through many of conflicting

messages and images. As suggested by Stuart Hall the research did show outsider representation did in fact have an impact on the participants. However, strong cultural identification did appear to modify the effects.

Cultural misrepresentations of Aboriginal humour were spoken about by the Algonquins in the interviews. Algonquins spoke of how humour in their culture was different from the cultural images produced by outsiders. In Algonquin culture, humour was present in all aspects of personal, family and community life. All ages could enjoy the benefits of tribal humour and playfulness. The teachings about the importance of humour are part of Algonquin oral tradition where they call humour 'good medicine'. These teachings placed humour in the centre of learning, work, play, spirituality and relationships.

In fact, humour was so important that, for those living in urban environments, trips to their home Reserves were an important element of emotional survival and tribal 'humorous' renewal. These trips were times when family and community members provided a humorous recharging which they saw as a vital and renewing force in their lives.

Besides personal issues the Algonquins discussed issues that affected the expression and transmission of tribal humour. Problems connected to issues about tribal language, the impact of Christianity, generational and gender differences were of concern to the participants. A certain amount of discussion went into the problem of tribal identity regarding what can be considered a 'traditional' attitude and

practice. For instance, what is acceptable humourous expression in spirituality and individual behaviour.

Protecting children from negative and stereotypical images was important to Algonquin adults. Since Algonquins valued humour and encouraged its expression in their children, they made sure the community's educational, artistic and recreational institutions were fun places for children.

Several participants spoke of the need to reach out to community members whom their residential school experiences had traumatized. It was felt humour could play a role in the healing and reintegration of these individuals into the community. In addition Algonquins perceived humour as a communication tool that they could use to ease communication with outsider culture. Algonquins felt humour could act as a vehicle for the two cultures to exchange, develop and share positive attitudes and perceptions.

As for comparing this study with others, this is impossible as no comparable studies exist in Canada. The lack of humour studies leads me to comment on the colonization of Aboriginal humour in Canada. In conducting the background reading for this research, I continually came across the same hundred or so references. The references encompassed Aboriginal peoples in both the United States and Canada and appeared in such divergent research as religion, art and literature. The discovery of this lack of scholarship led me to conclude scholars had devalued and intellectually colonized Aboriginal humour.

In assessing the methodology I used to write up this narration, I believe it avoided a 'translation' of Algonquin reality by letting the Algonquins speak about their culture. Reading the interview segments makes it obvious how the Algonquins felt about the issues they were discussing. By using this method I retained aspects of the speakers' personalities and individual interests and produced a holistic document. I believe these are important considerations when dealing with the subject of humour in an Aboriginal culture. I call it respect.

In addition, I believe the use of this methodology made room for new insights to emerge. As an example, although I did not set out to get information on style and type of Algonquin humour this information emerged in the writing. It also revealed how the social, economic and political situations the Algonquin Nation finds itself in today influence the expression of Algonquin humour. The methodology enriched my experience as a researcher, added to the body of the research and contributed to the production of a culturally sensitive document.

I believe research in Aboriginal humour is exciting, unexplored and contains a variety of issues and problems. The following are some suggestions for additional research that emerged out of the work I completed in this study. Insight into why scholars have neglected this subject in Canadian Studies scholarship would produce interesting observations. Research on the types, styles and practices related to Aboriginal humour in other First Nations would create a data source of culturally valuable information. Producers of television and movies could use this scholarship to

create culturally appropriate programming for the newly inaugurated Aboriginal Peoples Television Network and for national television.

Research on the impact of age and gender on Aboriginal humour would be fascinating to explore. It would be interesting to see if gender differences in humour are the result of Algonquin traditions or if Algonquins have adopted outsiders' cultural humour practices. An exploration of the effects of different political and religious world views on Aboriginal humour would be of value. Lastly, Canadian Studies scholarship needs an annotated bibliography of tribal humour in Canada. If researchers acted on these suggestions, the resulting scholarly material would provide the necessary references for courses on Aboriginal humour in Native Studies programs throughout Canada.

No matter where future researches go, I feel confident in the richness and vitality of the humour heritage of Aboriginal peoples. After all, humour will always be good medicine. Meegwetch.

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