

HUMOROUS TENDENTIOUS POETICS: BRUCE ANDREWS, MARIE ANNHARTE  
BAKER, AND DOROTHY TRUJILLO LUSK

by

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## Abstract

*Humorous Tendentious Poetics* interrogates tendentious humour as it operates as a textual-political strategy in the poetry of three contemporary poets. The term *tendentious humour* derives from Freud, who uses it to describe humour that is offensive and obscene—but also at times critical—in its intent and outcome. In the work of these poets, humour is highly fractious, rebarbative, and intransitive, at the level of its formal organization and syntax, as well as in terms of its language and socio-semantics. Typically, it functions by mobilizing, foregrounding, and eliding problematic or unconscious forms of knowing, thinking, or enjoyment, especially as these relate to the underlying “real” of social antagonism and alterity. Drawing on humour theory and poetics scholarship, this dissertation argues that this mode of humour functions differentially in the work of these poets as a means to navigate, circumvent, and intensify the socio-textual complexities and double binds particular to their respective poetic projects.

In his work from the 1980s and 1990s, the Language poet Bruce Andrews arrives at a politically and analytically difficult form of humour *qua* textuality. Emerging within a cultural milieu in which radical feminist, queer, and racialized writers are persuasively contesting dominant discourses, Andrews’ aggressive poetic fragmentation and reconfiguration of “injurious” speech acts is legible at times as a critique of oppressive forms of subjectivization. But it also registers forcefully as a repetition of these oppressive logics, as well as a strategy for absorbing cultural “crisis” into the body of Andrews’ own writing and recoding it as a formal analogy for the (ostensible) superiority of avant-garde transgression and irrecoverability. In texts like *Indigena Awry*, the Anishinaabe poet Annharte uses contentious humour as a vehicle of anti-colonial struggle, exploiting its logic of misprision and misrecognition to solicit but ultimately refuse colonial enjoinders to reconciliation as these operate within both settler and Indigenous

populations. Like Annharte, KSW poet Dorothy Lusk yokes humorous ire and provocation to a recalcitrant politics of difference. Yet here tendentious joking operates as a mechanism for travesty and attacking the classist and anti-maternal ideologies underlying patriarchal capitalist social formations, including that of the “avant-garde” cultural community.

## **Lay Summary**

This dissertation explores tendentious (provocative, offensive) humour in the writing of three contemporary poets. Most critical discussions of humour oscillate between whether a comic utterance subverts or reinforces the socio-political status quo. In these poets, humour frequently targets issues concerning social identity, particularly gender, class, and race. Unlike simple jokes, this humour is highly dense, non-linear, ambivalent, and ambiguous in ways that resist easy explanation. In analyzing this work, I conclude that the complexity of this humour is a response to the difficulties, deadlocks, and even impossibilities with which these poets grapple in their respective poetic projects. I argue that Bruce Andrews uses humour to attack hate speech but also to amplify the transgressiveness of his writing; that Annharte uses it to elude the double binds particular to Canada's official mandate of settler-Indigenous reconciliation; and that Dorothy Lusk uses it to navigate gender and class exclusion within radical cultural communities.

## **Preface**

The work of this dissertation is solely that of its author, Scott Inniss. None of its chapters, in whole or in part, appears in any prior publication venue. Its central problematics, arguments, analyses, and conclusions are original products of the independent scholarly and critical labour of the author.

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For Barb and Doug Inniss

## 1. Humorous Tendentious Poetics

This dissertation examines tendentious humour as it functions in the work of three contemporary poets: Bruce Andrews, Dorothy Trujillo Lusk, and Marie Annharte Baker (Anishinaabe). My contention is that these poets turn to humour because it offers a socio-textual method for interrogating, negotiating, and intervening in certain sites of political contention, including those of textual-cultural production. In reading these poets, however, I focus primarily on how humour allows them to address and in some instances circumvent various tensions and impasses that lie at the heart of their respective poetic projects. Humour is a mode of communication that simultaneously discloses and conceals the socio-discursive conflicts, contradictions, and overdeterminations that underlie and motivate it. As Freud writes, the joke is a “Janus-like, two-way-facing character . . . a double-dealing rascal who serves two masters at once” (*Jokes* 208). Here, Freud alerts us to how the joke strives to “interpellate” or “bribe the listener with its yield of pleasure into taking sides with us without very close investigation” (147). When we find a particular utterance humorous, “strictly speaking we do not know what we are laughing at” (146). But to say that we do not know is not necessarily to say that we cannot know. Indeed, it is frequently this shift from not knowing to knowing that bestows the types of humour that we find in the work of these poets with its particular effectivity. Regardless, humour always involves an excess of sense over signification. It localizes and circulates incongruities and ambiguities over and above those that it is able to resolve. My research focuses on how Andrews, Annharte, and Lusk mobilize and exploit these features of humour to specific textual, social, and political ends. But it also attends to the ambivalent effects and contradictory meanings that sometimes emerge in their work as a result of their recourse to humour.

Humour is an important locus of inquiry in the field of Indigenous poetics and literary criticism.<sup>1</sup> It is much less visible in other areas of contemporary poetics scholarship. To a certain extent, there is evidence that this situation is beginning to change. In the past ten years, the important poetics journals *Jacket2* and *Open Letter* have published issues focusing on humour in avant-garde poetry. More recently, the Canadian poets and critics Ryan Fitzpatrick and Jonathan Ball edited and published *Why Poetry Sucks: An Anthology of Humorous Experimental Canadian Poetry* (which includes two of the poets whose work I investigate here). Although it focuses on an earlier historical and cultural period, Rachel Trousdale's *Humor in Modern American Poetry* (2018) articulates poetic humour and humorous poetics as a vital research area in need of more critical attention. Of particular interest to me is examining how overtly aggressive, provocative, and (potentially) offensive forms of humour operate in contemporary (post)avant-garde, decolonial, and feminist poetics. In *No Joke: Transgressive Humor of American Women Writers* (2017), Sabrina Fuchs Abrams addresses a wide range of cultural, literary, and cultural texts and genres (including poetry). Abrams underlines how humour studies traditionally identifies "the aggressive, intellectual, and sexual tendencies of humour to be largely 'masculine' and thereby inaccessible to women" (2). With her emphasis on transgression, Abrams echoes, aids, and reinforces my sense of the contemporary relevance, timeliness, and necessity of examining feminist—and other "minoritarian"—uses of humour, particularly those

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<sup>1</sup> As I discuss in the chapter on Annharte, much of the humour research in Indigenous art and culture emerges during the "trickster moment" of the late 1980s and 1990s. Influential and exemplary writing of this moment includes Lenore Keeshig-Tobias (Chippewa Ojibwe), "Let's Be Our Own Tricksters, Eh," Kenneth Lincoln, *Indi'n Humor: Bicultural Play in Native America*, Gerald Vizenor (Chippewa Anishinabe), "Trickster Discourse: Comic Holotropes and Language Games," and J. Ryan, *The Trickster Shift: Humour and Irony in Contemporary Native Art*, among others.

that are more insistently antagonistic than literary criticism is often willing or comfortable to acknowledge or admit.

The broad gambit of this project is that humour theory offers a productively novel framework for thinking about certain textual-political tendencies within radical poetics and poetics of the last several decades. The caveat, of course, is that such a gambit is only true of particular and partial theories of humour, modes of humorous expression, and forms of poetic humour. In a real way, then, what this dissertation is about is the work of Bruce Andrews, Marie Annharte Baker, and Dorothy Trujillo Lusk. This work is not simply “exemplary” of a “humorous tendentious poetics” operative within certain overlapping fields of literary, cultural, and poetic production (though it is, to some extent, this too). The critical, theoretical, and political coordinates of this project emerge foremost from intense engagement with Andrews’ *I Don’t Have Any Paper so Shut Up (or, Social Romanticism)* (1992), Annharte’s *Indigena Awry* (2012), and Lusk’s *Ogress Oblige* (2001). These coordinates derive primarily from the poems that make up these texts, but also from these texts in relation—from the specific questions and problematics that arise from placing them together under the rubric of humorous tendentious poetry. I am not the only reader to index humour as a prominent feature of these texts or the oeuvres of these poets. Critics invariably take note of humour when discussing Bruce Andrews and Dorothy Lusk, not to mention other (post)avant-garde poets and poetics.<sup>2</sup> Yet there are no

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<sup>2</sup> Terminology is a site of contention in many places in both poetics and humour scholarship. As I understand it, the notion of the “post” avant-garde is similar to that of the postmodern in that it marks the nominal term as problematic while allowing it to remain in circulation. For some critics, the term “avant-garde” refers exclusively to historical art movements like Dadaism, Futurism, and Surrealism. Others regard it as effectively irrecoverable due to its associations with sexism, racism, and fascism, preferring instead terms like “experimental” or “formally innovative” to describe various modes of aesthetic radicalism. In relevant contexts, I prefer (post)avant-garde to any such “synonyms” for how it foregrounds (rather than effaces) the critical and political stakes involved in antagonistic cultural practices. At times, I find it helpful to place “post” in parenthesis as a reminder that the issue of avant-garde “auto-critique” is ongoing and not at all settled.

As with the postmodern, the debates around the (post)avant-garde are extensive. Peter Burger’s thesis on the impossibility of any contemporary avant-garde is the canonical ground of many of these debates. Influential

substantive interrogations of this work that take humour as a point of departure or primary theoretical optic. In this regard, my research project represents an attempt to contribute to an understanding of how humour functions in the work these poets and in Language poetics and the Kootenay School of Writing more generally. As for Annharte, her work occupies a very different position. Unlike Andrews and Lusk, Annharte frequently addresses the issue of humour in interviews, as well as in her own critical writings. Her idiosyncratic “trickster poetics,” “bitching,” and “guerilla backchat” (her terms) also receive significant attention from Indigenous literary scholars, academics, and other critics.

Unsurprisingly, these critical conversations around Annharte’s poetry are of high value to this project. They allow me to address the “problematic” of Annharte’s humour in a much more direct manner than I am able to with either Andrews or Lusk. They immediately position me within a rich and legible terrain of critical dispute and conversation. They do the work of explicitly situating the question of humour in relation to crucial theoretical and political issues in the field of Indigenous literature and culture, issues such as (de)colonization, Indigeneity, and nationalism. The chapters on Andrews and Lusk also benefit decisively from the incisive writing and thinking of other readers, commentators, and critics. As regards humour, however, the critical uptake of these poets is less immediately cohesive, involves more moving parts, and more work on my part to try to line them up.

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responses to Burger include Rosalind Krauss, *The Originality of the Avant-Garde and Other Modernist Myths*; Andreas Huyssen, *After the Great Divide: Modernism, Mass Culture, Postmodernism*; Paul Mann, *The Theory-Death of the Avant-Garde*; Hal Foster, *The Return of the Real: The Avant-Garde at the End of the Century*. See also Peter Burger, *Theory of the Avant-Garde*.

For articulations of contemporary avant-garde politics and poetics from a variety of minoritarian perspectives, see Erica Hunt, “Notes on an Oppositional Poetics”; Nathaniel Mackey, *Discrepant Engagement: Dissonance, Cross-Culturality, and Experimental Writing*; Harryette Mullen, “Poetry and Identity”; Fred Wah, *Faking It: Poetics and Hybridity, Critical Writing 1984-1999*; Brian Kim Stefans, “Remote Parsee: An Alternative Grammar of Asian North American Poetry”; Elizabeth Frost, *The Feminist Avant-Garde in American Poetry*; Jeff Derksen, “Unrecognizable Texts: From Multicultural to Antisystematic Writing.”

Part of what distinguishes my project is its deliberate turn to humour theory, an at once voluminous and somewhat obscure field of study, at least in relation to the literary humanities. What is most of interest here, however, is not what humour theory brings to an understanding of this poetry, but rather the challenges that it faces in trying to take this type of poetic humour into account. In *Linguistic Theories of Humor*, Salvatore Attardo describes the difficulties encountered in trying to analyze “*fatrasies, sotties, menus-propos*”—French medieval poetics forms whose humour involves high levels of semantic and syntactic disjunction. As Attardo relates, these early modern modes of humour disclose “a completely defunctionalized, non-communicative use of language” (268). They are humorous texts whose sentences appear not to “present any relationship among each other” while also violating “general semantic rules of the language” (269). Attardo translates one such *menus-propos* as follows:

Often from the convent is taken

the meanest to be abbot.

Tell me: what does “fooled” mean?

It means twice lied to.<sup>3</sup>

In the face of such semantic and isotopic uncertainty, most linguistic humour theory is quick to register such texts as incoherent and ill-formed. Yet Attardo attests that they “were considered to be humorous by their audiences” (268). Contemporary critics, readers, and audiences likewise attest to the humorousness of Andrews’, Annharte’s, and Lusk’s forms of writing, making it

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<sup>3</sup> In *A Flea the Size of Paris*, Ted Byrne and Donato Mancini note the influence of such medieval “nonsense” forms on many twentieth-century European avant-garde writers, including Andre Breton and Benjamin Péret, who viewed such forms as a type of pre-Surrealism. Interestingly, Byrne and Mancini are both poets and former members of Vancouver’s Kootenay School of Writing. In *A Flea the Size of Paris*, they not only collect but also translate over ninety Old French *fatrasies* and *fatras*, none of which have appeared in print in English before.

reasonable to wonder at the extent to which humour theory is productively able to grapple with this material.

In a humour theoretical context, texts like *I Don't Have Any Paper*, *Indigena Awry*, and *Ogress Oblige* stand out as fractious, stubborn, recalcitrant. Rather than submit as ready objects of analysis and knowledge production, they seed irritation into the disciplinary space of humour studies. Yet this seeming (and actual) ill fit is not something that disqualifies the poetry from the theoretical framework (and vice versa). It is rather the “empirical” evidence for the following two claims, each of which operates as an underlying axiom of my project in its entirety: 1) The poetry under examination theorizes humour in its very practice of it; 2) Humour theory has something to learn from attending to this practice. The chief aim of this dissertation is to explore and elucidate how humorous provocation and offense operate in the work of these poets, and perhaps also in the broader writing communities of which these poets form a part. To a lesser but still significant degree, it is also to serve as a (local) intervention into the field of humour theory.

One of the advantages of using humour as conceptual locus is how it enables individual and comparative readings of a group of poets who display a diversity of textual practices and write from a range of social and identity positions. As a trio of writers, Andrews, Annharte, and Lusk make a compelling ensemble, for their relations as much as their non-relations (and vice versa). This project involves a range of key terms, focal points, and disciplinary topographies, most of which derive more from the social texts of these poets than from the domain of humour theory. As poets, what Andrews, Annharte, and Lusk share in common is a textual politics in which language is both the instrument and object of ideology critique, even where the ideologies in question differ or overlap. In both broad and specific senses, their poetics are—or understand themselves as—oppositional, resistant, or liberatory in form, content, and intent. Social identity

is central to all of the texts under discussion, though to different degrees of explicitness, as are formal strategies for interrogating and disrupting reified, colonial, and exploitative processes of subjectivization and norms of identity formation and performance. Although perhaps less obvious, the work of these poets also shares a complex, contestatory, yet abiding interest and investment in the politics of writing and literary community. In *Comic Transactions*, James English argues that humour's status as mechanism of both social exclusion and inclusion renders it a method and model for negotiating competing "notions of community."<sup>4</sup> This relation of humour, provocation, and offense to literary community and its discontents is a site of analysis in each of the chapters to follow (though to different degrees and outcomes).

In terms of identity and writing community, Andrews and Lusk appear to have most in common. As white, settler subjects, they occupy the position of the colonial dominant in relation to Annharte, who is Anishinaabe and Salteaux of Little Saskatchewan First Nation. As a poet, Lusk comes to prominence as an affiliate and member of the Kootenay School of Writing, a Vancouver poetry collective whose aesthetic politics draw heavily on Language writing, a US avant-garde tendency or movement of which Andrews is a central member.<sup>5</sup> Annharte's writing, however, emerges and circulates primarily within the context of Indigenous literature and poetry, which has its own language for addressing the more "challenging" aspects of a text like *Indigena*

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<sup>4</sup> Here I cite from the back jacket of English's text. See also his section on "Community: The Politics of a Paradox," from the latter part of his introduction.

<sup>5</sup> The degree to which the KSW operates as a "branch plant" of Language writing is a site of contention among poets, critics, and scholars and is very much up for debate. I describe the relationship in such a manner simply for ease of expression. The first (or at least loudest) bowshot in this "debate" is Brian Fawcett's review of *East of Main: An Anthology of Poems from East Vancouver* (1989). Fawcett titles his review "Skinhead Formalists," later retitling it "East Van Uber Allës" for inclusion in his book *Unusual Circumstances, Interesting Times and Other Impolite Interventions*. For more careful takes on the relation between the KSW and Language writing, see Clint Burnham's essay "Sitting in a Bar," as well as the introduction to his book *The Only Poetry That Matters: Reading the Kootenay School of Writing*; Andrew Klobucar and Michael Barnholden's editorial introduction to *Writing Class: The Kootenay School of Writing Anthology*; and Jason Wiens' doctoral dissertation, *The Kootenay School of Writing: History, Community, Poetics*.

*Awry*, with its frequently shifting pronominal and indexical markers, its nonlinear “story” telling, and its syntactic and semantic opacity. As *anishinaabekwe*, Annharte’s position of difference in relation to Andrews and Lusk is of absolute import and not something that I wish to argue away or efface. Yet there are other ways of understanding these poets and their work in relation to each other that are equally true and productive.

Intersectionally, it is also valid to say that Annharte and Lusk have the most in common—or that Lusk is close to both Andrews and Annharte, whereas the most distant relation is between these last two. Andrews visits Vancouver under the auspices of the Kootenay School of Writing at least twice (1985 and 1990), and it is certain that Lusk attends at least some of his readings and talks. Andrews is certainly aware of Lusk as a reader and supporter of her work, providing a lengthy back-jacket blurb for *Redactive* (1990) and penning “Reading Notes” for *A Pestschrift for Dorothy Trujillo Lusk* (2003).<sup>6</sup> Socially, politically, and economically, however, Lusk and Annharte occupy much closer positions, not only as women but also through their experiences as low-income single mothers and as writers who have struggled with issues around mental health and disability. Although Lusk lives in Vancouver and Annharte is in Winnipeg, the two poets are also good friends, having met either when Annharte was living in Vancouver or through her not infrequent poetry visits to the city.<sup>7</sup> Interestingly, Lusk is not the only KSW writer to occupy an important place in Annharte’s writing community, which is perhaps not surprising, given the many readings that the KSW has helped to organize (partly or in full) for Annharte over the years.<sup>8</sup> Long-time collective member Reg Johanson has not only written two

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<sup>6</sup> A copy of these “Reading Notes” is available in Louis Armand, *Contemporary Poetics*.

<sup>7</sup> In a 2008 interview with Lusk, Rob McLennan asks, “What other writers or writings are important for your work, or simply your life outside of your work?” (“12 or 20”). As part of her response, Lusk tells McLennan, “Marie Annharte Baker is back in Winnipeg but we talk about writing among other things at least every week.”

<sup>8</sup> The details are a little blurry, but I recall seeing Annharte read at least three times in Vancouver in the early 2010s. Colin Smith was also on the bill for at least two of these three events, whose venues were the People’s Co-

essays plus at least one book review on Annharte's work. He is also responsible for editing and putting together *AKA Inendagosekwe*, which collects Annharte's critical essays, interviews, and other non-fiction writings, many of which are difficult to find or only published here. In the acknowledgements to *Indigena Awry*, Annharte not only thanks former KSW member "Colin Smith for encouraging enthusiastic edit" but also gives a "*Miigwech*" to "van agit-poets," along with "academic allies & aboriginal writers group & Joy Asham, storytaker supreme & rezblood cuz."

In a review of *AKA Inendagosekwe*, Rob McLennan writes, "It would be easy to align Annharte's writing with a number of other current and former Vancouver-area poets," going on to list a number of (mostly) white, settler writers, many with strong connections to the KSW. In their respective texts on Annharte, Lorraine Weir and Amy De'Ath push back against claims like McLennan's, which they view as an awkward and politically suspect attempt on behalf of white, avant-garde poets and critics to claim Annharte as one of their own. Like Weir and De'Ath, I too am more than anxious about moves like McLennan's.<sup>9</sup> Yet I am not in exact alignment with their position either. There is a history of (mostly white, male) critics and poets wanting to assimilate—or at least consider—formally innovative writing by BIPOC writers as a species of avant-gardism, and this history and its critique are not insubstantial to what follows.<sup>10</sup> By

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op Bookstore on Commercial Drive, the Dogwood Community Centre on Clark Drive, and the former KSW space on Keefer Avenue in Chinatown.

<sup>9</sup> There are significant problems in using the term "avant-garde" to describe Annharte's writing (or that of any Indigenous writer). Avant-garde means rupture from the past. It also means antagonism towards the norms and practices of one's society. Its history, theory, and practice are intensely imbricated within Western aesthetics and ethnocentrism. At worst, its politics are only formalist. To critique even "mainstream" Indigenous poetry according to "avant-garde" cultural and critical criteria is to reinscribe colonial violence not to help index a way out of it. For a novel and cogent exploration of various "global" avant-gardes in relation to race, religion, and war, see Mike Sell, *The Avant-Garde*. For a recent attempt to bring avant-garde and decolonial poetics together, see Gregory Betts, *Finding Nothing*, pp. 209-13.

<sup>10</sup> A recent case of this avant-garde desire is Gregory Betts and Christian Bök's *Avant-Canada*, which "extends the franchise" to "experimental" Indigenous writing by including texts from Liz Howard (Anishinaabe) and Jordan Abel (Nisga'a), among other First Nations authors. Interestingly, both Annharte and Lusk also participate in the

including Annharte in my project, my intent is not to assimilate her to the KSW or Language writing, though it is at times to consider her work in relation to it (and vice versa). In a version of this dissertation with more paratextual scope, I would incorporate greater and more extensive points of contact between the poetries and poetics under examination here, so that they might more productively engage and problematize each other, as well as my readings of them. Yet my wager is also that thinking about humour offers certain possibilities perhaps less available elsewhere for thinking the relation and politics of identity and aesthetic affiliation. In an essay on “Humorlessness,” Lauren Berlant describes humour as a “disturbance” that “lets into the room multiple logics of frame switching, temporal manipulation, status scale shifting, identification, and norm-agitating gestural events” (313). In *Comic Transactions*, James English proposes that the incongruous relations particular to humour are often productive of what he calls a “stranger politics” (18), in that its outcome often involves a “repositioning” rather than a consolidation of subjects and subjectivities (16). My project explores the stranger politics arising from the humorous tendentious poetics at work in Andrews, Annharte, and Lusk, and my hope is that such a politics is immanent to my analysis and argumentation as a whole.

From here, the purpose of this introduction is twofold. The first section to follow offers short, critical biographies of each of these three poets. Foregrounding identity, its politics, and its relation to these poets’ critical reception, this section also sets the stage for thinking how humour as tendentious poetics functions relative to the various social spaces and places from which these poets write. Since the central conceptual locus of this project is the relation of humour and

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collection, though Annharte appears under the category “Identity Writing,” while Lusk get the privilege (perhaps) of appearing in the more “universal” and “aesthetic” category “Language Writing.” Despite the book’s many problems, what is most of note about it is the presence of Indigenous writers who appear to have at least tentative interest in engaging with avant-garde discourse. Clearly, these writers do so of their own volition. Pace Weir and De’Ath, white, avant-garde fantasies are part of what mobilize such an “encounter,” but it is not reducible to these. For a review of Betts and Bök, see Scott Inniss, “Whose Canadian Avant-Garde?”

tendentiousness to radical poetics, the second section offers a historical overview of this relation as it plays out in the field of twentieth-century poetry, focusing on texts and forebears most relevant to the chapter-length examinations of Andrews, Annharte, and Lusk that follow.

Adumbrating many of the issues that (re)appear in Andrews' *I Don't Have Any Paper*, the first subsection engages scholarly work on aggressive and obscene humour as it operates in the iconoclastic modernist aesthetics and politics of Ezra Pound and E. E. Cummings. With specific attention to French Surrealism and André Breton's influential and controversial *Anthology of Black Humor*, the second section scrutinizes transgressive humour as a (largely masculinist) socio-aesthetic vehicle of the historical avant-garde. This focus on gender continues in the following sections, which explore the (sub)field of feminist humour theory, as well as the modernist, experimental, and (differently) humorous and subversive poetics of Gertrude Stein and Mina Loy. This discussion also opens onto contemporary intersectional approaches to humour and poetics, turning to the example of Harryette Mullen, whose work picks up the deft (sub)lexical comedy and play of Stein while refiguring such techniques as devices for interrogating Blackness, gender, and class.

As a whole, this section takes the smallest of steps towards identifying and addressing what I call humorous tendentious poetics as it appears in the work of earlier, twentieth-century poets. It suggests some of the socio-cultural reasons for such poetic deployments of humour, its targets, and outcomes—in themselves and as points of comparison for more contemporary writing and texts. My hope is that it helps to broaden the scope of this project, suggests further avenues for study, and begins to consider some of the questions and problematics that appear in more detail in subsequent chapters.

### **1.1 Andrews, Annharte, Lusk: Humour, Politics, Identity**

### 1.1.1. Andrews Extremities Bruce

Our blabby personalizing: a confessional.

—Bruce Andrews, “Revolution Only Fact Confected”

Of course, what also differentiates these three poets are the socio-subjective positions and locations from which they write. As a seminal figure within Language writing and poetics, Andrews is the subject of much more critical attention than either Lusk or Annharte<sup>11</sup>. Many responses to Andrews’ work are non-institutional or para-academic in that they emerge and circulate within a milieu of small press publications, little magazines, and online poetry servers and weblogs. Yet Andrews also receives attention from highly visible academics and poetry scholars, particularly those with research interest in Language writing and other contemporary poetry avant-gardes<sup>12</sup>. Andrews ostensibly writes from an “unmarked” subject position in that his social location is that of the dominant: white, male, heterosexual, broadly middle class<sup>13</sup>. This coincidence of social identity and avant-garde cultural investment explains in part the tendency among some (white) critics to focus on form in Andrews while generalizing content as “heteroglossia,” “raw material,” “cacophony,” and like terms. Yet, the language of race, gender, sexuality, and class often features prominently in his poetry, especially that of the 1980s. Typically, Andrews’ treatment of this language veers from ambivalence to provocation to offensive (regardless of whether the social identity in question occupies a dominant or marginal

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<sup>11</sup> With dozens of publications spanning from 1973 to the present, Andrews is also by far the most prolific of these poets and has been writing over the longest period.

<sup>12</sup> These include Marjorie Perloff, Jerome McGann, Sianne Ngai, Rachel Blau DuPlessis, Charles Altieri, and Peter Quartermain. In terms of “high profile” critical attention, however, Andrews remains a distant second to other influential Language poets of his generation, particularly Lyn Hejinian, Charles Bernstein, and Ron Silliman.

<sup>13</sup> There is little available information about Andrews’ family background or upbringing. Unlike Annharte and Lusk, Andrews nevertheless appears to write from a position of privilege. To observe this is not to minimize or challenge his experience of dominant cultural and social forms as oppressive. For an interesting and relatively rare instance of direct, personal, “subjective exposition” from Andrews, see the fascinating Q&A transcript that closes “Poetry as Explanation, Poetry as Praxis” (*Paradise* 64-65).

position). Along with his highly disruptive approach to form, Andrews' disdain for any politics of representation is what leads some critics to valorize his work as "the exemplary instance of American poetry at its limit," and others to reject it as errant and inconsiderate—or even misogynistic and (possibly) racist.<sup>14</sup> Even within Language poetry circles, Andrews is a polarizing figure, and *I Don't Have Any Paper So Shut Up (or, Social Romanticism)* is his most polarizing—but also popular and influential—work.

In "I m Dracula': Bruce Andrews and White Studies," Julianna Spahr notes how Andrews' writing from this period "continually violates the decorum" surrounding "discussions of race and ethnicity in leftist literature, which privilege a clear position as a political necessity." Yet she also claims that Andrews presents "statements of race and ethnicity . . . as raw social materials" rather than as intentional objects of attack, that his writing not so much abuses identity as critiques dominant (bourgeois, white) forms of subjectivity, and that this critical aspect broadly aligns Andrews' political project with that of identity poetics.<sup>15</sup> In *Ugly Feelings*, Sianne Ngai describes *I Don't Have Any Paper* as an aggressive and comic text that continues "the modernist avant-garde's project of decoupling art from beauty," developing "the negative aesthetic already latent in Kant's definition of the disgusting as the endpoint of mimetic art" (348). For Ngai, the intensity of Andrews' "poetics of disgust" is such that it crosses the threshold of politics proper, overwhelming the socio-aesthetic technologies of containment and recuperation particular to liberal (marketplace) pluralism, inclusivity, and tolerance (353-54). For a younger generation of critics and poets, however, Andrews' textual politics are much more

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<sup>14</sup> For an excellent overview of such responses, see the Bruce Andrews special issue of the poetry journal *Aerial*.

<sup>15</sup> Spahr's last claim is particularly striking and likely controversial in some circles. Comprising it are the following three observations: 1) criticizing dominant subjectivities is the necessary obverse to foregrounding and validating minoritarian subjectivities; 2) Andrews takes care to situate subjectivity and identity within a totality of asymmetrical power relations; 3) Andrews' "personal" use of "I" is deliberately vile and resists identificatory pleasure.

likely to appear as insensitive and beyond problematic, particularly in the wake of the arguments and controversies around Kenneth Goldsmith's "The Body of Michael Brown" and Vanessa Place's ongoing *Gone with The Wind* project. In "Free Speech, Minstrelsy, and the Avant-Garde," Chris Chen and Tim Kreiner critique Goldsmith, Place, and their supporters for reifying the politics of form and its ability to rework pejorative, traumatic, and violent racial "content" in a critical manner. Chen and Kreiner mention Andrews not at all and Language poetry only in passing, but their criticism also speaks to Andrews' formal strategy of appropriating, reframing, and defamiliarizing the "raw" socio-discursive materials of identity and subject construction.<sup>16</sup> At once critical, ambivalent, and ugly, *I Don't Have Any Paper* scrambles the language of gender, class, and sexuality in manner that adumbrates the textual politics of more recent avant-garde poetries like Flarf and Conceptual writing. To read poems like Andrews' "It's Time to Stop Glorifying the White Army," Drew Gardner's "Chicks Dig War," or Vanessa Place's "Miss Scarlet" as unequivocally feminist, anti-racist, or anti-oppressive is to have absolute faith in the radical, critical power of avant-garde politics of form and technique. Chen and Kreiner draw similar conclusions while also exposing the false binary that too often defines the relation of (white, male) avant-garde writing to the oppositional and anti-racist strategies of many BIPOC poets:

[T]he persistence of the form–content binary and its relation to race . . . restores a petrified conflict between Anglo-American poetic avant-gardes—like Language writing—and poets attached to new social movements from the 1970s onward—from

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<sup>16</sup> This language of "raw" social content and identity is explicit in many of Andrews' essays and talks. His "North by Northwest Interview" with Jeff Derksen and Kevin Davies contains an especially salient example of this tendency (*Paradise* 102-03).

second wave feminism to the Black Arts Movement and the rise of literary multiculturalism in the late 1980s and early 1990s.

In a series of important readings of figures like Alain Robbe-Grillet, Georges Bataille, and André Breton, Susan Suleiman cuts a path between Susan Sontag's and Andrea Dworkin's work on literature and pornography, stressing the importance of both frame and representation to (feminist) understandings of (masculinist) avant-garde transgression. For critics like Chen, Kreiner, and Suleiman, the (avant-garde) form-content relation is a reification. Along with socio-cultural location, the key issues in need of address are rather the political form and content of particular social materials and aesthetic techniques. To the extent that they maintain form-content binaries, supporters and critics of Goldsmith and Place are able to argue interminably to little interpretive effect. Following critics like Chen, Kreiner, and Suleiman, my sense is that the issue of tendentious humour, provocation, and offense in *I Don't Have Any Paper* calls for a slightly different vector of critical interrogation. In *I Don't Have Any Paper*, the question is not simply whether any particular locus of identity, form, and representation is oppressive or subversive, but what are the exigencies and outcomes surrounding Andrews' decision to cast these representations in the form of tendentious and humorous ambivalence, oscillation, and irresolvability.

### **1.1.2. AKA Old Bag, Gynocratic Granny, Funmaker, Red Blob, Reflecting Woman**

Must all argumentation rest on the authority of the personal narrative?

—Annharte, "Cry Not Crazy Lady"

Born in 1942, Marie Annharte Baker is only six years older than Bruce Andrews.<sup>17</sup>

Whereas Andrews first publishes in 1973, however, Annharte's collection *Being on the Moon*

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<sup>17</sup> As a writer, Annharte has a strong penchant for "pseudonyms." I derive the above list of self-designations from the paratext of her five books (four poetry collections and one essay collection).

appears in 1990, when she is forty-eight years old. Annharte's publication history offers an interesting framework in which to think about her emergence as a writer, her influences and motivations, her literary, political, and institutional affiliations, and her relations with other writers and writing communities (Indigenous or settler). In an interview with the critic Pauline Butling, Annharte names Colette, Guy du Maupassant, Emile Zola, and Eudora Welty as some of the authors who first allow her to experience literature as an emancipatory and political vehicle for constructing alternate subjectivities and eluding oppressive social and gender mores (AKA 4-5). In the same interview, she also speaks of her attraction from a young age for comic modes of writing, identifying Stephen Leacock and Richard Armour as early inspirations in this regard (5).<sup>18</sup> Of course, Annharte is all too aware of the (colonial) tensions, ambivalences, and incongruities at work in the self-portrait that she provides of herself as a young writer. "If I told you which writers interested me," she tells Butling, "you'd think it was strange. I think of it as funny now" (5). At the same time, Annharte throughout foregrounds how her status and experience as a two-spirit Indigenous woman of Anishinaabe and Anglo-Irish settler extraction marks the uses to which she put these early literary influences and models. In "North by Northwest Interview," Bruce Andrews also lists the authors and cultural movements that sparked his desire to become a writer. These early influences include the "radical" modernism of "Stein, Joyce, Beckett, people like that," Russian Futurism, the Objectivist poetics of Louis Zukofsky and George Oppen, as well contemporary currents in avant-garde "theatre, film, music, dance (a little bit)" (*Paradise* 93). Andrews' writing is not the sum of his influences. Yet part of what accounts for his success in publishing consistently from a young age resides in his ability to

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<sup>18</sup> How Annharte has yet even to receive a nomination for the Stephen Leacock Memorial Award for Humour is beyond me. I include a citation from Leacock's book *Humor: It's Theory and Technique* (1935) as an epigraph to my chapter on Annharte in part in recognition of the simultaneous irony and earnestness of this influence.

identify with a discernable cultural lineage and set of literary forebears.<sup>19</sup> Annharte, however, begins writing at a time when there are few models for Indigenous literary production, publication, or circulation.<sup>20</sup> It takes her much longer to find the type of community identification, affiliation, and solidarity that Andrews has access to as a L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E poet.

As an Indigenous writer, Annharte's struggles also extend well beyond those of the socio-subjective scene of writing. In the 1960s, she pursued post-secondary studies on a number of occasions, dropping out of Brandon College to do organizational work "with the Canadian Indian Youth Council" and later "the Native Alliance for Red Power," and leaving the Anthropology program at the University of British Columbia due to the prevalent colonialist and racist mentality of the department (*AKA* 6). As single mother, she attended Simon Fraser University for a spell, where she says she made her "first conscious attempt to write." She begins to write the poems that comprise *Being on the Moon* in the late 1970s while working as a social worker for various Indigenous communities in Northern Ontario. Her first publication comes five or so years later with the important lesbian feminist journal *Conditions*. In 1988, she was able to attend a summer writing workshop at Red Deer College, which provided her the time, space, and support to put together a complete manuscript (8-9).

Lack of adequate literary models, communities, and publication venues; the struggles of political activism and single motherhood; economic insecurity; and issues of physical and psychological health: these are only some of the obstacles residing behind Annharte's long emergence as a poet, playwright, critic, and essayist. As First Nations, Annharte is not alone in

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<sup>19</sup> Part of the fatal irony of Andrews' militantly anti-identitarian poetics is that it at once mobilizes and disavows a prior condition of identity.

<sup>20</sup> "We weren't finding images of ourselves," Annharte notes of the colonialist and settler literatures mostly available to urban Indigenous writers of her generation (*AKA* 6).

her experience of socio-cultural barriers and alienation, most of which finds its ground within the ongoing history of settle-colonial violence, dispossession, and marginalization. In this regard, her “career path” as a writer broadly mirrors that of numerous other Indigenous cultural producers of the past several decades, and her personal and political concerns are those of many other First Peoples from across Turtle Island.

Despite this broad context of solidarity, however, Annharte is a controversial and polarizing figure within the field of Indigenous literature. Part of the reason for her status as “a circuit speaker for Horrible Anonymous” (as Annharte describes it) is her recalcitrant attunement to multiple forms of difference and marginalization, as these operate within both settler and Indigenous communities (literary or otherwise) (*AKA* 173). Issues pertaining to gender and economic (class) oppression occupy an especially prominent position within her poetics and criticism. The violences of disablism, ageism, heteronormativity, white supremacy, and mental illness are key sites of intervention as well. In her essay collection *AKA Inendagosekwe*, Annharte directs much of her animosity towards liberal identity politics and poetics, which she views as inadequate to the task of Indigenous social, political, and subjective decolonization, survivance, and resurgence. For Annharte, the problem with “Native Lit” (in its dominant form) is that it is largely the project of white academics and publishing houses, along with Indigenous writers too eager to promote reconciliation and reproduce stereotypes in exchange for a modicum of mainstream Canadian literary prestige, power, influence.<sup>21</sup> As a de facto cultural supplement to the CanLit canon, Indigenous literature too often reproduces the colonial and patriarchal logics of exclusion, hierarchy, and competition. In *AKA Inendagosekwe*, Annharte describes how

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<sup>21</sup> This thematic runs through many of the essays, interviews, and autobiographical, political, and poetics snippets that comprise *AKA Inendagosekwe*. But see especially “Gotta Be on Top,” “Hard to Be Humble,” “Enough Roots and Reversals,” “Alternative Approaches to Indigenous Literary Criticism and Resistance Writing Practice,” and “Guerilla Backchat.”

“[w]hite people run everything or have their foot in all Indian productions and programs” (64). She bewails the success of her play *Albeit Aboriginal* for finding its ideal audience in the “fashionable” and “urbane” “white liberal...Indian expert” (57). She singles out white feminist academics, critics, and publishers for bolstering their careers on the cultural labour of Indigenous women writers while refusing to give up their class and racial privileges, for using political correctness to silence more recalcitrant Indigenous practices, and for neglecting to acknowledge how settler guilt inflects their work as professional champions of Indigeneity (119-20). She describes Indigenous literary events and organizations funded by the government as part of “the aboriginal service industry” in which “the white liberal snot fest presides” (174-5).

In “Straight Forward Approach,” the settler critic and poet Reg Johanson relates that “I’ve heard it said that Annharte ‘goes too far’” (143). Annharte is the first to agree with such statements—with the caveat that only by going too far is she able “to figure it out” (143-44).<sup>22</sup> She is painfully aware that her poetics and politics often “engender intense reactions and even rejections to my ideas, my writing and especially myself” (*AKA* 177). She frequently uses the term “pariah” to describe her position within the field of Indigenous literature and often expresses hurt at her sense and experience of alienation and exclusion (from the very space with which she most identifies and belongs). Despite the severity of these repercussions, however, she refuses to tone down her critique of what she views most problematic about contemporary notions and expressions of Indigeneity, or to remain silent about difference, hierarchy, conflict, and oppression among Native writers and within Native communities.

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<sup>22</sup> The language here is from Annharte’s “Woman Bath,” which appears in her book *Exercises in Lip Pointing* (31). Johanson cites the stanza in full: “I need to take it easy I am too hard on myself they rush to tell me / when I think I am just about to figure it out.” Among other things, this poem addresses how liberal political correctness has the effect of marking Annharte’s textual politics as offensive and even (at times) homophobic, racist, or hateful. As “For Annharte,” Johanson concludes, “the going-too-far is necessary to the figuring-it-out” (“Straight Forward” 143-44).

### 1.1.3. Dotti Shklovsky

An putative author interrogates her silence.

—Dorothy Trujillo Lusk, “Anti Tumblehome”

Among the three poets that I consider here, Dorothy Trujillo Lusk has published the fewest books and received the least critical attention. Biocritical contexts demonstrate her emerging connections to communities of artists and photographers.<sup>23</sup> Born in 1956 in Deep River, Ontario to working-class parents, Lusk dropped out of high school and married young. She moved to British Columbia in the late 1970s with her husband, who attended the University of Victoria. Lusk studied art at Camosun College and then later at Emily Carr in Vancouver after the marriage began to dissolve. Lusk becomes active in the early 1980s Vancouver art scene at this time, working for a while as a studio assistant for the influential conceptual artist and photographer Jeff Wall. As a model, she appears in one of Wall’s most iconic photographs, *Mimic* (1982), which features a white couple walking hand-in-hand down the street, with the man using his finger to “slant” one of his eyes in the direction of an Asian man with whom they share the sidewalk. In later interviews, Lusk mostly expresses aesthetic, social, and political dissatisfaction with this period of her life. Lusk begins writing at young age and continues to write throughout this period, but she only begins to prioritize it after meeting Kevin Davies, another future “member” of the still-emerging Kootenay School of Writing.

After developing friendships with Davies and other future KSW members like Colin Smith and Gerald Creede, Lusk slowly begins to “come out” as a writer after encountering other

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<sup>23</sup> Much of this biographical information comes from various interviews. See especially Lusk, “Write a Poem,” “See You,” and “20 Questions.” Colin Smith, “Versus” is also helpful in this regard. “Dotti” (and “Dot”) are diminutives of Lusk’s given name that appear in her writing from time to time. “Shklovsky” refers to the influential Russian formalist literary theorist “Victor,” whose surname Lusk appends to her own in Jeff Derksen’s signed copy of *Redactive*.

future KSW members (Jeff Derksen among others) at a political rally over the Social Credit provincial government's decision to shut down the David Thompson University Centre in Nelson.<sup>24</sup> In addition to her small group of writer friends, Lusk's primary influences at this point include Anselm Hollo, Maxine Gadd, Ed Dorn, Fanny Howe, Margaret Avison, and Nicole Brossard. With Davies and later Smith, Lusk begins reading Language poets like David Melnick, Bruce Andrews, and Lyn Hejinian (though she views these less as influences than fellow travellers, since her writing was already highly non-linear and disjunctive at the time).<sup>25</sup> In 1987, Larry Timewell Bremner and Tsunami Editions publish *Oral Tragedy*, which "was a runner-up in the 1989 bpNichol Memorial Chapbook contest" (Nash). In 1990, Talonbooks publishes (and later pulps) *Redactive* (which Tsunami Editions subsequently republishes in 2000) (C. Smith "Versus"). In 2001, the important San Francisco small press Krupskaya publishes *Ogress Oblige*, which "collects pieces written over the last few years, included in such places as the chapbook *Sleek Vinyl Drill* (Thuja Books, 2000)" and in such journals and magazines as "*Open Letter*, *Raddle Moon*, *The Gig*, and . . . *Boo*" ("12 or 20").

Although Lusk has not published any more books of poetry since *Ogress Oblige*, this is not to say that she has not continued to write and on occasion publish. Perhaps unsurprisingly, however, it becomes much more difficult to track her output from this point on. To my knowledge, the most recent mention of possible forthcoming work appears in a 2015 interview with the Vancouver poet Danielle Lafrance, who comments on a manuscript with the title *Garadene Swine* (29). In a 2008 interview with the poet and scholar Kate Eichhorn, Lusk mentions a project with the name *Dazzle Camo* (300). It is uncertain whether this is a separate

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<sup>24</sup> For a (contested) history of this period of British Columbia political life and its relation to the formation of the KSW, see Andrew Klobucar and Michael Barnholden, *Writing Class*.

<sup>25</sup> "Before reading any of the so-called language poets," Lusk remarks to Donato Mancini, "I'd just read what they were reading" ("Writing a Poem").

manuscript or simply an earlier idea for a title that Lusk has since discarded. To my knowledge, the most recent writings that Lusk has published are “From Cunta Breccia” and “Letter to Cunta Breccia”—two short poems or poem excerpts that appear in the first issue of *About a Bicycle* in 2012.<sup>26</sup> Along with work from Marie Annharte Baker, Lusk’s poem “Sleek Vinyl Drill” appears in Gregory Betts and Christian Bök’s recent (2019) book *Avant Canada: Poets, Prophets, Revolutionaries*, but this poem is not new and appears in *Ogress Oblige*.<sup>27</sup>

This later history is not at all incidental to understanding Lusk’s writing, poetics, and politics, which is why I include it here. In *The Feminist Avant-Garde in American Poetry*, Elizabeth Frost adds a third valence to Susan Suleiman’s influential analysis of the double marginalization of radical (Surrealist) women poets. Like Suleiman’s exemplars, Frost’s poets occupy a position of double marginality in that they experience subjective and cultural devaluation not only in the hetero-patriarchal public sphere of everyday social existence, but also in the highly masculinist coterie spaces of avant-garde literary production (Frost xviii). Yet they also occupy a third margin in relation to the predominant form of American feminist poetics, with its “emphasis on personal voice” and “transparent language”—and its concomitant “assumption that linguistic experimentation has little relevance to feminist writing” (xix). With Lusk, however, it is possible to add further valences to Suleiman’s and Frost’s margins, the most important of which concerns her status (at the time of writing *Ogress Oblige*) as a poor single mother—a subjective and somatic position “traditionally” even more antithetical to male avant-

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<sup>26</sup> *About a Bicycle* was a broadly feminist and Marxist reading collective organized by Danielle LaFrance and Anahita Jamali Rad. It was open only to self-identified women and ran from 2010 until 2015 or so. After each session or series, the collective would publish material from the group in a self-published zine, journal, or small book of the same name, though with various titles. Lusk’s poems appear in the first issue, from the summer of 2012.

<sup>27</sup> Betts and Bök place “Slick Vinyl Drill” at the end of a section on “Language writing,” along with poetic texts from Erín Moure and Donato Mancini, and following essays from Michael Roberson and Kit Dobson.

garde sensibilities.<sup>28</sup> “An ahistorical avant-garde verges on apoplexy at the approach of an / active mother—RRRRRRR,” as Lusk expresses it in the more than ironically titled “‘We’re All Friends Here:’ A Fiction of Unspeakable Horror” (*Ogress* 32). Like many radical women writers before her, Lusk’s becoming-mother symbolically expels her from the ambit of “radical” cultural production. She is no longer able to serve as an object-cause of *amour fou*—André Breton’s ideal of the young, erotically available, female Surrealist and muse.

Yet Lusk’s exclusion is not only symbolic but also somatic and economic, in that she no longer has the time, energy, or (cultural) capital necessary to access “bohemian” or “countercultural” spaces. It is perhaps unsurprising, then, that Lusk’s publication history becomes more and more scant in the years following the appearance of *Ogress Oblige*. In interviews, Lusk often stresses the necessarily collaborative nature of reading, writing, and publishing for her.<sup>29</sup> As Lusk encounters more barriers to literary and cultural collaboration, her textual production—or at least public presentations of it—starts to diminish. Despite the importance of writing community to Lusk, however, she never lapses into overly idealistic or romantic notions of how such communities operate. She never forgets that artistic and literary spaces are always as political as they are socio-cultural and interpersonal. Importantly, Lusk’s writing always engages or enacts the antagonisms and contradictions that define her “incongruous” positionality as a “lumpen prole” woman, a “single mom on welfare,” and yet

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<sup>28</sup> Of course, many of the poets whose work Frost discusses inhabit the “margins” in more ways than she establishes in the introduction to her book. Frost discusses Blackness in her chapter on Harryette Mullen, for instance. Yet she nowhere indexes race (or any other social category) as a “fourth” margin. Drawing on Suleiman and other feminist scholarship, my later discussion of Lusk (and the figure of the “ogress”) elaborates this claim regarding the anti-feminist logics constitutive of avant-garde subjectivity and (sub)cultural mores.

<sup>29</sup> As Lusk openly admits, her books are all collaborative projects to the extent that she relies on the opinions and even decisions of her closest writer friends as to which poems to publish, in what order, which to edit or leave as is. Later KSW members like Reg Johanson, Roger Farr, and Aaron Vidaver are as crucial to the publication of *Ogress Oblige* as Davies, Smith, and Bremner were to *Redactive*, as Lusk stresses in interviews. As she succinctly expresses it in “12 or 20 Questions,” I rely on my listeners and readers to be friends who don’t let friends publish that which sucks.”

also a radical feminist poet, at once a part and “no part” of various textual-political communities.<sup>30</sup> Yet this existential and political problematic of multiple marginalization vis-à-vis socio-subjective incommensurability is especially prominent in the work that comprises *Ogress Oblige*, which perhaps explains why it is arguably Lusk’s most tendentious and humorous text. As the British anthropologist Mary Douglas argues in an influential essay on humour, “a joke cannot be perceived unless it corresponds to the form of the social experience: but I would go a step further and even suggest that the experience of a joke form in the social structure calls imperatively for an explicit joke to express it” (153). In *Ogress Oblige*, part of what characterizes Lusk’s particular mode of humour is its “wickedly tight knots of tensions—semantic, political, verbal, formal,” as Donato Mancini remarks (Lusk “Write a Poem”). Following Douglas and others, I argue that the wickedness, tightness, and knottiness of Lusk’s humour here mediate similar affects and forms as these operate across the various social sites from which Lusk’s writing emerges, but with the end of confronting, disclosing, and amplifying them rather than diffusing them via “false” comic resolution and closure.<sup>31</sup>

## **1.2 Humour, Provocation, and Offense in Modernist, Avant-Garde, and Indigenous**

### **Poetics: Histories, Case Studies, Instantiations**

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<sup>30</sup> I borrow “lumpen prole” from Lusk’s poem “Lumpen Prole by Choice,” from *Ogress Oblige*. The designation “single mom on welfare” is from Colin Smith’s (playful) discussion of Lusk and her work in “Avant-Sword” (57). My use of the phrase “part and no part” is a riff on a key notion in the thinking of the political theorist Jacques Rancière. For an essay that thinks humour through Rancière’s work, see Nicolas Holm, “The Distribution of the Nonsensical and the Political Aesthetics of Humour.”

<sup>31</sup> In “The Barriers to a Critical Comedy,” Todd McGowan argues that humour is conservative when it “creates an image of the social order as a whole.” Conversely, it is critical or subversive when it “reveals the incompleteness of the social structure” (201). Within McGowan’s analytic, Lusk’s humour is clearly critical since part of its mandate is to resist imperatives to group unity or solidarity whose effects are also to efface conflict, power disparity, and difference. McGowan’s binary is helpful, but it also has significant limits given its overarching “either-or” logic. Like Annharte, the social group that Lusk’s humour often works to interrogate is that of the literary or writing community. Interestingly, Lusk discusses humour in her work on a variety of occasions. Lusk’s most immediately relevant comments in this instance appear in her interview with Kate Eichhorn, in which she (Lusk) cautions specifically against readings of her work that focus on humour to the neglect of social relations and content (292). The interview gives no sense of whether Lusk is speaking of a particular instance or simply in general, however.

### 1.2.1. Tendentious Humour

In *Jokes and Their Relation to the Unconscious*, Sigmund Freud identifies two main modalities of humour. There are “innocent” jokes, whose humour derives strictly from their form and technique. There are also “tendentious” jokes, whose humour derives primarily from their purpose and effect. Among other things, Freud’s joke book is famous for its difficulty of translation. The signal instance of this is the key term *Witz*, which translator James Strachey has little choice but to render as “jokes” even though the terms are far from synonymous. Happily, the opposite is the case with the German word *tendenz*, which Strachey consistently translates as “purpose.” As a footnote to Freud’s text tells us, the adjectival form of *tendenz* “has become a naturalized English word” in “tendentious” (132 n1). Yet the aptness of the translation lies in more than semantic exactitude. “Tendentious” has more or less the same meaning as “purposive.” Yet it also carries a derogatory sense largely absent from such cognate terms as “purpose,” “aim,” or “goal.” The “problem” with tendentious humour is not simply that it conduces to both humorous and “extra-humorous” outcomes and effects. It is that these outcomes and effects are frequently didactic, partisan, and prejudicial. Later, Freud becomes more explicit with his language, characterizing tendentious jokes as either aggressive or sexual in nature. Secretly and patently, their tendencies are towards offense and provocation.

As critics note, part of the problem with Freud's innocent-tendentious distinction is that both modes of humour in fact have a purpose. Echoing the Kantian aesthetic, the purpose of “innocent” jokes is to bring about otherwise non-instrumental forms of play, enjoyment, and pleasurable experience. This distinction suggests that tendentious humour is more about displeasure than pleasure. Yet it is more accurate to say: displeasure for some, pleasure for others. Still, the question of humorous enjoyment is never as clear cut as it first appears, making

it not entirely reliable as a means of sorting out the jokers from the targets. A similar uncertainty plagues the category of the tendentious, which gets more permeable—or capacious—as Freud explores and examines it. Freud ultimately identifies not two but six species of tendentious humour: obscene and hostile, but also critical, cynical, skeptical, and epistemological. Unsurprisingly, Freud never directly entertains political and ideological concerns. But his elaboration of tendency humour absolutely opens onto this terrain. In their discussions of aesthetic matters, Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels use the word *Tendenzschrift* to describe literary texts that also operate as vehicles of political thought or ideology critique.<sup>32</sup> Freudian humour theory occupies an important but by no means exclusive or dominant place in the chapters to follow. The notion of the tendentious is of especial value, particularly as an index of the traits most characteristic of the poetic humour under investigation. In the work of poets like Bruce Andrews, Marie Annharte Baker, and Dorothy Lusk, humour operates as a site of socio-cultural antagonism, textual politics, and critique. It is also much more fractious, illiberal, or unsettling than it is simply laughable, funny, or amusing. I privilege the term “tendentious” because it pushes against the “ideological positivism” of much contemporary thinking and writing about humour (not to mention humour and poetry).<sup>33</sup> Tendentious humour encapsulates political humour as well as a potential politics and poetics of humour. For better or for worse, it also marks their recalcitrance to any straightforward party platforms, progressivisms, or doctrinal values.

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<sup>32</sup> See for example many of the essays collected by Lee Baxandall, Daly Macdonald, and Stefan Morawski as *Karl Marx and Frederick Engels on Literature and Art*. Importantly, Marx and Engels’ use of “tendentious” as a theoretical term is not at all idiosyncratic but part of the nineteenth-century German intellectual lexicon. As a result, this overlap with Freudian terminology is not entirely serendipitous but perhaps suggestive of interesting points of connection. For Marx and Engels, tendency novels or other literary works are effectively “good” when their politics, partisanship, or critique is immanent to the text or artwork rather than overt or sententious (kind of like with a good political joke).

<sup>33</sup> I draw the term *ideological positivism* from Michael Billig, *Laughter and Ridicule*.

### 1.2.2. And Its Relation to Contemporary Poetry

The dearth of critical accounts of humour and poetry suggests a degree of intractability between the two forms. Culturally, poetry signifies primarily as a “serious” genre and mode of expression. Tendentious humour is at once “serious” and “nonserious.” Yet it is also frequently harsh and vulgar, which seems to rule it out in advance as a potential poetic vehicle. Even so, it is not hard to find examples of poetry from various eras in which humour features prominently. These examples are important—and not merely as exceptions to a rule (de facto or otherwise). Under the sign of the postmodern, humour begins to garner an upswing in critical attention and valuation in the late 1960s or early 1970s. As parody and play, “good” postmodern humour comes to supersede and triumph over “bad” modernist (or New Critical) irony.<sup>34</sup> In the much narrower context of poetry, however, it is helpful to keep earlier uses of tendency humour in mind, not least because they militate against such “grand historical narratives.” Such counterfactuals temper any critical urge to claim that the increase in humour in contemporary poetry since the 1960s or so evidences something like a socio-aesthetic break or (less dramatically) a humorous shift or turn. Yet it is equally important not to mistake poets who privilege humour as a textual strategy as participants within some broader, transhistorical comic poetry tradition. It certainly makes little sense to discuss Andrews, Annharte, or Lusk in terms of historical comic genres: parody, satire, light verse, doggerel, whatever. Humour in these poets is as particular as the concrete circumstances and exigencies to which it is a response. At the same time, humour is a social process and phenomenon and thus never simply *sui generis*. Humour in

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<sup>34</sup> Among many others, see for example Candace Lang, *Irony/Humor: Critical Paradigms*, Jerry Aline Flieger, *The Purloined Punch Line*, Johnathan Culler, *On Puns: The Foundation of Letters*, Lance Olsen, *Circus of the Mind in Motion: Postmodernism and the Comic Vision*, and Kirby Olson, *Comedy After Postmodernism: Rereading Comedy from Edward Lear to Charles Willeford*.

these poets is singular and idiosyncratic, but it also exists in relation to important poetic forbears, historical tendencies, and cultural influences.

### 1.2.3. Humour and Modernist Poetry: The Example of Pound and Cummings

Anglo-American modernist poetry is difficult, impersonal, discrete, serious. It is ironic in the New Critical sense of awareness and incorporation of opposition and contrariety.<sup>35</sup> With the exception of E. E. Cummings and Gertrude Stein, it is rarely if ever funny, comic, or humorous.<sup>36</sup> Not so, argues Rachel Trousdale in *Humor in Modern American Poetry*, a recent (2018) collection of essays that aims at a radical revision of critical conventions surrounding modernist poetry and poetics. Trousdale's thesis is not simply that many high modernist poets in fact display a penchant for "joking, mocking, and making puns" (1). Nor is it that such poets turn to humour in order "to provide 'comic relief,' a brief counterpoint to the poem's serious themes." Trousdale's claims go much further in that they identify humour as integral to poetic modernity: "a constitutive part of the poems' projects." Critical attention to modernist poetic humour is long overdue and thus welcome and exciting. Unfortunately, Trousdale's argument is not without significant missteps and weaknesses. Part of the problem is that Trousdale neglects to engage ideas about humour to the same degree as her conversation with modernist literary scholarship. She troubles conventional critical tenets concerning modernist poetics—but is much too quick to take commonplace or moribund ideas about humour at face value. Like many literary critics, Trousdale also succumbs to the urge to think the relation of poetry to humour by means of

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<sup>35</sup> Among other places, see I. A. Richards, *Principles of Literary Criticism*, chap. 32.

<sup>36</sup> Stein is important as an influence (especially for Bruce Andrews, who frequently mentions her in talks, interviews, and essays). But Stein's humour is only infrequently tendentious in the Freudian sense (aggressive, obscene). Of course, this is not to say that her humour is not political. For a productively unorthodox discussion of Steinian humour, see Neil Schmitz, *Of Huck and Alice*.

analogy.<sup>37</sup> Perhaps humour and poetry share certain “impulses” and “structures” in common. But any such claim requires sufficient critical elaboration and interrogation. These “impulses” and “structures” are not simply “givens,” as Trousdale presents them. Trousdale recognizes that there exist “many kinds of competitive, hostile, or tendentious humor” (15). Against the (masculinist) theories of Hobbes, Freud, and Bergson, however, Trousdale’s position is that modernist poetic humour works chiefly as means to generate fellow feeling or a *sensus communis* between reader and text, “among a social group, or between friends or lovers” (12). My position is not so much that Trousdale’s “positive” reading of humour is wrong. It is that humour most often works to destabilize any such attempt to delineate absolutely between what constitutes a “positive” or “negative” joke or comic exchange.

In the context of my project, *Humor in Modern American Poetry* is valuable as evidence that humour is a significant contemporary poetic tactic in need of further investigation. It also contains two essays that are immediately germane to my particular area of inquiry, in that they explicitly explore issues of radical poetics, comic aggression, and identity. In “Humor and Authority in Ezra Pound’s *Cantos*,” Joel Elliot Slotkin identifies a humorous logic in Pound’s work that later also becomes characteristic of various poetic avant-gardes. In essence, Slotkin’s claim is that Pound frequently moderates the “high moral seriousness” of the *Cantos* with what theorists describe as register humour. For Slotkin, this humour technique performs multiple functions in Pound’s work. Pound’s humour is tendentious in that he deploys it “primarily as a weapon to discredit the people and the viewpoints he opposes, while simultaneously instantiating

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<sup>37</sup> As Trousdale expresses it, “modernist poetry and modernist humor share several key impulses and structures” (1). Typically, these arguments proceed by identifying incongruity as key to both poetry and humour. Trousdale identifies other features: efficiency, precision, readerly commitment, novelty, surprise, juxtaposition, “plot twists, and puns; and both link the creative to the subversive.” (1). In the final analysis, however, these claims are much too general and ultimately collapse any meaningful distinction between the two phenomena under investigation.

and reinforcing his distinctive poetic voice and authority as the speaker” (19). As a type of code switching, it borrows cultural material “from racial others, particular African-Americans,” which it then uses “to subvert racial hierarchies” and “to reinforce white supremacist stereotypes” (20).<sup>38</sup> Part of what makes Slotkin’s reading convincing is his attention to the ambivalences and double movements particular to humour. As Slotkin observes, Pound’s humour is often explicitly “of a racist, homophobic, or scatological nature.” Ventriloquizing “low,” vernacular idioms, stereotypes, and imaginaries, humour contributes significantly to Pound’s construction of “a protean voice that is at once of the common people and above them” (36). Yet the sheer excessiveness of Pound’s comic blackface, queer mimicry, and bawdy joking has also the effect of undermining his pretensions to poetic mastery, authority, and control. The humour techne that bolsters his “polemic poetic intentions” (20) is also that which calls them into question. “[M]y errors and wrecks lie about me,” Pound famously writes in canto CXVI. “I cannot make it cohere” (810). With tendentious humour, the joke is not infrequently also on the teller.

In “Cummings’s Erotic Humor,” William Solomon poses a crucial question of E. E. Cumming’s poetics. It is a question that applies equally well to much tendentiously humorous experimental and avant-garde poetry (inordinately that by straight, upper-middle-class white men). For Solomon, what stands out most about Cummings’ work is not simply its high degree of technical innovation and spatio-syntactic originality. More striking is Cummings’ seemingly inexplicable decision to yoke elaborate, meticulous poetic form to sexually explicit and comically obscene content. As Solomon writes, “the meeting of puerile subject matter and

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<sup>38</sup> This code switching involves a type of double movement that also characterizes Andrews’ poetry (though at a much more phrasal and even (sub)lexical level). By bringing in subaltern voices, Pound disrupts classical, genteel notions of poetry and the poetic. His is a poetry of heteroglossia. But the purpose of this heteroglossia is ultimately “to demonstrate [Pound’s] hip, unpretentious, worldly wise superiority over social and intellectual elites” (Slotkin 20). It also helps revivify the corpse of late Victorian cultural modes of literary production. Pound borrows from the “Other,” but only to subsume this material under the sign of the high modern.

rhetorical mastery is indisputably a distinguishing feature of a considerable portion of [Cummings'] poetic corpus" (49). Solomon's response to this aspect of Cummings' writing is at once odd and enlightening. According to Solomon, literary criticism lacks interpretative frameworks sufficient to the difficulties of Cummings' "unsettling" conjunction of poetic smuttiness and aesthetic intricacy. Yet Solomon essentially explains these difficulties away via recourse to the most obvious—and quite possibly the least productive—critical framework available: Bakhtin and the carnivalesque (49 ff.).<sup>39</sup> Solomon's most significant observation appears in a footnote to a discussion of the less familiar latter half of Victor Shklovsky's "Art as Device." The observation is a potential game changer and deserves quotation in full:

It strikes me that one of the repeated risks of critical discourse on the risqué is that failure to do justice to the denigration or objectification of (not to mention the violence against) women. Cummings, for instance, in the foreword to *Is 5* proposes (no doubt with Ignatz and Krazy Kat in mind) to explain his technique "by quoting The Eternal Question and Immortal Answer of burlesk, viz. 'Would you hit a woman with a child—No, I'd hit her with a brick.'" (Solomon 55 n5)<sup>40</sup>

Avant-garde criticism too often echoes humour theory in its refusal (or inability) to take seriously representations of "aesthetic" violence, objectification, and denigration.<sup>41</sup> Although feminist critics have been forwarding similar arguments for years, Solomon nevertheless

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<sup>39</sup> Umberto Eco offers an original critique of the carnivalesque in his essay "The Frames of Comic Freedom," which advocates what he calls "cold carnival" over Bakhtin's comic heteroglossia, arguing whereas the former works to make social limits and norms visible, the latter is too content simply to transgress them. For Todd McGowan, the problem with Bakhtin's comic thesis is its essentialist claim that humour and laughter are necessarily subversive and liberatory rather than also (or simultaneously) repressive and oppressive. "When we see figures of authority derisively mocking and laughing at the downtrodden or the excluded," McGowan writes, "we can have no doubt that the valence of laughter and comedy is not as clear-cut as Bakhtin imagines it" (*Only a Joke* 163). Both Eco's and McGowan's critiques are both apposite to the Bakhtinian element of Solomon's reading of Cummings.

<sup>40</sup> For Cummings' foreword, see his *Poems: 1923-1954* (163). Schmitz also discusses Cummings and Krazy Kat in the context of modernist humour in his introductory chapter to *Of Huck and Alice*.

<sup>41</sup> I take up this critical blind spot in more detail in the following chapter.

deserves credit for his incisive observation. The problem, however, is that Solomon appears to forget it the moment he returns to his analysis proper, which lamely concludes that Cummings' "hilariously elaborate tropes" give evidence of a "boldly liberated attitude" (55).<sup>42</sup> Solomon's feminist footnote is in response to an "indisputably misogynist" Russian folktale in Shklovsky. In adducing Cummings' "burlesk" poetics, he valuably points to the relation between sexist aggression, tendentious humour, and avant-garde technique. Yet somehow Solomon still manages to miss the "indisputably misogynist" material at work in the poems that he analyzes (and that is characteristic of Cummings' writing as a whole).

#### **1.2.4. Avant-Garde Humour: The Example of Surrealism**

When a real piece of humour appears, entertainment becomes avant-garde.

—Umberto Eco, "Frames of Comic Freedom"

There was a time when literary and artistic avant-gardes defined themselves through their laughter.

—Anca Parvulescu, "Even Laughter?"

In their respective essays, Slotkin and Solomon identify two key aspects of humour use in the work of a particular group of modernist poets. In both Pound and Cummings, humour operates as a technique for incorporating "low"—and frequently racialized, classed, "abject"—cultural materials, discourses, and voices into the otherwise elite aesthetic space of the "high" modernist text.<sup>43</sup> Both poets also favour comic expressions of violent sexuality or erotic taboos

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<sup>42</sup> Solomon is not entirely wrong here. But what he provides at best is only half of the picture. A much better question to ask is, What does it mean for Cummings' carnivalesque humour to operate at once as liberation from repressive "Victorian" sexual mores and as masculinist, hetero-patriarchal, erotic aggression?

<sup>43</sup> In *Comedy: The Mastery of Discourse*, Susan Purdie cogently demonstrates how techniques of comic transgression often operate on behalf of the (male) joke teller as strategies of mastery and control: "[F]unniness involves at once breaking rules and 'marking' that break, so that correct behavior is implicitly instated; yet in transgressing and recognizing the rules, jokers take power over rather than merely submitting to them" (3).

as figural stand-ins for the transgression of “bourgeois” social, cultural, and literary mores and norms.<sup>44</sup> Yet these tendencies or traits are not exclusive to Pound or Cummings or poetic modernism more generally. Indeed, where they achieve maximum traction is within the various historical avant-gardes. Futurism and Dada are key incubators for thinking tendency humour as textual and cultural poetics. Yet this notion finds its most explicit articulation in the work of French surrealist André Breton, particularly in the introduction to his *Anthology of Black Humor*.<sup>45</sup>

Writing on the eve of the Nazi invasion of France, Breton argues that what he calls black humour is much more than an emergent cultural-aesthetic tendency among others. It names the dominant sensibility, ethos, and structure of feeling through which all modern cultural, social, and political work is to proceed. Under blackly humorous socio-historical “atmospheric conditions,” black humour becomes the means necessary to individual and cultural revolt and survival (xiii-xiv).<sup>46</sup> As a type of *modus vivendi*, black humour is congenial to “any poetic, artistic, or scientific work, any philosophical or social system” (xiv).<sup>47</sup> Yet it is especially congenial to poetry, particularly that of Baudelaire and Rimbaud, with whose work Breton’s

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<sup>44</sup> In *Subversive Intent*, Susan Suleiman argues that “[i]t was in the 1960s that the potential for a metaphoric equivalence between the violation of sexual taboos and the violation of discursive norms . . . became fully elaborated” (74). Part of the value of Slotkin’s and Solomon’s essays lies in how they uncover a modernist, Anglo-American iteration of such equivalences in Pound and Cummings. Writing in the French context, Suleiman traces this tendency back to Sade, to whom Breton also gives pride of place—along with Baudelaire and, perhaps somewhat surprisingly, Swift.

<sup>45</sup> Breton first publishes the anthology in 1940, but the Vichy government in France immediately bans it. After returning from exile, he republishes it in 1947 and again in 1966 (the last which he calls the definitive version). See translator Mark Polizzotti’s introduction to the 1997 City Lights edition.

<sup>46</sup> Inconsistently, Breton alternately suggests that black humour is a global phenomenon in which all participate and that it is particular to “a few elite spirits” (xiv).

<sup>47</sup> Breton is even more explicit in his introduction to Rimbaud: “The concept we have today of poetry and art, insofar as it is determined by the needs of a given era and as it overdetermines them, has granted humor an importance that it could not claim before. Our whole modern sensibility is attuned to it” (164).

introduction begins.<sup>48</sup> The psychological, affective, and textual qualities of black humour are too familiar to require much discussion. “Malice,” “cruelty,” “shock,” “negation,” insubordination,” “displeasure:” these terms are among those that appear most frequently in Breton’s discussion of the writers included in his anthology. In “Surrealist Black Humour,” Susan Suleiman implies that Breton’s text never really arrives at a theory of avant-garde humour (black or otherwise) (2). Suleiman is correct that Breton nowhere fully or adequately works through black humour as an aesthetic or existential concept. Yet Breton makes up for the limitations of his introductory essay in the brief but trenchant comments with which he introduces the work of each writer.

In this part of the anthology, Breton frequently describes black humour as a species of incongruity that resists resolution or else splinters along odd and unpredictable vectors. Jonathon Swift is “the first black humorist” in part because his misanthropy is equal to his “frantic need for justice” (4). In the work of fellow Surrealist Jacques Rigault, black humour takes the form of a fight to the death between “an absolute, flagrant egotism” and “a natural generosity bordering on supreme extravagance . . . to be given at the drop of a hat” (309). With its formal and social logic of antagonism, negativity, and opposition, Breton’s conception of black humour is broadly Hegelian, which Breton acknowledges in various places in his text. In “Lightening Rod,” Breton dedicates a paragraph or so to Hegel’s notion of “objective humour.”<sup>49</sup> He later adduces the non-Aristotelian logician Stephane Lupasco, formally characterizing black humour as an “inverse” dialectical operation in which neither side “triumph[s] over the other and which therefore progressively deepens a relative contradiction” (347).<sup>50</sup> Yet Breton’s understanding of black

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<sup>48</sup> Also of interest in this context is Baudelaire’s essay “Of the Essence of Laughter,” which distinguishes two modes of humour, associating the more “tendentious” of the two with the satanic.

<sup>49</sup> Citing Léon Pierre-Quint citing from Hegel’s *Aesthetics*, Breton concurs that objective humour is characterized by its capacity to maintain “its subjective and reflexive character” while “let[ting] itself be captivated by the object and its real form” (xiv). The Pierre-Quint text in question is *Le Comte de Lautréamont et Dieu* (1930).

<sup>50</sup> Breton is citing from Lupasco’s *Logique et Contradiction* (1947).

humour is as much Freudian as Hegelian. It is what Doug Haynes describes as a complex poetic-ironic conjunction of *Objektivehumor* and *Galgenhumor* (25). Interestingly, the term that James Strachey translates as “gallows humour” appears not in *Jokes and Their Relation to the Unconscious* but in Freud’s much later and less familiar essay “Humour,” in which the joke-work appears as a function of a (surprisingly) benevolent superego. The Freudian influence underlies Breton’s belief that Surrealist humour involves a “refutation of reality, grandiose affirmation of the pleasure principle,” and “superior revolt of the mind” (Breton xvi).<sup>51</sup> The Hegelian influence underwrites Surrealism’s more political claims, locating black humour at once as antithetical (oppositional) and symptomatic of the ideological unconscious.

The critical uptake of Breton’s notion of black humour traditionally operates in the domains of literary existentialism and the early postmodern American novel.<sup>52</sup> Yet Breton’s anthology is important because it also maps many of the coordinates that inform contemporary uses of humour in (post)avant-garde poetic contexts. Like Pound’s and Cummings’, Breton’s tendentiousness is especially useful for the light—or lack thereof—that it sheds on the issue of humour and identity—and gender in particular. As Suleiman notes in “Surrealist Black Humour,” Breton’s anthology comprises forty-five writers, only two of whom are women: Gisèle Prassinos and Leonora Carrington.<sup>53</sup> This gender disparity leads Suleiman to address the obvious but crucial issue of whether Surrealist black humour is inherently masculine in its affect and logic. In *L’Humour noir selon André Breton*, Mireille Rosello asks the same question and responds emphatically in the positive.<sup>54</sup> For Suleiman, the answer is not as straightforward as it

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<sup>51</sup> The first of these translations is Suleiman’s, from her essay “Surrealist Black Humour” (2). The second is Polizzoti’s, from the City Lights edition.

<sup>52</sup> See Doug Haynes, “The Persistence of Irony” (25).

<sup>53</sup> Breton only adds Carrington subsequent to the first edition.

<sup>54</sup> See Mireille Rosello, *L’humour noir selon André Breton* (57).

perhaps appears. The writings not only of Prassinis and Carrington but also of Annie Le Brun and Nelly Kaplan make it clear that “black humour—like Surrealism itself—is as much a woman’s business as a man’s” (2-3). Yet the misogynistic tropes and fantasies with which Breton conceptualizes black humour (and Surrealism more generally) equally make clear that “black humour is not feminine but is the enemy of the feminine” (4). For Suleiman, however, the anti-feminist logic at the heart of Breton’s thinking about black humour in no way invalidates the work of women black humourists (at least not in advance). Examining this work itself, Suleiman instead identifies three positions available to women Surrealists vis-à-vis the *phratric* of Breton’s anthology: assimilation, hostile parody, or mimicry.<sup>55</sup> The simplest of these positions is assimilation. In Suleiman’s reading, Prassinis’ and Carrington’s contributions to Breton’s anthology differ little, “either formally or in terms of values,” from the writing of their male colleagues (5). Their contributions are wonderfully original “in their aggressive and parodic energy” (6). But they focus this energy on prevailing Surrealist targets—“bourgeois conventions, the family, the mother”—rather than on Surrealism itself.<sup>56</sup> The other two positions are more complex because they involve what Suleiman calls “a ‘double allegiance’ on the part of the woman artist” (5). These women adhere “to the formal experimentation and playful innovations of Surrealism and other male-dominated avant-gardes.” They equally adhere “to the feminist critique of sexual ideologies, including those of the very same avant-gardes.”<sup>57</sup> In the work of many women Surrealists, parody and mimicry resist assimilation by placing the masculinist

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<sup>55</sup> Suleiman borrows the term *phratric* from Luce Irigaray.

<sup>56</sup> “Carrington’s and Prassinis’ texts are easily assimilable into the Surrealist canon—which is doubtless why Breton included them in his anthology” (6). Suleiman takes care to stress that Carrington and Prassinis have many other texts that are not so assimilable.

<sup>57</sup> In *Subversive Intent*, Suleiman uses the term “double marginality” to describe the ambivalent positionality of these women writers and by extension their writings.

logics of black humour in the service of feminist critique (5-6).<sup>58</sup> As women Surrealists, Carrington, Prassinis, Le Brun, and Kaplan all occupy highly ambivalent cultural and political positions. It is not surprising, then, that they turn to aggressive, ambivalent modes of humour as a means to navigate, evade, or even exacerbate the various double binds particular to their socio-subjective situation. At the close of her essay, Suleiman proposes the “double allegiance” of feminist Surrealism as a productive critical topos for (re)examining “the early twentieth-century avant-garde” from a contemporary perspective (10). (Masculinist) black humour and its (feminist) ambivalences continue to cast a shadow on contemporary poetic deployments of tendentious humour. Suleiman’s essay is not without its difficulties and limitations. Still, her exploration of the antinomies of “masculine” and “feminist” avant-garde humour plots useful coordinates for interrogating contemporary poetic uses of tendentious humour as well.<sup>59</sup>

### 1.2.5. Tendentious Humour and Radical Feminist Poetics

Such a lack of resolution transforms holiday into politics.

—Judy Little, *Comedy and the Woman Writer*

Women will never be equal to men until they can walk down the street bald.

—Sina Queyras, “Women Are Funny That Way”

Whereas critical discussions of humour in radical poetry are rare, discussions of humour in the work of radical women poets are rarer still. Though to a lesser degree, this is also the case with feminist theories of humour. For many literature scholars, the go-to texts for critical discussions of feminist humour are Regina Barreca’s *They Used to Call Me Snow White but I*

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<sup>58</sup> For Suleiman, feminist parody uses avant-garde strategies and black humour to attack the androcentrism of Surrealism in a hostile manner, whereas mimicry observes the letter of the law in a manner that disturbs it.

<sup>59</sup> Importantly, Suleiman explicitly links Breton’s notion of humour to Freud’s. As she writes after a brief discussion of Freud’s exposition on “hostile” and “aggressive” joking, “black humour is obviously related to tendentious jokes” (6).

*Drifted: Women's Strategic Use of Humor* (1991) and Nancy A. Walker's *A Very Serious Thing: Women's Humor and American Culture* (1988). In her introduction to *No Joke: Transgressive Humor of American Women Writers*, Sabrina Fuchs Abrams locates the beginnings of scholarship on women's humour in the feminist movement of the 1970s, and she describes both Barreca's and Walker's contributions to this field as "groundbreaking" (11). What Abrams says here is undoubtedly true. For critics looking to investigate feminist humour in radical poetry, however, Barreca and Walker unfortunately have little to offer. As with much mainstream humour scholarship, both Barreca and Walker remain much too credulous to the interpretive purchase of strictly binaristic paradigms. Both are often content to view the radicality and subversiveness of women's humour as residing in its capacity to bring about effective comic "reversals," and many of their claims founder against the "inverse" gender essentialisms upon which they often depend.

Despite these similarities, however, Barreca's scholarship is very much the less cogent of the two. Indeed, Barreca's text is much closer to a popular work of humour than to a work of academic criticism, which is surprising given its ongoing critical purchase among feminist literary scholars. Barreca is certainly correct in her claim that "there are gender differences in humor" (9). Part of the problem, however, is that Barreca rarely locates these differences in their particular social, historical, or political contexts. She is obviously attuned to gender power differentials, how historically humour was regarded as the exclusive province of men, and how tendentious jokes often operate as a strategy for maintaining or reasserting patriarchal privilege. In her discussion of such issues, however, she too readily settles for uncritical generalizations that fail to hold up under even the most cursory interrogation. The claim that animates most of *I Used to Be Snow White* is that male humour is reactionary and female humour is subversive.

Whereas men often “use the typical scapegoat figures in their humor,” Barreca asserts, “women’s comedy takes as its material the powerful rather than the pitiful” (13). Too often, Barreca appears to believe that the truth value of such statements is entirely transparent and capable of standing on its own. At times, she cites authorities (most often psychologists) but without providing any references or sources.<sup>60</sup> Far too frequently, she grounds her position using the “evidence” of mainstream media, of “recent television programs” like *Roseanne*, *Murphy Brown*, and *Designing Women* (13). Popular culture is certainly a rich field from which to draw examples of contemporary humour (and its gender politics). For Barreca, however, “television reflects the reality of women’s humor” (14), and such an uncritical approach media, gender, and humour unsurprisingly renders Barreca’s text highly vulnerable to a great deal of ideological content.<sup>61</sup>

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<sup>60</sup> One example suffices, although there are many to choose from: “Women do not often laugh at the genuine misfortune of others—women are, according to the psychoanalyst Natalie Becker, less likely than men to laugh at a situation where someone is hurt or embarrassed” (12). No further reference to Becker appears.

<sup>61</sup> Part of this ideological content includes not one but two explicitly homophobic “jokes” that Barreca passes off without comment. Of lesser moment, there is another problem of note with Barreca’s text as well. At many points in *I Used to Be Snow White*, Barreca presents herself less as a critic or cultural expert than as someone auditioning for a future job as a “humour consultant” for women CEOs, corporate officers, and other white-collar workers (5 passim). What makes this aspect of her work noteworthy, however, is not simply the negative effect that it has on her status as a critical authority (at least for some readers). It is noteworthy because Barreca is far from alone in this regard within the field of humour studies. Indeed, the issue is pressing enough that the literary critic and humour scholar Paul Lewis dedicates an entire chapter to the phenomenon in his book *Cracking Up* (2006). In this chapter, Lewis explores what he describes as the “positive humor movement,” a highly lucrative and expanding entrepreneurial field in which “top consultants can earn as much as \$7,500–10,000 for a presentation” (88). In addition to Texas Tech emeritus and The Humour Remedy president Paul McGhee, Lewis dedicates a substantial amount of time to the case of John Morreall, who is among the biggest names and influential theorists in humour studies. “Like Paul McGhee,” Lewis writes, “Morreall has used his academic credentials to validate his work for corporate clients” (88). Lewis goes on to wonder the extent to which this conflict of interest inflects (and infects) Morreall’s scholarship. In this regard, Barreca also appears as a forerunner to relative latecomers like Morreall and McGhee. *I Used to Be Snow White* not only often takes women board directors and senior administrators as experts on “feminist” humour. It also includes as chapter with the title “Laughing All the Way to the Bank: Humor and Strategies for Success,” and section titles like “From the Kitchen to the Boardroom” and “Do Good Executives Laugh with Their Mouths Open?” Lewis nowhere mentions Barreca, but clearly her work is available for critique from a similar perspective.

In *A Very Serious Thing*, Nancy Walker is much more careful to historicize her analysis of specific joke texts by women, and she displays a degree of critical and theoretical nuance largely absent from Barreca's book. Like Barreca, Walker connects humour by women to women's lived experience both in the domestic sphere and in the social world of work. She also recognizes how humour offers women a social, discursive, and affective strategy for navigating and negotiating various impasses and double binds specific to the gender power discrepancies characteristic of "pre-feminist" US culture from the 1820s to the 1970s. For Walker, important sites of contradiction and antagonism in women's humour include 1) women's experience of subordination and marginalization in an ostensibly "neutral" American political culture that prioritizes freedom and self-actualization above all else; 2) the frustration of feminist intellectual and cultural endeavour in the face of rampant stereotypes about feminine "nature"; 3) the gendering of public and private spaces, the discursive policing of "separate spheres" for men and women, and the social logics that pressure these distinctions while also working to maintain them (7-8). With its focus on the politics of motherhood and domestic labour, Walker's analysis introduces family life, child rearing, and the home as exigencies to which both reformist and radical feminist humour offers a possible analytic and response. As Walker writes, "[H]umor is one testament to women's exclusion from power, and the messages of the humor itself are frequently eloquent statements of women's subordination" (10). Rather than "the lighthearted feeling that is the privilege of the powerful," then, what marks humour by women is its frequent "subtext of anguish and frustration" (xii).

With this recognition of negative comic affect, Walker plots a different course for thinking women's humour, away from the "ideological positivism" that underwrites the work of critics for whom all instances of female joking are liberatory and subversive of the gender status

quo.<sup>62</sup> Anguish, frustration, and other “ugly feelings” are almost always present in the tendentious humour of Annharte’s *Indigena Awry* and Lusk’s *Ogress Oblige*.<sup>63</sup> Walker’s insights here are additionally pertinent in the context of Lusk’s poetry, in which the aggressive humour of the mother figures prominently. As with much second-wave feminist scholarship, Walker’s analysis meets its limit in its tendency to speak of women’s humour in the universal case. Early in her text, Walker defines the following as no less than “the central problem of the female humorist in America: the fact that humor is at odds with the conventional definition of ideal womanhood” (12). In other words, the problem of women’s humour is the problem of tendentiousness itself, with its at once conscious and unconscious mobilization of “masculine” aggression, obscenity, and superiority. In “Raw Matter,” Sianne Ngai uses Lusk’s work as an example of what she (Ngai) theorizes as a “poetics of disgust.”<sup>64</sup> In her interview with Danielle Lafrance, Lusk says, “I’m always interested in what people have to say about my work, especially Sianne” (31). But Lusk also pushes back against Ngai’s reading to a degree, especially its key visual trope of “a cockroach crawling on a turd,” which Lusk regards as too “naturalized and universalized” to apply to her class-inflected “disemboweling of finer poetics” (“See You” 31; *Ogress Oblige* 64). As Lafrance chimes in in response, “[s]ometimes you live where there are cockroaches, and that’s your home” (“See You” 31).

Unfortunately, the tendency to naturalize and universalize the category “woman” is almost everywhere operative in Walker. For women humorists like Lusk and Annharte, what

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<sup>62</sup> The term “ideological positivism” is from Michael Billig’s important book *Laughter and Ridicule*, where he uses it to constellate various social discourses and positions that regard humour as an inherent good.

<sup>63</sup> Here as elsewhere, I borrow the term *ugly feelings* from Sianne Ngai’s book of the same name.

<sup>64</sup> “Raw Matter” is an early iteration of Ngai’s book *Ugly Feelings*, which redacts all mention of Lusk’s work, unfortunately.

Walker views as the “central problem” for feminist humour is effectively non-existent.<sup>65</sup> Minimally, it takes a different form, given Lusk’s and Annharte’s “non-bourgeois” subject positions. Though not as egregious as in Barreca, Walker nevertheless also frequently makes suspect claims about the “nature” of women’s humour: its primary function as “a sharing of experience rather than a demonstration of cleverness” (xii); its reluctance to trade in or “create negative stereotypes” (13); its preference for self-deprecation over confrontation (35); its inherent solidary and consubstantiality with the political humour practices “of racial and ethnic minorities” (10). In some instances, the problem is not in the claims themselves, but in their susceptibility to even minimal degrees of critical (or evidentiary) pressure. In the context of Lusk’s and Annharte’s work, much of Walker’s analysis is inapplicable not simply due to its specific historical focus or attention to genres other than poetry. The issue is that there are important ways in which Walker’s analysis is incapable of even registering the political humour animating “feminist” texts like *Ogress Oblige* and *Indigena Awry*.<sup>66</sup> Bringing into focus the political humour of certain women writers, Walker’s text inadvertently works to further marginalize and efface that of others.

Barreca’s and Walker’s work is clearly important to the still emergent body of feminist humour theory. In many cases, its limits (as well as perhaps its strengths) are also those of second-wave feminism. In this regard, Sabrina Fuchs Abrams’ *No Joke: Transgressive Humor of American Women Writers* seems much more promising, not only because it has the advantage of

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<sup>65</sup> Part of the reason that Walker emphasizes the problematic nature of tendentious humour for women is that her research largely focuses on comic genres that have historically been most available to women: “light verse, sketches, newspaper columns, fables, jokes” (x).

<sup>66</sup> I place “feminist” in scare quotes to flag Annharte’s unflagging animosity towards feminism, which she regards as always already signifying white, settler feminism. See especially her essays “Gotta Be On Top: Why the Missionary Position Fails to Excite Me” and “Hard to Be Humble: Native Women Take Notice,” both of which appear in *AKA Inendagosekwe*.

thirty more years of feminist scholarship since the publication of Barreca's and Walker's texts, but also because of its explicit foregrounding of the tendentious aspect of feminist politics in relation to women's humour. Abrams begins by telling the reader how "this book looks at how humor, as an expression of sublimated aggressive and sexual impulses, is often transgressive in nature" (1). A page later, she outlines how women's tendentious humour potentially operates as "a threat to the existing patriarchal power structure," in part because men tend to experience this humour "as castrating and emasculating, a sign of intellectual and sexual potency" (2). Of course, the other side of the coin is that men also tend to regard such humour—and the women who wield it—as "monstrous," a designation that is not without potentially serious socio-subjective consequences.<sup>67</sup> For Abrams, historical and ongoing gender power discrepancies help explain why so much women's humour involves a type of "double-voicedness." With this insight, Abrams' analysis opens on to various productive complexities and complications familiar to humour theorists and critics. If women's humour involves more than one voice or discursive register, how are readers to discern which one is "true?"

How Abrams ultimately chooses to answer such issues, however, is where her project loses steam and begins to succumb to the familiar platitudes of humour studies. Abrams briefly draws attention to the work of Sarah Kaufman, which distinguishes two different modes of women's humour: feminist and feminine. For Kaufman, whereas feminine humour tends to "ridicule a person or a system from an accepting point of view," what characterizes feminist humour is an "attitude of social revolution" and a "*nonacceptance* of oppression" (13). Within this rubric, Annharte and Lusk fall more definitively within the category of feminist than feminine humour (even though both poets—Lusk in particular—do contain moments of comic

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<sup>67</sup> In general terms, this notion of women's humour as "monstrous" or "grotesque" is relevant to Lusk's titular ogress, as well as Annharte's various comic personas ("mad woman," "crazy bitch," "sicko cunt," and the like).

resignation of sorts). No sooner does Abrams entertain this possibility, however, than she steps away from it, less because any such binary is unsatisfactory (especially in contexts of critical humour theory) than because it runs the risk of excluding or categorizing large swathes of women's humour as in some way reactionary, reformist, or quietist. Rather than seeing this contradiction or crux (among others) as the necessary position within which to theorize and engage feminist humour, Abrams resolves it by sidestepping the issue altogether. Ultimately, Abrams takes the position that all women's humour works variously to challenge "patriarchal assumptions regarding traditional gender roles in the interest of personal transformation or social reform" (9). In many ways, Abrams' conclusion returns us to a white feminist universalism of sorts, in that it marks the politics of women's humour as unconditionally subversive, while pulling back from the more "transgressive" claims. As a result, the question becomes, How is it transgressive if it is also socially acceptable (which means socially acceptable for all women)?

In many ways, much of the most vital critical thinking about feminist politics, cultural production, and humour takes place not within the field of humour theory but under the sign of the postmodern. This is especially the case in the final three decades of the twentieth century. Canonical texts in this regard include Hélène Cixous' famous essay "The Laugh of the Medusa," Linda Hutcheon's influential monographs on the politics of parody and irony, and Susan Suleiman's *Subversive Intent* (whose exploration of the "impossible" figure of the laughing avant-garde mother leads to her valorization of the transgressive play of women writers and artists like Kathy Acker and Cindy Sherman). Yet the postmodern framework has many limits when it comes to considering tendentious humour in the work of radical women writers. In this context, the most obvious of these limits is its tendency to conflate humour not only with irony, parody, and satire, but also with any other broadly aesthetic or cultural phenomenon that operates

according to some principle of incongruity or doubleness (such as metaphor, performativity, mimicry, aesthetic experience, polyvalence, and cultural play, among others).<sup>68</sup>

With this sense of what both mainstream humour theory and postmodern feminism offer and lack, I want to turn to a handful of critical texts that address humour in radical feminist writing and poetics, but not from a position within the field of humour theory or studies. Of the five texts that I have in mind, the first is an essay by Regenia Gagnier on nineteenth-century working-class women's humour. The second two texts are the work of academic critics writing about canonical modernist women poets (Gertrude Stein and Mina Loy), whereas the final two involve contemporary poets (Sharon Mesmer, Vanessa Place, and Sina Queyras) considering the position of humour and laughter in recent experimental writing by women. None of these texts offers a comprehensive framework for discussing the tendentious poetics of Annharte or Lusk. What they offer collectively, however, are a disparate set of cogent problematics, insights, and interpretive tools for considering the less straightforward modes of humour characteristic of feminist avant-garde poetics and textual politics.

In "Between Women: A Cross-Class Analysis of Status and Anarchic Humor," Regenia Gagnier focuses on British women's (non-fiction) writing from the late-nineteenth and early-twentieth century, rather than on radical women's poetics of the modernist (Stein, Loy) or broadly contemporary period. Regardless, her essay offers many productive ideas about tendentious humour in feminist and working-class contexts, as well as in the spaces where these two social positions overlap. Although she does not name it as such, Gagnier's approach is effectively intersectional in its attention to the centrality of identity and difference to humour.

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<sup>68</sup> Of course, these tendencies permeate all sorts of writing on humour, not only those of postmodern feminism. As regards mimicry and performativity, the influence of Judith Butler and French feminism loom large, however. I further elaborate the problematic of postmodern humour (as it inflects the critical trope of the Indigenous trickster figure) in my chapter on Annharte.

Following James English, Gagnier prioritizes incongruity (as an analytic framework) while also maintaining it as an irreducible site of social antagonism and incommensurability.<sup>69</sup> In Gagnier's analysis, the humour of working-class women derives primarily from the transgression of social boundaries, codes, and rules. Conversely, Gagnier also holds that little humour is possible in social situations in which the doctrine and practice of private or separate spheres prevails. Valuably, such a view allows Gagnier to escape the "essentialist" notions about working-class and women's humour that plague much writing on these subjects. From this perspective, what "minoritarian" humour relies on for its appearance is not simply social encounter—but social encounter across difference. It derives its force from the pressure and the possibility of temporally puncturing the symbolic prophylaxes of social stratification. As political or critical humour, it inclines towards the tendentious relative to the intensity of the power relations that animate its articulation within a particular scene of difference and exchange. Gagnier begins her essay with the suspicion that humour studies has little of value to say about what exactly women's humour is.<sup>70</sup> She concludes with the view that what accounts for the complexity of women's humour is the variance of socio-discursive frames that inform it. Interestingly, the term that Gagnier prefers as a descriptor of this humour is *anarchic*, rather than more familiar terms like subversive, transgressive, and (in this context) tendentious. For Gagnier, the textual record of late Victorian England reveals a form of working-class women's humour that is both "assaultive" and a "critical act." At the end of her essay, Gagnier briefly introduces (lesbian) sexuality as an additional socio-subjective category through which to consider this type of humour, suggesting that the complex multiplicity of any particular comic utterance depends on

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<sup>69</sup> Gagnier in fact thanks English in the first of her endnotes.

<sup>70</sup> "If for male theorists humor is functional, promoting group cohesion and intergroup conflict through disparagement, and social control through momentary releases that only serve to reinforce the status quo, women's humor may do none of the above" (138).

that of the exigencies and determinants to which it is a response. In what follows, then, Gagnier is valuable because her essay offers one of the few complex accounts of working-class women's humour, making it applicable to important aspects of both Lusk's and Annharte's work. It is equally valuable for how it "socializes" Cixous' Medusa and multiplies Sulieman's margins, all while insisting on the "negative" (or tendentious).

### **1.2.6. Feminist Humour in Literary Modernism and its Contemporary Intersections: The Examples of Stein, Loy, and Mullen**

And identity is funny.

—Gertrude Stein, *Everybody's Autobiography*

She put all minor riddles out of her.

—Mina Loy, "Giovanni Franchi"

Off-color jokes, borrowed and blue.

—Harryette Mullen, *Trimmings*

Searching for a tradition of radical writing by women in conjunction with what she describes as feminist black humour, Susan Suleiman turns to the French avant-garde in general and especially Surrealism. Yet the Anglo-American modernist tradition offers examples of such writing by women as well. In her introduction to *Humor in Modern American Poetry*, Rachel Trousdale makes mention of Gertrude Stein but only to note her absence from the essays to follow. To an extent, Stein's aesthetic play in *Tender Buttons* is amenable to the focus on humour as *sensus communis* that characterizes Trousdale's approach. At the same time, the formal qualities particular to Stein's poetic humour more closely approach those of Language writing and (post)identity poetics than those of modernists like Lorine Niedecker, Marianne Moore, or William Carlos Williams (to mention only three of the poets who receive full

treatment in *Humor in Modern American Poetry*). In Stein, moreover, difference rather than identity operates as the key locus of lexical, discursive, and socio-political incongruity. Unlike Suleiman's feminist black humorists, the difference that makes a difference in Stein's work is not only gender but also (non-phallic) sexuality and desire. In this regard, the complex and irreducible linguistic play of Stein's work offers a fruitful starting point from which to consider other radical women writers whose textual humour tends to overburden the interpretive resources of more conventional feminist frameworks.

In *Of Huck and Alice: Humorous Writing in American Literature*, Neil Schmitz dedicates not one but three chapters to the "gaiety" of Stein's poetic and comic "genius." Although Schmitz is an academic literary critic, his approach (productively) evidences the comic "contagion" that theorists like Judith Roof, Mladen Dolar, and Todd McGowan identify as an inevitable outcome of trying to encompass a non-bona fide language game like humour within a bona fide discursive form.<sup>71</sup> In Schmitz's estimate, Stein's humour is contrary but only to the extent that it addresses language and the signifier (which in turn mediate the social). *Tender Buttons* "is brimming with good humor, with puns, jokes, facetious gaming, cozy talk" (163). This is the humour of Freud's 1927 essay, not the tendentiousness of the more famous joke book.<sup>72</sup> Yet Stein wields these puns, jokes, and games not only as a means to engender a queer interiority or domestic space. As Schmitz recognizes, this queering of language is more than simply the doubled "lovetalk" of lesbian pleasure and companionship (180). It aims in the direction of the social "exterior" as well. This social exterior includes the intensely masculinist scene and space of modernist cultural production of which Stein is at once a participant and

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<sup>71</sup> For Roof, Dolar, and McGowan, see the opening pages of the subsequent chapter "What Is Critical Humour Theory?"

<sup>72</sup> Schmitz describes Freud's late essay as "almost an encomium to humor" (18).

outlier.<sup>73</sup> It also includes the broader socio-structural horizon, the oppressive, identitarian binaries and categories that threaten Stein not only as a woman and lesbian but as an expatriate Jew. In Stein, the political value of humour lies in its inherently non-Aristotelian logic, and in how this logic is able to catalyze language, which then becomes by turns “a secret code” and a weapon for eluding and deferring phallographic domination—but also for deconstructing and decapitating it (195).

Over the course of his three chapters, Schmitz identifies various double binds that confront Stein, a woman writer among a coterie of largely heterosexist male artists, some of whom view her as little more than a salon hostess, an eccentric collector, or even a cultural “tourist” (as the cubist painter George Braque once disparagingly characterized her) (109).<sup>74</sup> How is it to speak minoritarian experience from within a majoritarian symbolic system? By what means is it possible at once to use and usurp the language of the phallus and the father? In Schmitz’s analysis, part of the gaiety-genius of Stein’s poetics is its marriage of epistemology to the nonsense tradition (162). This hybrid comic form is what helps Stein avoid the masculinist “trap of counter-statement, of mirroring argument” (12), and *Tender Buttons* is evidence of its success.<sup>75</sup> Schmitz is right to say that the polysemous comedy and incongruity of *Tender Buttons* operate as a textual vehicle “to keep Gertrude Stein, as a writer, out of the fixation of a particular identity” (228). He takes the issue too far, however, with the claim that Stein’s formal-comic style in fact “does away entirely with the concept of identity. Subject drops out of writing” (189).

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<sup>73</sup> As Schmitz relates, Ernest Hemingway once sent Stein a copy of *Death in the Afternoon* with the inscription, “A Bitch is A Bitch is A Bitch is A Bitch” (209). Stein was on the receiving end of similar invective from such art-world luminaries as Tristan Tzara, André Salmon, George Braque, and Henri Matisse, all of whom were contributors to the “Testimony against Gertrude Stein” that appeared as a supplement to the avant-garde literary journal *Transition* in 1935.

<sup>74</sup> In such contexts, the “clitoral” play of a text like *Tender Buttons* is almost “tendentious” by definition.

<sup>75</sup> “The working of [Stein’s] style puts her, ideally, outside the dualism that is the haunt of writing in the West” (185). “Stein has lied/lain in a conundrum, a question whose answer always involves a pun, an understanding of double talk” (186).

Schmitz's second claim is questionable for various reasons, the most important of which is that it mutes critical attention to Stein's at times problematic position vis-à-vis social identity, especially race (although also class and nationality). Scholarly attention to the issue of race (and anti-Black racism) in Stein tends to focus on "Melanctha," the middle story in Stein's early book *Three Lives* (1909). As Lorna J. Smedman cogently demonstrates in "Cousin to Cooning," however, such issues also feature in Stein's more "experimental" or "non-representational" texts like *Tender Buttons*.<sup>76</sup> Without addressing humour directly, Smedman identifies "wild non sequiturs, double entendres" and other modes of "linguistic play" as central features of Stein's poetics and textual politics (584). She is cognizant of how this poetics functions politically and discursively as a means to "resist phallogocentric logic and authority," challenge "the categories of gender and sexuality," and create "a space for a nonheterosexual erotics."

Part of the import and originality of Smedman's essay, however, involves her exploration of how Stein's ludic procedures of semantic decomposition frequently have the effect of introducing racial signifiers (or racist ideologemes) into her work. For Smedman, this conjuring of the racial "unconscious" of the avant-garde text takes two forms—both of which are highly informative for understanding the humorous tendency and tendentious humour of certain strands of contemporary poetry as well.<sup>77</sup> "Many of Stein's experimental texts," Smedman notes, "contain the 'sudden' eruption of racialized, sometimes derogatory terms" (570).<sup>78</sup> In the first instance, such eruptions are an effect of form and technique—somewhat similar to a

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<sup>76</sup> The subtitle to Smedman's essay is "Relation, Difference, and Racialized Language in Stein's Nonrepresentational Texts."

<sup>77</sup> To different degrees, this is true of each of the poets whose work I examine later, particularly when tendentious humour operates as a poetic techne for addressing issues of social identity and difference. Yet it is especially true of the line of "influence" that runs from Bruce Andrews' work in the 1980s and 1990s, to the emergence of Flarf, as well as to certain tendencies within conceptual poetry.

<sup>78</sup> Smedman takes as examples the texts "White Wine," "Miguel (Collusion). Guimpe. Candle," "Dinner," "Bee Time Vine," and "Thank You."

contemporary poem by Clark Coolidge and Larry Fagin, which applies “chance operations” to a text by Maya Angelou, with potentially fraught results.<sup>79</sup> In her experimental writing of the 1910s, Stein primarily works “with the materiality of the word, self-consciously playing with the plastic aspects of language such as aural puns (including mistranslations from other languages to English and transsyllabification), rhyme, morphemes, visual format, and punctuation” (Smedman 573). Similar to Freud’s joke technique, Stein’s poems from this period operate according to the logic of substitution, displacement, and condensation, exploiting the metaphoric and metonymic axes of language, at the level of the word but also the syllable, phoneme, and letter.

Theoretically, they approach the “infinite poesis” of which the semiotician Umberto Eco nominates Joyce’s *Finnegan’s Wake* as exemplar.<sup>80</sup> As Smedman observes, however, the language of racist interpellation and hate speech is highly resistant to poetic, aesthetic, or comic procedures of destabilization and deconstruction.

The grammatical, syntactic, and lexical re-combinatorics of Stein’s earliest poetic experimentation bodies forth racist ideologemes at various levels of the textual unconscious. Over time, Stein begins to feel the gravitational pull of such language, not only as (ambivalent) figures for her own alterity, but also (perhaps) as oppressive forms of signification. At once comic and abstract, Stein’s writing plays “with loaded signifiers” in an attempt to empty them “of their gendered, historical denotations and connotations” (Smedman 575). It attempts to accomplish the same outcome “with racialized signifiers such as ‘nigger’ or ‘coon,’ but these terms” lack “the elasticity” of hetero-phallic romance tropes like “‘wife,’ ‘wedding,’ ‘Caesar,’ and, most famously, ‘rose.’” As a textual means to frustrate hate speech, Stein’s “linguistic

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<sup>79</sup> Bob Perelman discusses Coolidge and Fagin’s poem in *The Marginalization of Poetry*. I address it again in my chapter on Bruce Andrews.

<sup>80</sup> See Eco’s essay on “The Semantics of Metaphor,” collected in his book *The Role of the Reader: Explorations of the Semiotics of Texts*.

sleight of hand promises more than it delivers” (584). Generously, Smedman reads Stein’s frequent return to “racialized language” in her work of the 1920s as evidence of her desire “to defuse this language, to destabilize it” (585). In *Reading Race: White American Poets and Racial Discourse in the Twentieth Century*, the poet and critic Aldon Lynn Nielsen suggests that the power of racist terms exists less in their seemingly immutable “meaning” than in their “extra-personal” illocutionary function within broader socio-discursive contexts of white supremacy. Structurally, then, white subjects always occupy a non-ironic position vis-à-vis “the epithet ‘nigger,’” regardless of their support, indifference, or opposition to anti-Black violence and oppression (Nielsen 3). In her essay, Smedman uses Nielsen’s claims to clarify the necessary failure and compulsive repetition of Stein’s efforts to disarticulate racial language through avant-garde form. From a political and humour theoretical perspective, however, Smedman’s and Nielsen’s conclusions are also of interest for implying that part of the problem confronting any anti-racist poetics or humour—feminist, queer, or otherwise—concerns the effective insolubility of (Black) racial signifiers under white supremacist hegemony.<sup>81</sup>

In *Rich and Strange: Gender, History, Modernism*, Marianne DeKoven notes how “race and class are frequently suppressed co-referents of representations of woman and the feminine” (35).<sup>82</sup> In other words, the “detour” from feminist to anti-racist humour is not really a detour but rather an intersection.<sup>83</sup> Humorously, Stein’s attempt to use linguistic play as a means to interrogate and circumvent identity finds its contemporary supplement in the work of Harryette

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<sup>81</sup> Judith Butler’s theoretical and political investments in poststructuralist notions of iterability and citationality compel her (carefully) to take a different position on this issue. See *Excitable Speech*, especially the introductory chapter “On Linguist Vulnerability.” Of course, the comic tools for detouring heterosexism and anti-feminism are not of necessity the same that short-circuit anti-Black racism—if this is in fact something that even poetic humour is able accomplish, at least in such a straightforward way, and without any residue or remainder.

<sup>82</sup> This citation also appears in Smedman.

<sup>83</sup> The same is also true of misogynistic and racist humour.

Mullen, which uses Black feminist comic techniques to interrogate race in Stein (and cultural modernity more broadly). In “Tender Revisions,” critic Deborah Mix addresses the Steinian lineage of Mullen’s second and third books, *Trimmings* and *S\*PeRM\*\*K\*T*. What is most of interest to Mix is how Mullen uses *Tender Buttons* as “a starting place” for her “own deconstruction of patriarchal formations” (65), as well as for her own textual practice and politics of “transracial signifying” (66). While engaging Mullen’s particular admixture of “motherwit and grit” (87-88), Mix’s essay never addresses the issue of humour directly. This is typical of many critical explorations of Mullen’s poetry, which almost always take note of Mullen’s striking lexical discursive play, but without considering the work as “humorous” in any important way.

Two exceptions to this tendency are Mitchum Huelhs’ essay “Spun Puns (and Anagrams)” and Elisabeth Frost’s book chapter on “Hybrid Traditions in the Poetry of Harryette Mullen,” both of which operate in productive relation to more explicit humour theoretical frameworks. Huelhs’ essay makes no reference to Stein, likely because his focus is Mullen’s later work *Muse & Drudge*, her least Steinian text. What it offers instead is a highly cogent analysis of how Mullen uses paronyms and other polyvalent lexical techne to navigate the cultural-political pitfalls of binary categories and thinking, and to model and perform various relational epistemologies.

As the title of her chapter indicates, what interests Frost is the poetic and cultural hybridity at play in Mullen’s writing—a writing that at once evidences, summons, and enacts an always already extant tradition of radical Black, feminist textual forms. As Frost recognizes, Mullen’s work not only “employ[s] *Tender Buttons* as a point of departure” (137). It also “signifies” on Stein (149), in the sense that the scholar Henry Louis Gates, Jr., gives to this

term.<sup>84</sup> From a humour theoretical perspective, Frost's identification of these twin aspects of Mullen's poetics are also useful as frameworks for thinking about Black, feminist humour as both a literary and a socio-political practice. As Frost elaborates, Mullen's particular brand of textuality accords with the highly polyvalent, paratactic logic of "Steinian homophonic composition" (148). But it also supplements and challenges this compositional texture by means of specifically Black vernacular "[m]odes of jest and word-play—playing the dozens, rapping, and signifying" (142). In texts like *Trimblings*, *S\*PeRM\*\*K\*T*, and *Sleeping with the Dictionary*, Mullen deploys this mix of Black, feminist, avant-garde, and populist linguistic, comic techne to multiple ends.<sup>85</sup> In signifying on Stein, Mullen not only brings the Steinian (social) text into "dialogue with contemporary motifs linked to black women's lives" (Frost 137). For the humour critic, she also makes available a number of important notions and frameworks necessary to theorizing comic, poetic practice more adequately. As a poetics of Black, feminist, avant-garde humour, Mullen's texts offer hybridity, intersectionality, local logics, and cultural specificity, as against the more abstract, totalizing, and essentialist understandings of "women's" or "minority" humour typical to the field of "mainstream" humour studies.<sup>86</sup>

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<sup>84</sup> See Gates, *The Signifying Monkey: A Theory of African-American Literary Criticism*. Although humour is not something that Gates addresses at length, *The Signifying Monkey* contains a conceptual vocabulary that could potentially provide a ground for a critical Black theory of humour. Another likely important text in this regard is *The Book of Negro Humor* (1958), edited and with an introduction by Langston Hughes.

<sup>85</sup> Across Mullen's oeuvre, humour performs the work of difference and critique but also of hybridization, connection, and affiliation. Mullen often employs it as a mark or site of cultural specificity. But it also serves a multitude of other functions: to trouble the apparent self-identity of binary categories and oppositions; to register the cross-cultural or dialogic tendencies that always already exist within and between African American, feminist, and avant-garde textual practices; to deconstruct myths or ideologies of purity as these operate within the realms of cultural, language, and subjectivity. Formally, Mullen's is poetics of disjunctive synthesis or contiguity in non-contiguity. Culturally, hers is a project of poetic mongrelization, desegregation, and "miscegenation." In Mullen, humour operates as a technique for locating multiple cultural signifieds in a single semantic or discursive space, but also for short-circuiting boundaries between seemingly discrete socio-symbolic practices and terrains

<sup>86</sup> This is an important lesson in relation to Lusk and Annharte, who occupy socially marginalized positions as women, working class and poor and Indigenous respectively.

There is a body of criticism that discusses Mina Loy's idiosyncratic version of feminist textual modernism as satiric, parodic, mock-heroic, and ironic, but rarely as humorous. As many critics writing on Loy point out, her writing often demonstrates an above average penchant for lexical play, paronym, shifts in register, comic archaisms, discursive and syntax incongruity, the bawdy, and the carnivalesque.<sup>87</sup> Especially in early texts like "Lion's Jaws" and "Anglo-Mongrels and the Rose," Loy's writing frequently involves aggression and "obscenity," Freud's twin characteristics of the tendentious. Loy lacks the critical cachet that Stein enjoys among Language poets.<sup>88</sup> Yet the tendentiousness of much of her work provides a model of sorts for thinking "negative" modalities of feminist humour. As Frost describes them, many of Loy's comic techniques and effects appear to anticipate contemporary poetic deployments of avant-garde humour. Loy's penchant for yoking tendentious humour to problematic content makes her work even more salient as a counter-example to the more "positive" or benign modes of literary, modernist humour that Trousdale and other critics tend to portray.

In "'Crisis of Consciousness': Mina Loy's 'Anglo Mongrels and the Rose,'" Frost focuses on the productive ambivalence of Loy's relation to earlier, masculinist avant-gardes like Futurism, and how this ambivalence marks the complex radicality of Loy's critical practice as a modernist feminist artist and poet. From a humour theoretical perspective, however, what is most of interest is Frost's discussion of what she calls "comic overwriting"—a technique that Loy frequently deploys in her quest to transmogrify traditional poetic effect (and affect) into feminist travesty and critique. At the level of linguistic, discursive, and literary form, Loy's comic overwriting operates as a key weapon within an aesthetic arsenal whose aim is to infiltrate

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<sup>87</sup> In addition to Elizabeth Frost, see Peter Nicholls, "Mina Loy and Lexicophilia," and Sara Crangle, "Desires Dissolvent: How Mina Loy Exceeds George Bataille," among others.

<sup>88</sup> One means of registering this claim is to note that Stein's name appears twenty times in *The L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E Book* while Loy's name appears not at all.

language and culture from within, to pressurize their structures of signification, and thereby to render them vulnerable to the excess of meaning inherent to their status as conduits of patriarchal power and repression. Like all humour, Loy's comic overwriting is socio-semantic and not simply formal. As Frost notes, this is the level at which the limits and problematics of Loy's tendentious poetics are most palpable. In her younger years, Loy was an enthusiast of Marinetti and the cultural politics of *Futurismo*. According to Frost, this initial enthusiasm for Marinetti's incendiary manifestos is part of what lies behind Loy's fervent "desire to use 'blasphemy' and 'obscenity' to destroy conventional language" (61). As her relationship to Italian Futurist aesthetics and politics becomes more critical, comic techniques like overwriting and discursive "mongrelization" become even more prominent.

As Frost engages it, "The Anglo-Mongrel and the Rose" is a key text for understanding the promise and perils of Loy's aggressively idiosyncratic feminist avant-garde humour and poetics. In "Coldness and Cruelty," French philosopher Gilles Deleuze obliquely notes that the purpose of humour is not so much to override prohibitions as it is to "reduce the law to its furthest consequences" (88). In this sense, Loy's comic overwriting is not only tendentious but perhaps also masochistic, in that it enacts a seemingly willing yet ultimately non-bona fide adherence to the letter of the law(s) that underwrite masculinist literary expression, traditional as well as avant-garde. As its title suggests, "The Anglo-Mongrel and the Rose" thematizes the figure of the mongrel while also using it to mark the poem's resistance to socio-aesthetic regimes "of purity and high culture" (Frost 37). Formally, Loy's trope of the mongrel finds its correlative in the poem's comic grafting of vernacular speech registers, crass idioms, and taboo discursive markers and lexemes. Where problems arise is when Loy's interest in mongrelization shifts registers slightly, into the discursive field of miscegenation and even racial eugenics, mobilizing

these as tropes against gender hygienics and puritanisms of “high art,” all while maintaining a caustic, mock-heroic, and thus politically ambivalent tone.

In her essay, Frost does an admirable job of tracing the ambivalences, contradictions, and problematics of Loy’s comic overwriting of eugenicist and hereditarianist rhetorics in “Anglo-Mongrel and the Rose.” In the final instance, she maintains that Loy’s satiric “quotation” of these rhetorics works primarily “to undercut misogyny and class hierarchy” and to “attack[] gender and racial typing” (33). From a humour theoretical perspective, however, the question shifts somewhat: not whether Loy’s tendentiously humorous use of racist, sexist, and classist language is ultimately critical or reactionary, but what this serio-comic vacillation between critique and reaction affords Loy’s textual politics and poetics. In “Anglo-Mongrel and the Rose” and other works, Loy uses aggravating humour as both a problematic and a strategy for negotiating—and “irritating”—double binds particular to her social position and aesthetic-political project.<sup>89</sup> To various degrees, Loy is thus an important precursor to later (post)avant-garde deployments of comic aggression.<sup>90</sup> Her work also contributes to an understanding of tendentiousness as it functions in relation to feminist humour theory, practice, and poetics. Interestingly, both Loy’s writing and Frost’s reading of it resonate with the type of joke-work operative in Lusk’s *Ogress Oblige* and *Redactive*. In Frost’s tally, Loy uses the technique of comic overwriting to a wide range of ends, including to critique the phallocentrism, anti-maternalism, and general gynophobia particular to masculinist avant-garde and bohemian socio-

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<sup>89</sup> In “Aphorisms on Futurism,” Loy conceives the role of politically radical poetry as that of an “irritant” (Frost 34). Interestingly, Lusk makes a similar point in an interview with Kate Eichhorn, describing the poem as “what irritates and irritates and has to be worked out” (298).

<sup>90</sup> In “Versus the Atomizations of Power,” KSW poet Colin Smith states, “There are twin tendencies (at the least) in Language poetry that contest power. One is to clown with toxic aphorisms, and another to make ‘opaque’ with smashed and recombined syntax” (113). In its generality, Smith’s claim is also applicable to Flarf and conceptual poetry. Of course, what Smith identifies as “twin tendencies” are most often bound up in each other. It is precisely this combination that makes the humorous tendentious poetics of writers like Andrews, Annharte, and Lusk challenging for conventional humour studies frameworks.

cultural milieus (35). She also uses it as a vehicle for foregrounding “how social status relates to language” (39) and for fashioning “an oppositional feminist avant-garde aesthetic (46). In her attempts to “breed” a radical, anti-oppressive textual politics from oppressive rhetoric (Frost 32), Loy resembles Andrews much more than Lusk or Annharte.<sup>91</sup> Her comic “mongrelization” of language as both critical trope and formal instantiation recalls Mullen’s later exploration of lexical play and the cultural politics of hybridity (though to very different ends and degrees of efficacy). In the tenor and texture of her writing, however, Loy most resembles Lusk, at times remarkably so.<sup>92</sup> Hence Loy’s work is of especial interest as a potential point of reference for Lusk’s writing, even though no critical accounts of this influence are currently extant.

### 1.3. Critical Set-Ups and Punchlines

The wager of this project is that tendentious humour operates as a key socio-aesthetic strategy in the poetics and textual politics of Bruce Andrews, Marie Annharte Baker, and Dorothy Trujillo Lusk. In the most basic sense, humour operates by making some form of incongruity, tension, or antagonism visible, only to “resolve” it. These forms are profoundly social, but their appearance as humour typically registers at the level of signification, often

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<sup>91</sup> I place “breed” in scare quotes to signal Loy’s proclivity for punning on this term. This proclivity she shares with Lusk and Annharte, as I mention in my respective discussions of their work.

<sup>92</sup> “I really like tossing in a lot of etymological jokes,” Lusk relates to fellow KSW poet Donato Mancini in an interview. “And fucking around with these completely asinine, baroque, Latinate figurations, like putting parking-lots of little anglo-saxon things and other derivations into it and seeing what percolates out of that” (“Write a Poem”). Readers of Lusk’s work are certainly aware of this tendency as well. The poetics scholar Lytle Shaw offers the following description in a review of *Ogress Oblige*: “Juxtaposing high Latinate lexemes, frequent internal rhymes and self-consciously stilted neologisms (‘enchildment’; ‘molluskular discord’), Lusk evokes the history of England and its poesy (especially of the 18th century) as a colonial specter of our current post-co writhings: ‘Errant friction fall-out / to repudiate a lineage / of hammered patricians.’” See the following excerpt from Loy’s “Lions’ Jaws” for comparison:

The antique envious thunder  
of Latin litterateurs  
rivaling Gabrunzio’s satiety  
burst in a manifesto  
notifying women’s wombs  
of Man’s immediate agamogenesis (47)

linguistic and often across various scales (phonemic, semantic, discursive, and the like). I privilege Freud's notion of the tendentious because the work of these poets is regularly fractious, recalcitrant, and conflictive, not only in its socio-semantic content but also in its formal properties: in its syntax, its lineation, its word choice and order, in its disjunctions of voice, discursive register, and organizational structure. Freud's identification of the tendentious as a particular mode of humour is also of value for what it says about how jokes work to mobilize and distribute particular forms pleasure-displeasure. In Freud's articulation, aggressive, obscene jokes use the bribe of comic (dis)pleasure to short-circuit (often multiple, irreducible) deadlocks to social, libidinal, political enjoyment. With this understanding, it becomes clear that what James English describes as the "comic transaction" involves much more than a simple binary organization whose determining polarities are those of ambiguation-disambiguation. As a site of multiple socio-semantic, affective, and political overdeterminations, the tendentious joke models an interpretive framework whose complexity at least partly approaches that of the poetics under investigation here. As with the other humour theories that I entertain in what follows, however, the Freudian model has its benefits and limits. Part of my wager is that the forms of humour at work in Andrews, Annharte, and Lusk are such as to compel any particular humour theory to undergo a process of radicalization. This "radical" conjunction of humour, tendentiousness, theory, and poetics is what I gesture to via this project's title.

As regards humour, what Andrews, Annharte, and Lusk share is a low tolerance for resolution, disambiguation, and reconciliation. They are much more likely to multiply and intensify antagonism than they are to dispel it. In their writing, humour often figures as a poetic means to confront or circumscribe particular knots, cul-de-sacs, or dilemmas in the social (including the social spaces of cultural production). In terms of the disciplinary unconscious,

liberal-conservative ideologemes are rife within the field of academic humour studies. Subjectively and textually, the political stances of these three poets are quite disparate and even incommensurate (at least in their historical and material particularities). To the extent that it designates a space elsewhere to the dominant political spectrum, however, it makes sense to designate these poets as radical in politics, as they are in poetics (keeping in mind that this space is as plural and contestatory as any other). Beyond these generalizations, however, it is not advisable to attempt to place *I Don't Have Any Paper*, *Indigena Awry*, and *Ogress Oblige* in similar relation to the broader socio-historical period in which they emerge (1980-2010). Their tendentious humour brings irresolution and antagonism to the forefront, but its textual, social, and political specificity only comes into focus in tighter quarters, as I explore in the chapters to follow.

#### **1.4. Cartographies of Humour and Tendentious Poetries**

Four chapters follow this introduction. The first focuses on humour theory, while the following three chapters examine humorous tendentious poetics in Bruce Andrews' *I Don't Have Any Paper so Shut Up (Or, Social Romanticism)*, Annharte's *Indigena Awry*, and Dorothy Trujillo Lusk's *Ogress Oblige* (in this order).

In "What Is Critical Humour Theory? Frameworks, Issues, Problematics," my aim is threefold: 1) to provide an overview of the field of humour studies, 2) to introduce frameworks and issues most immediately relevant to the poetic material under discussion, and 3) to intervene into the field of humour studies by considering what precisely comprises a critical theory of humour. As a survey of humour studies, this chapter takes care to foreground the internal divisions and disciplinary fissures operative within the field. The first division up for discussion is that between humour research and humour theory. The second is that between broadly

formalist and sociological approaches to humour analysis. Social identity (gender, race) is an issue throughout the chapter, but it comes especially to the fore at this point, which touches on feminist and critical race theories of humour, while focusing primarily on the relation of tendentious joking to hate speech, as well as the possibility for anti-racist or non-oppressive forms of political humour. The final third of the chapter moves into somewhat more speculative territory, examining Freud's brief mention of what he calls critical humour, as well as the "stranger" politics that James F. English identifies as a possible social desideratum of attending to particular forms of differentially ambivalent and irreducible "comic exchanges." As it currently stands, the chapter not so much formulates a critical theory of humour as clears some of the ground necessary to any such a formulation. Still, this foray into the field brings with it a few key takeaways in this direction. Clearly, critical humour theory resists the analytic and conceptual reductions particular to strictly formalist-structuralist and psychosocial approaches to humour. Part of what the humorous tendentious poetics of Andrews, Annharte, and Lusk have to teach humour studies is 1) that form is always social and political and 2) that socio-political material is never strictly content, but always carries with it its own structural logics. In psychoanalytic terms, this is the crucial lesson of what Freud terms the joke-work. Perhaps the biggest dead end in humour studies is to view humour as definitionally nonserious, rather than as at once serious and nonserious—at different moments and across various scales. The second biggest mistake is for this reason to take humorous statements at face value, as merely serious statements in disguise, as if the joke-work were merely catalytic, adding or subtracting nothing essential to an analytically transparent meaning. A classist joke, for example, is not identical to a bona fide classist statement—which is not at all the same as saying that the joke is in fact not classist, only that there is some necessary if only minimal difference (the difference of the

unconscious, for instance). With the help of a radically humorous poetic textual corpus, these are some of the ideas that this chapter endeavours to work towards.

The first chapter to examine textual instances of avant-garde humour and tendentious poetics is “‘I Hate Speech’: Humour on the Offensive in Bruce Andrews’ *I Don’t Have Any Paper So Shut Up (or, Social Romanticism)*.” As a political subject and private citizen, Andrews is in broad solidarity with feminist, anti-racist, and other anti-oppressive, liberatory, and utopian practices.<sup>93</sup> As a poet, however, Andrews’ impasse is how to align his anti-oppressive, liberatory politics with anti-racist, feminist critique while enacting his fervent belief in the superiority of avant-garde textuality over the politics of lived experience, personal testimony, and subjective empowerment, all of which he associates with identity poetics. After introducing some of the stakes involved in Andrews’ decision to turn to troubling registers of humour as a means to address this impasse, I turn to the work of Bob Perelman, a fellow Language poet who nevertheless offers among the most substantial and critical engagements with this aspect of Andrews’ writing from the 1980s and 1990s. Among other claims, I engage Perelman’s contention that *I Don’t Have Any Paper* is a profoundly ironic (rather than humorous) text whose frequent use of violent language represents the futility of Andrews’ aim to “explode” the neoliberal “desiring machine” or “superstructure” by poetic force alone. While elaborating the critical importance of many of Perelman’s insights into the politics of race, class, and gender operative within Andrews’ text, I also take the time to consider what it means to read Andrews’ “attack-phrases” more accurately as instances of (tendentious) humour rather than “corrosive

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<sup>93</sup> Perhaps tellingly, Andrews most transparently articulates his political standpoint as an academic and political science professor at Fordham University, where he teaches from 1975 to 2013. Ironically, Andrews’ politics are perhaps most publicly on display as a “guest” on *The O’Reilly Factor* for a segment called “Outrage of the Week” in which O’Reilly attacks Andrews for teaching a book critical of the (second) Bush administration. The clip is available on *YouTube*. See Andrews, “Bill O’Reilly vs. Bruce Andrews.”

irony.” Resituating Perelman’s claims within the context of humour theory, the middle sections of the chapter focus on the intersubjective and social relations particular to Andrews’ “attack-phrases” *qua* joke-work. The purpose here is to gain a better sense of how identity in Andrews’ text is not some sort of empirical social datum but rather something that the joke-work endeavours to elicit and parcel out to varying (and often incompatible) ends. To this end, the section also turns to the work of the humour theorist Jerry Palmer, whose notion of humour as a particular interplay between plausible and implausible claims (or enthymemes) provides a workable hermeneutic for articulating Andrews’ non-linear and often sub-phrasal humour to larger units of social meaning and discourse.

Supplementing a handful of other humour theoretical methodologies with Palmer’s, the chapter then turns to an in-depth analysis of various excerpts from one of Andrews’ poems. These “close readings” become quite tortuous at times—which is no doubt part of the “joke”—as I work to trace and untangle the plausible-unplausible logic of a handful of Andrews’ “punchlines.” After this, the longest section of the chapter, the final sections set out to elaborate the socio-discursive context(s) in which the political ambivalence and irreducibility of Andrews’ humour make most “sense.” This process entails going over representative passages from Andrews’ rather voluminous writings on poetics, as well as engaging a complementary essay on Andrews’ work by another Language poet, this time, Barrett Watten. From a critical purview, this secondary material is what brings into focus the theoretical details of Andrews’ intense opposition to identity as a key locus of political resistance and emancipation, his insistence on conceiving the social construction of identity as entirely subordinate to the totalizing logics of global capitalism, and his universalizing of language as the only valid object of textual-political

critique.<sup>94</sup> The chapter then concludes by turning to Timothy Yu and Benjamin Hickman, two poetics scholars whose work explores the relation of avant-garde movements to moments of historical, socio-political, and cultural crisis. The value of Yu's and Hickman's work is that it helps situate Andrews' humorous tendentious poetics as a response to what Yu characterizes as the crisis of avant-garde universality—a response that in Andrews' case “humorously” works to intensify crisis rather than ameliorate it.

The third chapter focuses on the radical decolonial poetics of the Anishinaabe (Salteaux) writer Annharte, examining how she uses “illiberal” modes of humour variously to elicit, complicate, evade, and refuse settler forms of recognition and reconciliation. The chapter broadly divides into three major sections. The first of these sections works to establish the theoretical, critical, interpretive, and political grounds for what follows. It begins by offering an overview, elaboration, and critique of the “trickster moment” within Indigenous literary studies—the dominant framework for considering Indigenous humour from the late 1980s until the early 2010s. Whereas Annharte's first two collections (*Being on the Moon* and especially *Coyote Columbus Cafe*) actively participate in this moment, her more recent work calls for a different interpretive apparatus, not least because of her increasingly fractious and difficult humour. The aim of this section is not to jettison the insights of an earlier critical moment, but in part to reconsider them in a manner more reflective of the Indigenous nationalist present—a present that demands a more (not less) complex understanding of Annharte's textual politics. To situate Annharte's humorous tendentious poetics in the broadly contemporary moment, I look to the influential work of Yellowknives Dene scholar Glen Coulthard, whose incisive critique of

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<sup>94</sup> Andrews' poetry, essays, and poetics statements all evidence an obvious investment in anarchic energetics and libidinal flows, as in Bakhtin's carnivalesque or Bataille's general (solar) economy. Yet Andrews ultimately seems to follow Saussure in prioritizing *langue* over *parole* as the crucial locus of poetic, critical, and political attention.

settler-state recognition and reconciliation policies provides a highly salient and productive interpretive “background” for the sections that follow.

Heeding the call of recent Indigenous scholars to locate Indigenous texts within Indigenous contexts of reception, the rest of the chapter divides into two sections. At the most basic level, the first section examines the remarkably savvy political humour of Annharte’s poem “Squaw Guide” from a broadly settler perspective. The final section considers the poems “Breed Apart” and “Best Dressed” by situating their provocative humour in the context of contemporary discussions among Indigenous writers, critics, scholars, and activists around issues of Indigenous identity, community, sovereignty, and nation. Importantly, these sections draw not only on the work of critics like Leanne Betasamosake Simpson (Mississauga Nishnaabeg) and Audra Simpson (Mohawk), but also on Annharte’s own critical writings, especially those in which she (humorously, tendentiously) reconfigures notions of political correctness and appropriation to “in-group” Indigenous contexts. In such a discursive milieu, it becomes possible to track the multiple and often competing valences at work in Annharte’s frequently virtuosic humour: to unravel how comic ambiguity, ambivalence, and intransitiveness serve as interpretive, affective, and political techniques for negotiating, circumventing, and pushing back against what she experiences as oppressive within settler as well as Indigenous literary, cultural, and political communities. In her writing, Annharte insists on recognizing the class, gender, and other antagonisms operative within Indigenous communities—antagonisms that find their impetus in historical and ongoing systems of psychosocial colonization and dispossession but also in overly idealistic or rigid nationalist definitions of Indigenous identity, authenticity, and culture. At the same time, Annharte’s humour, decolonial poetics, radicalism, and political desire is frequently legible or in alignment with “militant” Indigenous nationalist expression and practice. In his

introduction to *AKA Inendagosekwe*, the critic and poet Reg Johanson describes Annharte's poetics as a "search for medicine lines," for "boundaries that locate a necessary difference between indigenous and non-indigenous identities but which are also points of contact where actual bodies and subjects reside in all their contradiction and complexity" (xviii). In texts like *Indigena Awry* and *Exercises in Lip Pointing*, humour functions as a poetic means for exploring these contradictions and complexities—but also for simultaneously retrenching and trespassing certain boundaries of Indigenous identity and difference.

With "The Laugh of the Ogress," I turn to the work of KSW poet Dorothy Trujillo Lusk, who deploys "ogressive" and "obligatory" forms of humour as means to pressure the various exclusionary and marginalizing logics that confront her as both a working-class single mother in social housing and a radical poet within a broadly avant-garde literary, cultural, and political community. In texts like *Ogress Oblige* and *Redactive*, the antagonisms particular to Lusk's writerly subject position are complexly social and textual. My claim is that what explains Lusk's humorous tendentious poetics is precisely its productiveness as an aesthetic, affective, and political vehicle for mobilizing this social complexity in textual form. To situate Lusk's position, the chapter begins with Susan Suleiman's critical writings on the "double marginalization" of feminist, women writers and artists within historical avant-garde coteries (especially that of Surrealism). Suleiman's work is especially valuable here for its discussion of the maternal body in relation to radical writing, which Suleiman figures by means of what she calls "the avant-garde mother." Suleiman's work has its limits in that it neglects to address forms of social difference other than gender, yet these limitations are also productive to the extent that they help bring the critical valences particular to Lusk's "laughing mother" to the fore.

After addressing critical work that does foreground the issue of class (and its relation to gender) in Lusk's poetics, I turn to two questions that help structure my approach to reading humour in *Ogress Oblige*. Who or what is the titular ogress? What are the obligations particular to this figure? These questions and others that spring from them lead into a multi-section discussion of the ogress as this figure operates across both domestic spaces of social reproduction and cultural spaces of (avant-garde) literary production. Given the discursive, semantic, and syntactic disjunction of Lusk's text, close attention to instances of linguistic humour and tendentious "representation" becomes crucial to identifying the key social exigencies, forces, and "narratives" at work in the poems comprising *Ogress Oblige*. Via this attention, part of what becomes clear is how the figure of the ogress operates primarily as a "cipher" for certain forms of class-gender experience and the practices that textually and affectively materialize them. The following sections continue close reading Lusk's work, especially poems like "For D. M. Fraser," "We're All Friends Here," and others that appear to foreground social relation and antagonism within the social space and scene of writing. This focus on the somewhat "auto-critical" aspect of Lusk's text segues into an exploration of genre (comedy, tragedy) as these mediate conventions and norms concerning literary and social representations of gender and class—an exploration that Lusk's work signals by means of its frequent comic and ironic use of generic terms in its titles ("Oral Tragedy," "A Novel in Arias," "An Apocryphal Memoir," and many more). As with classical understandings of comedy and tragedy, this question of "obligation" in *Ogress Oblige* comes down to issues surrounding the relation between choice-constraint or freedom-determination.

The tragedy of *Oral Tragedy* (Lusk's first book) is that the political and cultural marginalization of the gender-class subject cannot be written—at least according to masculinist-

bourgeois norms of representation. Reading the French verb as a (gendered) adjective, the laughter of the ogress *obligée* works instead to mark, transpose, and intersect the (negative) dialectics of gender-class, freedom-necessity, and comedy-tragedy. Pace Suleiman's notion of double marginalization, the chapter concludes by locating these three antagonistic social binaries at the heart of Lusk's ongoing enactment of the possibility for a radical maternal-lumpen proletarian writing.

## 2. What Is Critical Humour Theory? Frameworks, Issues, Problematics

A critical approach to humour needs to recover some of the elements that have been omitted in previous theories, especially the so-called negatives that tend to get lost in the loose assumptions of ideological positivism.

—Michael Billig, *Laughter and Ridicule*

The situation begins with a joke.

—Nancy Shaw, *Scoptocratic*

When writing or theorizing about humour, the convention is to begin by forewarning readers of the difficulties involved in positively identifying humour as an object of analysis.<sup>1</sup> Part of this difficulty stems from problematics of terminology. How is humour distinct (or similar) to comedy, irony, laughter, or the comic? What is the relation of humorous forms like satire, joking, and parody to humour itself? Other questions concern the status of humour as a social or phenomenological utterance or event. Who or what is humorous? Where does humour in fact reside? Is it in the object of laughter, the bodies of those who laugh, or within the social networks of exchange whereby it passes from one subject to another? Is humour the property of a joke or joke teller who then transmits it to the listener or reader? Is it rather an (emergent) property of a particular configuration of affective forces and relations? In a late essay, Sigmund Freud represents humour as a triumph of narcissism, the pleasure principle, and the ego.<sup>2</sup> As a particular organization of cathectic energy, its function is to enable subjects to derive enjoyment and liberation from the threat or even experience of tragedy, suffering, or trauma. In *The Senses*

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<sup>1</sup> Henri Bergson's is likely the exemplar here: "The greatest of thinkers, from Aristotle downwards, have tackled this little problem, which has a knack of baffling every effort, of slipping away and escaping only to bob up again, a pert challenge flung at philosophical speculation" (1). Writing in the contemporary moment, Simon Critchley posits "that humour is a nicely impossible object for a philosopher" (*On Humour* 2).

<sup>2</sup> This is the view that Freud presents in his much lesser-known essay on "Humour," which he composes in 1927, twenty-two years after *Jokes and Their Relation to the Unconscious*.

of *Humor*, however, Daniel Wickberg effectively historicizes the idea that humour is primarily “a principle of mind or subjective assessment,” adducing the medieval and early modern tendency to view humour as an immanent property or characteristic of particular bodies or things (rather than conscious interiorities or psyches) (Wickberg 40).<sup>3</sup> Humour stumps critical analysis because its “essence” is elusive, appearing in multiple guises and forms. As a concept, humour lacks sufficient self-definition and identity. Its “essence,” “spirit,” or “soul” is moreover irreducibly social. The meaning of any particular joke is ineluctably local, cultural, historical, and thus variable. More difficult still is the fact that the same is true of humour itself. For some critics, the analytical challenges posed by humour go even further still. As a ludic, nonserious, or transgressive mode of communication, humour is recalcitrant to all rational, conceptual, and thetic discursive treatment. In *The Comic Event*, Judith Roof dedicates an entire chapter to this problematic, which she regards as essentially twofold in nature. As a de facto yet ultimately impenetrable (unconscious) mode of analysis, humour punctures “the analogy of distance” central to “objective” interpretive methodologies (7). Conversely, the “stylistic infelicities” particular to academic writing on humour invariably have the effect of distorting (or even destroying) the very object that it intends to address.<sup>4</sup> Of course, none of these difficulties dissuades Roof (or any other humour critic) from trying her hand at humour analysis. The lesson is not that it is impossible to write about humour, only that it presents a range of challenges particular to its social and discursive logic.

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<sup>3</sup> Part of Wickberg’s project is to track the cultural-historical pressures whereby humour shifts from “a mode of being” to “a mode of seeing” (7). For Wickberg, these cultural-historical pressures are coterminous with the emergence of bourgeois, liberal, capitalist ideas about individuality and social organization (bureaucracy, corporatism, consumerism).

<sup>4</sup> In “Comedy and Its Double,” Mladen Dolar similarly notes how “it is in the nature of comedy to escape the clues, that it is irreducible to formulas which pretend to spell out its secret and that it always has the last laugh over the philosophical endeavours to bring it to the concept” (209).

It is difficult to write about humour, but more difficult still to write about poetic uses of humour. The best evidence of this is the relative scarcity of critical materials on the subject. Humour theoretical text corpora comprise jokes, quips, and puns almost exclusively. Most working theories of humour, moreover, operate under the assumption that humour is essentially linear and narrative in its structure and logic.<sup>5</sup> As a result, humour theory is somewhat comfortable dealing with exempla of greater length and complexity than jokes (comic stories, plays, films, and the like). In poetry, however, it appears to meet an interpretive limit. An even more formidable limit case is poetry that emphatically eschews the hypotactic logic particular to narrative modes of spatial and temporal organization. Since the 1960s, humour has come to function as an important socio-aesthetic strategy in many (post)avant-garde, oppositional, and anti-systemic poetics.<sup>6</sup> These poetics vary to a significant extent in their socio-semantic content, ideological concern, and cultural location. What they share in common is a political or critical investment in radical forms of disjunction, code-switching, and polyvalence. Readers and critics have no difficulty identifying humour in the work of Bruce Andrews, Marie Annharte Baker, and Dorothy Lusk. But it is a form of humour that many humour theories at best are unable to account for, and at worst have little choice but to reject out of hand as little more than nonsense.

It is rarely a fruitful idea to try to impose a single, unitary theoretical apparatus upon a range of disparate and heterogeneous material. This is certainly the case when examining humour as it appears in recent forms of innovative poetry. The field of humour theory and research offers a wealth of critical frameworks, analytic tools, and interpretive tactics. In *Comic*

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<sup>5</sup> See Attardo's chapter on "The Linear Organization of the Joke," in *Linguistic Theories of Humor*.

<sup>6</sup> I derive these terms from Peter Burger, *Theory of the Avant-Garde*, Erica Hunt, "Notes on an Oppositional Poetics," and Jeff Derksen, "Unrecognizable Texts: From Multiculturalism to Antisystemic Writing."

*Effects*, Paul Lewis argues the need for interdisciplinary methodologies capable of addressing the manifold complexity of humour as a simultaneously formal, psychological, moral, and social phenomenon. For Lewis, this interdisciplinarity is already a reality within the broad field of humour theory. To learn to deal adequately with literary and textual uses of humour, humour criticism needs simply to “become as pluralistic as ongoing humor research” (Lewis x). I concur with Lewis that the study and analysis of humour calls for sufficiently capacious and elastic methodologies. Yet I diverge from Lewis on two important points. In my reading, the field of humour research and theory is not so much pluralistic as antagonistic in its organization and constitution. As a field, humour research certainly comprises an impressive range of theoretical platforms and standpoints. But this multiplicity of approaches invokes tension and antagonism much more than compatibility and synthesis. Pace Lewis and others, literary and cultural criticism is often unable to navigate the complexity of humorous phenomena not because it neglects to keep abreast of recent advances and approaches within the (pluralistic yet identifiably singular) field of humour studies. There is no perspective from which individual humour theories function as “parts” within a broader (inter)disciplinary ecumenon. Humour studies exists as a field—but also as a site of contention and incommensurability.<sup>7</sup> In “Comedy Theory and the Postmodern,” Gillian Pye echoes Lewis in calling for a humour criticism “able to generate methodologies that would allow more generalized application” (54). What Pye’s essay inadvertently makes clear, however, is the extent to which holistic, synoptic, and even interdisciplinary approaches to humour often work to impose a false unity upon the field or object of study (or both). Critical recognition of this state of affairs is not a limitation in humour theory but rather an advantage.

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<sup>7</sup> This is not to say that no (provisional) map of the field is possible. There are general (and more local) alliances.

The non-idiomatic nature of humour in much contemporary poetry only works to frustrate conventional or overly systematic notions of how humour functions. There is not a single theory of humour capacious or elastic enough to support a reading of a single one of the poets whose work I examine here. What these bodies of work require is not a complex interdisciplinary framework but rather strategically selective and eclectic sets of critical methodologies. They require a variety of theories and analytical resources—whichever best apply to particular poems or instances of humour.<sup>8</sup> Crucially, what these poems also teach the critic is to resist the urge to privilege humour theory exclusively. These poets and poetries not only use humour but also “theorize” humour via this very usage. The humour particular to these writers is often nebulous, diffuse, and idiosyncratic. As authorities in their own right, the texts have much to say about how humour functions in non-narrative or otherwise non-idiomatic humour contexts. It benefits humour criticism inordinately to remain sensitive and open to these particular uses.

What nominates this particular group of poets is not simply that they conceive humour as a vehicle of critique (what Freud describes as tendentious humour). Crucially, humour is a mode of communication that at once discloses and conceals the socio-discursive conflicts, contradictions, and overdeterminations that underlie and motivate it. In Freud’s words, it is a “Janus-like, two-way-facing character . . . a double-dealing rascal who serves two masters at once” (*Jokes* 208). In *Jokes and Their Relation to the Unconscious*, Freud takes pains to alert us to how humour strives to “bribe the listener with its yield of pleasure into taking sides . . . without very close investigation” (147). When we find a particular utterance humorous, “strictly

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<sup>8</sup> Of course, this is not to deny that I have my preferences. I find some theories more cogent than others and play my favourites.

speaking we do not know what we are laughing at” (146). But to say that we do not know is not necessarily to say that it is not possible to know (if only partially or after the fact). Indeed, it is frequently this shift from not knowing to knowing that bestows the types of humour that we find in the work of these poets with its particular effectivity. Regardless, humour always involves an excess of sense over signification. It localizes and circulates incongruities and ambiguities over and above those that it is able to resolve. Each of these poets mobilizes and exploits these features of humour to specific textual, social, and political ends. Yet what humour theory also helps bring to the fore are the ambivalent effects and contradictory meanings that sometimes emerge in these poets’ work as a result of their recourse to humour.

Most introductions to humour studies begin by naming and summarizing the three most influential humour theories of the past several decades. These are the superiority, the release, and the incongruity theories.<sup>9</sup> Of these three, the incongruity theory is most relevant in this context, since it accords best with the socio-aesthetic logics at play in the work of these poets. At its most basic, incongruity theory identifies an overlap or discrepancy between two disparate socio-semantic contents as a key feature of the humorous utterance or text. As its name suggests, it places incongruity at the heart of every humorous operation. For many humour theorists, however, incongruity is a necessary but not sufficient condition for humour. Incongruity is formal, but it also works to organize particular socio-discursive contents. From this observation, two important points immediately follow. Humorous content often takes the form of a binary opposition. Incongruity acts upon this opposition, reinforcing it at the same that it destabilizes it (and vice versa). In *Semantic Mechanisms of Humor*, Victor Raskin claims that humorous “script oppositions fall into three classes,” each of which is a subset of the primary opposition real-

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<sup>9</sup> For a summary of these theories, see Attardo, *Linguistic Theories of Humour. Taking Laughter Seriously* by John Morreall is also helpful in this regard.

unreal (Attardo 204). Yet it is clear from the work of other theorists and critics that humour is able to mobilize effectively limitless sets of antithesis, polarity, and contradiction: not only actual-virtual, normal-abnormal, and possible-impossible (Attardo 204), but also serious-nonserious, bona fide-non-bona fide, plausible-implausible, concealment-disclosure, lack-excess, immersion-distanciation, disjunction-conjunction, unconscious-conscious, figure-ground, sense-nonsense, semantics-syntax, pleasure-displeasure, transgression-recuperation (and others besides).<sup>10</sup> As these examples evidence, the humorous binary begins as an indeterminate content—not a universal set of script oppositions. It is a formal (and thus “empty”) rather than a semantic (or isotopic) operator.<sup>11</sup>

The critical discussion of poetic humour requires interventions into the field of humour theory. Still, my intention here is simply to sketch the beginnings of a working model responsive to modalities of humour operative within the field of contemporary poetry. Clearly, it is important not to reduce the complex social, political, and affective workings of humour to a strictly formal or structural template. Yet strictly political and sociological approaches to humour have their limitations as well. In Todd McGowan’s view, the chief problem with sociological humour theory is its tendency to locate “the political valence of comedy in either who creates the comedy or who is its object” (“Barriers” 204). In this framework, humour is critical when it travesties authority figures or when its teller occupies a position of social exclusion or marginalization. Conversely, humour is conservative when it targets marginal or minority

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<sup>10</sup> Raskin presents his categories as structuralist reductions, but the point is that such a structuralist reduction is in error. In Bergson, for example, a key comic binary is rigidity-flexibility, whereas relevance theories of humour privilege use-mention.

<sup>11</sup> The term *isotopy* derives from Algirdas Julien Greimas’ seminal work in the fields of semiotics and narratology. Greimas’ work is important to the early development of the incongruity-disjunction model of humour prevalent in linguistics and pragmatics. In this context, Greimas’ notion of isotopy is more or less equivalent to what Raskin calls scripts. On the function of isotopy-scripts in linguistic humour theory, see Attardo.

subjects or when the teller occupies a dominant position within the social hierarchy or symbolic order. Certainly, this interpretive model holds true in some instances (particularly with simpler forms of humour, such as jokes, one-liners, and the like). As McGowan demonstrates, however, there are many instances of humour and comedy that appear to critique authority but whose underlying logic works to sustain or prop up that authority.<sup>12</sup> “Though it seems hard to stomach,” McGowan later adds, “there is also a critical comedy that mocks the marginalized and oppressed” (213-14).<sup>13</sup> From McGowan’s perspective, conventional sociological and political frameworks are clearly inadequate for analyzing tendentious humour of this kind. As he writes, “the evaluation of comedy must examine not just its source or object but take into account its effects” (“Barriers” 205).<sup>14</sup>

McGowan offers a useful rejoinder to any criticism that reads humour as a simple sociological document and that neglects to attend to the logics specific to humorous utterances and events.<sup>15</sup> Where McGowan’s essay makes a wrong turn, however, is in its desire to provide the incongruous oppositions upon which humour operates with a determinant and universal content. In “The Barriers to Critical Comedy,” McGowan suggests that humour operates along the axis of inclusion-exclusion. Humour is critical when it discloses the exclusions constitutive of the social. It is conservative when it sutures over these gaps. In a more recent book, McGowan takes a more explicitly universalist stance. In *Only a Joke Can Save Us*, he modifies his earlier claim, now identifying the opposition lack-excess as the fundamental logic of all comic acts and

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<sup>12</sup> McGowan’s examples are medieval carnival and Robert Altman’s *MASH*. He’s especially persuasive as regards unconscious, libidinal, and ideological investments.

<sup>13</sup> Predictably given his Žižekian orientation, McGowan’s key example of this is Chaplin’s *Little Tramp*. Not all of McGowan’s readings convince. But I think he is right to say that there exist types of humour that laugh at, rather than with, marginal subjects and that are nonetheless “critical” rather than simply derogatory (at times both at once, to different degrees and outcomes).

<sup>14</sup> These effects are broadly social, political, and ideological. They also refer to the effects “that the comedy produces on both its source and its object” (205).

<sup>15</sup> What Freud calls the “joke-work.”

events. “My contention,” McGowan writes, “is that the source of comedy, jokes, and humor has the same structure and that this structure transcends its multiple manifestations” (18).<sup>16</sup> In McGowan’s definition, “comedy is the result of a specific form of the connection of disparate elements—the intersection of lack and excess. Comedy occurs when this connection takes us by surprise” (14).<sup>17</sup> McGowan’s definition draws obvious influence from psychoanalysis (Lacan, Žižek) and echoes incongruity theory. As a result, it is entirely amenable to important currents with contemporary humour research. In view of the poetic humour under consideration, however, my gambit is to subtract from—rather than pluralize—McGowan’s claim (and others similar to it). Such a subtractive approach allows for a more generic positing of humour as a type of oscillation or double movement between any binary oppositions—regardless of whether these are structural, social, affective, cognitive, ideological, or whatever.<sup>18</sup> In the poetic works under examination, humour is foremost linguistic and textual, but it also works on the bodies of readers and audiences. The complex etiology of laughter discounts the laughing body as necessary to any definition of humour. Still, the experience of humour is never strictly interpretive but also affective and physiological. Incongruity is not exclusive to humour but informs a range of other structures and phenomena (such as metaphor, fear, and puzzle solving). It is a necessary but not sufficient condition of humour. Universalist incongruity theories address this need for further specification by providing incongruity with a determinate content. My position is that such a

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<sup>16</sup> For McGowan, “comedy is a singular phenomenon” (*Only a Joke* 7). For this reason, he chooses not to enter into perennial debates concerning the relation between comedy, humour, laughter, and jokes. I also choose not to enter into this debate but for other reasons, including the radical terminological inconsistency in humour theory—of which the translation of the title of Freud’s joke book is a *locus classicus*.

<sup>17</sup> Throughout *Only a Joke Can Save Us*, McGowan identifies and discusses a host of other important binaries operative in humour, including identification-disidentification, proximity-distance, and investment-disinterest. It is possible to read these binaries as epiphenomenal species of excess-lack (as with the categories that comprise Raskin’s master binary real-unreal). Yet it is also possible to read this proliferation of binaries in McGowan as evidence of his universalist claim getting away from him.

<sup>18</sup> These binaries can occur at the level of semantic or social content as well as context.

move is entirely inadequate to poetic uses of humour (or even to humour more generally). Pace McGowan, humour is not at all identical to laughter. At its most basic, it is a double movement between opposites whose prototypical outcome is laughter (or unlaughter).

## 2.1. Humour Studies: Theory versus Research

What Humor is, not all the Tribe

Of Logick-mongers can describe.

—Johnathan Swift, “To Mr. Delany”

There is no theoretical account of humor that is not itself (on a higher level) somewhat funny and therefore incomplete.

John Allen Paulos, *Mathematics and Humor*

As a field of enquiry, the study of humour divides roughly into two categories: humour theory and humour research. In general, humour theory is critical, attending closely to subjective, political, and ideological determinants and effects. It often builds on philosophical sources and is confident forwarding more speculative claims, viewing humour not simply as an object of research but as possessing a methodological, hermeneutic, and epistemological valence in its own right. Conversely, humour research is largely empirical in its outlook, grounding its knowledge claims in the analysis of puns and jokes and other humour corpora. Functionalist and pragmatic in orientation, humour research also privileges interpretive frameworks able to generate complex formal models with high degrees of systematicity.<sup>19</sup> Much humour theory operates under the influence of poststructuralism, psychoanalysis, semiotics, discourse analysis, new materialism, and (most recently) affect theory.<sup>20</sup> As for humour research, it tends to take its

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<sup>19</sup> The “pinnacle” of which is Raskin and Attardo’s general verbal theory of humour (GTVH), which both authors discuss across multiple publications.

<sup>20</sup> Lesser known but still important texts within this field include G. B. Milner, “Homo Ridens: Towards a Semiotic Theory of Humour and Laughter,” Julie Kristeva, “Towards a Semiology of Paragrams,” Johnathan Culler (editor),

cues from such disciplines as linguistics, psychology, cognitive science, anthropology, and sociology. In light of this disparity of disciplinary investments and allegiances, it is not surprising that some humour theories never speak—are unable to speak—to each other at all. Yet other theories and research platforms have closer relations than they think, with conceptual overlaps and intersections beyond interdisciplinarity.

In *Linguistic Theories of Humour*, Salvatore Attardo chastises literary criticism for its disciplinary attachment to early-twentieth-century thinking about humour, comedy, and laughter. “Humor research has advanced in the last half of a century well beyond Freud and Bergson,” he fumes, “and it is time for scholars to become aware of this” (58-59). Attardo is correct in his observation, but his motivation is at once suspect and inadequate. In “Comedy Theory and the Postmodern,” Gillian Pye appears to advocate for a humour theory conversant with both linguistic and poststructuralist methods. Yet her ultimate concern is to subordinate the theoretical “excesses” of poststructuralism to the disciplinary rationality of structural linguistics, semantics, and pragmatics. In a general way, I agree with Attardo, Pye, and Lewis that there is a need for literary critics working on humour to familiarize themselves with theorists outside of Freud and Bergson (not to mention other clearly important yet perhaps overfamiliar figures like Johan Huizinga and Mikhail Bakhtin). The problem with humour research, however, is that it rarely allows this process to operate in reverse. There are plenty of theorists like Attardo, Pye, and Lewis who advocate opening literary criticism to the influence of Greimas’ isotopy-disjunction model, Raskin’s semantic script theory of humour, or Sperber and Wilson’s cognitive pragmatic approach.<sup>21</sup> There are few or none who advocate the converse: of opening humour research to

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*On Puns: The Foundation of Letters*, Robert Pfaller, “The Order of Appearance: Materialism’s Comedy,” and (more recently) Lauren Berlant and Sianne Ngai (editors), *Comedy: An Issue*.

<sup>21</sup> The canonical text for this last is *Relevance: Communication and Cognition* by Dan Sperber and Deirdre Wilson. For an application and elaboration of relevance theory to humour, see Francisco Yus, *Humour and Relevance*.

the influence of literary criticism and the literary more generally (whether “postmodern,” poetic, or otherwise).

Linguistic humour theory has many analytic tools and frameworks to offer, but its tendency to totalize and systematize its formal models has the inverse (and ironic) effect of rendering it unusable in many contexts, including contemporary poetics and textual politics. In a rather remarkable and telling early essay, Attardo claims that despite the shared influence of Saussure, structuralist and poststructuralist thinking about language have absolutely nothing to say to each other. They are beyond incompatibility and constitute radically incommensurable paradigms or epistemes. Attardo is among the most prominent figures in contemporary humour scholarship. To my mind, his unequivocal foreclosure on “poststructuralist” approaches to humour says much about the limits inherent to any call for greater ecumenism or interdisciplinarity among humour critics and researchers. Interdisciplinary thinking within the field of humour studies is certainly possible. In fact, it is evident everywhere. Yet my sense is that Attardo is right to draw attention to the radical breaks that do in fact structure humour studies as a field of inquiry. Summoning Hegel, McGowan writes that it is impossible “to reach the particular comic element without invoking the universal” and that this impossibility “dooms the project of examining comedy without theorizing it” (*Only a Joke* 183 n6). Interrogating humour, provocation, and offense and its relation to contemporary radical poetics and textual politics, my project is more particular still. It requires a strategic rather than a summative approach: not an aerial view of humour theory per se, but a critical interrogation of issues in the field most relevant to the poetry under discussion. Is humour immanent to its particular instantiations? Or is it a site of socio-subjective negotiation, dispute, and contest? What is its viability or effectivity as a vehicle of political expression or critique? Is it able to undermine

oppressive discourses, rhetorics, and structures? Or is its function inevitably to recirculate, strengthen, and impose them?

## 2.2. Humour in the Last Instance: Syntax, Semantics, Socius

A joke explained is a joke misunderstood.

—Simon Critchley, *On Humour*

The comedy door hits you on the way in and on the way out.

—Lauren Berlant, “Humorlessness”

Theorists often argue whether humour is primarily a formal, semantic, or social process. My position is that humour observes certain structural logics but that these logics are irreducibly cultural, political, and historical. In *Jokes and Their Relation to the Unconscious*, Freud asks whether humour resides in the “thought expressed” or “in the expression which the thought has been given in” (47). What exactly is it about humour that provides listeners with pleasure? Is it the form of the joke or the specificity of its content?<sup>22</sup> This question echoes throughout Freud’s inquiry (as well as humour theory more generally).<sup>23</sup> Freud’s initial insight, however, is that jokes tend to lose their status as jokes when they lose or change their form of expression.<sup>24</sup> For Freud, this insight strongly suggests that what defines humour more generally are the various techniques whereby it organizes its material. Freud spends more than eighty pages seeking out, identifying, and enumerating twenty or more individual joke structures and mechanisms, only

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<sup>22</sup> Interestingly, the intuitive sense is that only content can provoke displeasure (at least as regards humour—contra, say, music or art).

<sup>23</sup> The distinction here is between referential and verbal humour, or *de dicto* and *de re* (as Cicero terms it in *De Oratore*). (See Attardo, pp. 26-29, 54.) Nick Holm addresses this issue in his interesting article “Humour as Edge-Work: Aesthetics, Joke-Work, and Tendentiousness in Tosh.0,” which explores the distinction between tendentiousness and the joke-work.

<sup>24</sup> “[T]he joke invariably disappears as soon as we eliminate the operation of these techniques from its form of expression!” (77). See also pp. 47-49.

later to reduce these to two: displacement and condensation.<sup>25</sup> As Salvatore Attardo notes, Freud's chapter on "The Technique of Jokes" plays a key role in subsequent elaborations of linguistic theories of humour (56). The influential incongruity-disjunction model of humour finds its origin in the work of the literary semiotician Algirdas Julien Greimas.<sup>26</sup> From a Greimasian perspective, humour operates by means of the mechanisms of disjunction and connection. The function of the disjunctive is to introduce incongruity into a particular isotopy.<sup>27</sup> The function of the connector is to allow a shift from an initial isotopy to a new, emergent, or previously hidden one.<sup>28</sup> Strikingly, Attardo goes so far as to describe Greimas' formal analysis of humour as "descriptively equivalent" to Freud's. For Attardo, however, this equivalency is only significant to the extent that it demonstrates the analytic superiority of Greimas' model, which translates "Freud's impressionistic terminology into the more rigorous one of structural linguistics" (64 n3). Yet what Attardo (necessarily) misses is how these same equivalencies and overlaps also

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<sup>25</sup> Freud is well aware and explicit about how this maps onto discussion of the dream-work in *Interpretation of Dreams*, which he publishes only five years earlier. Indeed, he addresses it at length in a chapter on "The Relation of Jokes to Dreams and to the Unconscious."

<sup>26</sup> In fact, the origin and development of this model is more complex. Greimas only spends two pages of *Structural Semantics* discussing humour, and he nowhere claims "to have proposed a model of jokes or of humor" (Attardo 62). Nevertheless, I follow Attardo and humour theory more generally in attributing it to him, for convenience.

<sup>27</sup> *Isotopy* is Greimas' technical term for a sufficiently homogeneous narrative environment of semantic content. See Attardo, pp. 62-81.

<sup>28</sup> Take the following W. C. Fields gag as an example: "Do you believe in clubs for young people? Only when kindness fails" (Attardo 97). The isotopic disjunctive occurs at the end of the last line, with the words "kindness fails." What serves as the connector is the polyseme "club" from the line that precedes it. Whereas it is the disjunctive that introduces a sense incompatible to that of the opening sentence, it is the connector that allows the reader to discover a means to resolve this incompatibility, to produce a new isotopy in which the semantic content of the disjunctive becomes a constituent element of the meaning of the text as a whole. The word "club" refers not only to a particular social space but to a type of weapon. It is the first of these meanings that the joke evokes in the set-up, a meaning that the disjunctive subsequently invalidates via the words "kindness fails." But it is also the disjunctive that leads the reader to discover in the second meaning of the word "club" a means to reconstitute the semantic homogeneity of the joke text in its entirety. What the connector allows for is the emergence of a new isotopy, of a new reading of the text, whose content now concerns not the necessity or suitability of establishing social spaces for youths, but rather an absurd (and extreme) form of corporal punishment

work to make linguistic humour theory available to psychoanalysis and other more “speculative” or “impressionistic” approaches to humorous phenomena.<sup>29</sup>

Most linguistic theories of humour are semantic and pragmatic in orientation, which means that they are considerate of social and contextual determinants. Nevertheless, formalisms still prevail in much linguistic humour research. From a strict Greimasian perspective, the pleasure of humour derives not from any particular content but from “the discovery of two different isotopies within a supposedly homogenous narrative” (Greimas 80). As with other formalisms, the problem with minimizing or effacing social, historical, and cultural factors is not simply the tendency to arrive at synchronic, essentialist, or universal definitions. There is equally the tendency to conceptualize humour in strangely apolitical terms. Linguistic analyses of humour frequently use as exempla jokes that are tendentious, offensive, or sexist in content. In some instances, the analysis of such jokes only attends to issues of structure and form. Ignoring discriminatory content is part of what allows linguistic humour theory to imagine itself as more “rigorous,” “objective,” and “scientific” than other, competing methodologies and frameworks. By the same token, it also produces an image of humour research as a discursive space where oppressive social norms, assumptions, and contents circulate openly and with ease.<sup>30</sup> More often than not, however, the claim that a particular analysis is strictly formal is simply not true. Almost invariably, even the most abstract discussion of humour entails some involvement with socio-semantic content. The real problem with formalist readings of humour is not so much that they decline to address the specificities of content and context. It is that they lack the necessary

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<sup>29</sup> Structural linguistics takes Freud’s insights and then walls itself off from potential intrusions of dreams and the unconscious.

<sup>30</sup> The problem is not that they address offensive content but that they fail to do this in a critical way. They take the content for granted, for the way things really are, the way the world really works. They naturalize it. It reproduces a masculinist, hetero, white, disciplinary space.

disciplinary tools for engaging social, political, and cultural material, which they treat far too often in an entirely uncritical manner.

Many instances of this type of formalism appear in the work of Christie Davies, a prominent humour scholar and a former president of the *International Society for Humor Studies*. In *Jokes and Their Relation to Society*, Davies discusses ethnic jokes about stupidity and other “sick” and “nasty” forms of humour. Against the theories of Hobbes, Freud, and many others, Davies argues that such humour has little to nothing to do with conflict, superiority, or hostility. According to Davies, what motivate “stupid ethnic” jokes are not racial prejudices, stereotypes, or animosities. Underlying all forms of tendentious humour are rather sets of binary relations between insider and outsider: primarily centre-periphery but also urban-rural, knowledgeable-ignorant, savvy-naive, master-novice. For Davies, the logic of the “stupid ethnic” joke is such as to allow it to take on certain forms: “geographical, economic, linguistic, or even religious” (1). Yet the analysis of such jokes never has to do with any particular content or interpretive context, only its formal distribution of opposing binary pairs. In terms of content, ethnic jokes are not political, topical, or historical but rather traditional, conventional, and interchangeable. For Davies, contextual factors are equally problematic, in part because “comic ethnic scripts can exist in the absence of serious stereotypes and vice versa” (136). “It is futile to search for an explanation of stupidity jokes in terms of inter-group conflict or tensions,” Davies insists. “The key explanation of these jokes is always the centre-edge relationships of the jokers and the butts of their jokes” (1).

Davies everywhere argues against two key tenets within the sociology of humour: that tendentious jokes are not only injurious but also political. Davies’ position is surprising given his own sociological training, not to mention that he forwards such claims in a book with a title like

*Jokes and Their Relation to Society*. What makes his formalism less of a surprise, however, is that his book appears as part of the Mouton de Gruyter Humor Research series, which is predominantly linguistic in its orientation. Indeed, most of Davies' claims find their theoretical support in two key components of linguist Victor Raskin's semantic script theory of humour. In *Semantic Mechanisms of Humor*, Raskin defines humour formally as any text containing two incongruous script oppositions (99). Raskin's scripts are similar to Greimas' isotopies, but they have the advantage of also operating as psychological, cognitive, and experiential categories. In Raskin's use, scripts describe the sum total of information that typical social actors possess about specific narratives, actions, or scenarios. They are normative descriptions of the lexicons, routine behaviours, and sensibilities that accrue to certain activities or modes of knowing. What Davies calls an "ethnic script" is not the same as an ethnic stereotype, in part because scripts are simply much more capacious. Ethnic scripts certainly contain stereotypes and other types of prejudicial images and language—but also a wide range of other discursive and artifactual material. Importantly, Davies nowhere denies the existence, seriousness, or hostility of prejudicial, pejorative, or abusive stereotypes. His claim is that "stupid ethnic jokes" rely on "comic ethnic scripts" rather than stereotypes—and that these are not at all the same things. With this claim, Davies draws on a second important component of Raskin's theory: that humour operates in contradistinction to the norms governing regular, everyday language use. For Raskin, humour is "non-bona fide" because it violates the (Gricean) principles of co-operation necessary to "the earnest, truthful, information-conveying mode of verbal communication" (Raskin 100).<sup>31</sup>

Injurious speech falls under the category of what Raskin calls *bona fide* or *casual*

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<sup>31</sup> Grice's co-operative principle comprises four communicational maxims, which he introduces in his influential essay "Logic and Conversation" (1975). These are the maxims of quantity, relation, manner, and quality. See Attardo's chapter on "The Cooperative Nature of Humor."

communication. Such speech is hurtful because it is serious in meaning and intent. Comic ethnic scripts, however, are by definition “non-bona fide” and unserious.<sup>32</sup> Davies’ argument is not that people who enjoy such scripts are innocent of prejudicial beliefs, only that such beliefs are not a necessary precondition to their enjoyment. From this perspective, laughing at ethnic humour is not necessarily evidence of racial antagonism towards a particular cultural group.

Throughout his work, Davies berates conflict theorists for their refusal to acknowledge the non-bona fide status of humour as a constitutively playful and nonserious linguistic practice. In Davies’ view, “the confusion of comic script and serious stereotype has long bedevilled the study of ethnic humour and it makes more sense to explain them separately” (136). Davies’ text contains many claims and remarks that significantly undermine the already tenuous viability of his thesis.<sup>33</sup> Yet this line is particularly telling of his theoretic and analytic limitations. On the surface, Davies’ methodology is primarily statistical, empirical, corpus based. Yet he never tires of imposing an a priori formal distinction upon his comic examples. Insisting that all “stupid ethnic jokes” operate according to an underlying binary logic of centre-periphery, Davies effectively renders a diversity of socio-cultural material into mere epiphenomena. Davies argues that tendentious jokes have nothing to do with oppression or uneven power struggles and relations. Implicitly, he tells people on the receiving end of such jokes that they are wrong to

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<sup>32</sup> Raskin’s preferred term for such scripts is *mythical*.

<sup>33</sup> In 1993, Davies was part of minor “scandal” for starting a practical joke among members of Her Majesty’s Civil Service with his proposal that the Westminster government consider building a “city-state” in Northern Ireland for the entire Hong Kong population, to save them from the misfortune of having to return to China along with the former British colony, as well as to provide a much-needed boost to the Unionist economy. Davies’ “joke” first circulated in the *Belfast News Letter* only later to appear as an archival “oddity” in a 2015 item on the *BBC News* website. The BBC News item contains a response from David Snoxell—a former employee with the Republic of Ireland Department of the Foreign Office—who discloses that the affair was simply “a spoof between colleagues who had a sense of humour. You can see it wasn’t intended seriously . . . Sadly, it’s impossible to make jokes like this any more, the Diplomatic Service has lost its sense of humour. I think that’s a shame because it’s through humour that you build relationships, with other departments, with other diplomats at home and abroad.” The incident and Snoxell’s response are of interest for how they effectively encapsulate Davies’ views on “tendentious” joking as a theorist of humour. For the full article, see “National Archives Reveal Hong Kong-to-NI ‘Spoof.’”

take offense, to feel hurt, or to respond with anger.<sup>34</sup> He similarly upbraids humour theorists and critics for their insistence on co-implicating comic ethnic scripts and racist discourses. At times, he unwittingly suggests that what aggravates him is not simply how political readings of humour confuse bona fide and non-bona fide verbal practices, but also how these readings disturb the formal tidiness of theory. For Davies, part of what disqualifies the idea of injurious humour is that it calls into question any absolute distinction between bona fide and non-bona fide speech acts. Davies is correct in his observation that jokes (typically) come “in opposed pairs” (184). He is right in his claim that “jokes are of necessity ambiguous and cannot be treated as mere disguised versions of serious statements” (104). Davies’ fatal error is not in insisting that humour operates according to binary categories (including that of bona fide and non-bona fide). His theory fails because it forgets that humour mobilizes binary categories—but only to trouble, destabilize, or collapse them. In his conclusion, Davies offers the remarkable insight that analyzing humour necessarily ramifies and proliferates its ambiguous effects. It deepens rather than resolves comic paradox and contradiction.<sup>35</sup> During his own interpretation of “ethnic” humour, however, Davies constantly works to relegate comic ambiguity to the level of semantic content or to fix it as a static, immanent formal principle. Tendentious jokes are certainly irreducible to covert bona fide statements. Crucially, they resist any reduction to simple non-bona fide status as well. Part of the provocation of tendentious humour is its ability to short-circuit binary oppositions—especially that of serious-nonserious.<sup>36</sup> In “Derrida and Saussure,”

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<sup>34</sup> As with Snoxell’s response above, Davies’ response to injurious humour is the classic manoeuvre whereby tendentious jokers register their non-intention and de-commitment to the co-operative principles inherent to any “serious” speech act: “It’s only a joke.”

<sup>35</sup> “The more . . . jokes are analyzed, the more possibilities become apparent and each possibility is itself irreducibly humorous and not in any sense a clear serious statement” (181).

<sup>36</sup> Critics implicitly note this when they note the difficulty involved in trying to respond to tendentious humour. Responding seriously only tends to add to the joker’s and audience’s pleasure—and to demonstrate the validity of the butt’s status qua butt. Yet responding with humour is to surrender the very possibility of bona fide response in advance. As Michael Billig writes, “Unlaughter is a favourite target for the laughter of ridicule” (194). Moira Smith

Attardo describes linguistics as a discipline whose commitment to rationality and science renders it unwilling and unable to handle claims that transgress Aristotle's law of the excluded middle.<sup>37</sup> In *Jokes and Their Relation to Society*, Davies names contradiction and paradox as inherent to the working of tendentious humour. Similar to much linguistic humour research, however, he is unable to reconcile humour's profoundly non-Aristotelian logic to the propositional laws that his disciplinary investments require.

The tendency to view form as central to understanding humour is not exclusive to scholars like Christie. It also inflects the work of theorists who operate with substantially different theoretical frameworks and methods. In *The Mastery of Discourse*, Susan Purdie posits humour as site of structural, discursive, and social overdetermination. According to Purdie, comic utterances comprise "literally innumerable elements, involving relationships within *and* between the material, personalities, and circumstances" (4; emphasis mine). They are also irreducible in that it is often possible to describe particular comic elements "in several different ways" or in terms of each other. As a result, the analysis of humour necessarily involves a proliferation rather than a single resolution of possible ambiguities and meanings. It also involves a potential proliferation of explanatory categories.<sup>38</sup> Writing from a feminist Lacanian purview, Purdie possesses a variety of theoretical tools for navigating the formal, semantic, and situational irreducibility of the humorous utterance or act. At various moments in her text, however, she appears to succumb to the lure of viewing a particular humorous element as determinant "in the last instance." Unlike Christie, Purdie insists that humour is always

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describes the double bind particular to the butt in the subtitle of a section in her essay: "Laughter is Immoral, But Unlaughter is Ridiculous" (153). See also Palmer, who opens *The Logic of the Absurd* with similar considerations.

<sup>37</sup> "It is impossible to imagine a linguist accepting as part of a rational discussion a claim that is 'not acceptable' in terms of Aristotelian logic" (50).

<sup>38</sup> It is thus not entirely possible (or desirable) to cordon the object of analysis from the analytic process.

tendentious: not simply that it works towards certain ends, but that these ends involve particular forms of degradation and subjugation. Among linguists and pragmatists, there is a debate as to whether humour violates norms or simply flaunts them. For Purdie, humour always involves real linguistic transgression—what she calls “the Ab-use of Language” (35). In many social contexts, it also has the double effect of constructing its users as subjects with discursive-symbolic power and its targets or butts as lacking, abject, or non-persons. Much of the originality of Purdie’s theory resides in her reading of humour as a double movement between infraction and redress. For Purdie, comic utterances transgress the symbolic order, but they also mark this transgression, thereby affirming their “ultimate compliance” with the law (91). As this thesis indicates, Purdie holds humour to work most often to enforce or reinscribe socio-discursive norms and asymmetrical power relations. Yet her text also explores instances where it appears to possess genuinely subversive and oppositional capabilities.<sup>39</sup> These explorations are salient because it is here that Purdie runs the risk of lapsing into a type of formal determinism. They are doubly salient because they also include a (brief) discussion of “avant-garde” comic strategies.<sup>40</sup>

Purdie first addresses the possibility for subversive humour while discussing the relation between serious and nonserious modes of discourse. Contra Christie and much of the humour research tradition, Purdie maintains not only that humour masks serious intent but also that it is capable of conveying bona fide communicational content. Humour is a contravention of discursive norms and marks itself as such. What constitutes language use as “serious” is precisely the absence of any such marks. As Purdie notes, however, “[t]here is a textual effect which involves not so much a movement between ‘serious’ and ‘joking’ intention as a constant

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<sup>39</sup> For Purdie, the overdeterminateness of humour provisionally maintains the possibility for other forms of subversive humour (for women and “other” subaltern subjects) (145-49).

<sup>40</sup> Purdie nowhere uses the term “avant-garde.” Rather her references are to radical tendencies within what she understands as literary modernism. But her discussion nevertheless applies.

ambiguity” (87). For Purdie, this refusal to mark a text as either “serious” or “nonserious” “is a deeply disruptive textual strategy” because “assuming the primary intention to joke or not is a very basic move in making sense of any utterance.” Serious discourse is “proper” in the sense of “propriety” but also in the sense of every signifying element occupying its proper place within broader relations of signification.<sup>41</sup> Humour is “improper” in that it scrambles these discursive and signifying relations. As a knowing breach of conventional language use, however, humour also reinstates the proper at the very moment that it transgresses it. For Purdie, this legerdemain is precisely what constructs the users of humour as de facto “masters of discourse” and its victims as “discursively incompetent” (59). “When a text is radically ambiguous,” however, “there is no site of ‘proper’ language and no mastery” (87). Whether by discursive indeterminacy or excessive polysemy, the “avant-garde” comic text dissolves the very mechanisms upon which conventional, conservative modes of joking depend.<sup>42</sup>

Purdie’s book is a work of humour theory not literary or cultural criticism. Still, her suggestion here that comic subversion is a matter of form maps well onto traditional understandings of the political efficacy of avant-garde writing strategies. Christie’s formalism is what allows him to discount offensive content as nonserious in import and epiphenomenal to an ahistorical opposition between centre and periphery. Purdie’s political investments are entirely antithetical to those of Christie. Nevertheless, her identification of form as the locus of comic subversion also has the potential effect of minimizing or effacing content. It implies that “avant-garde” humour is disruptive of discursive norms by definition, even in the presence of semantic

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<sup>41</sup> Purdie elaborates this claim at length in the opening chapter of her book, and she recapitulates its key components at the beginning the third chapter.

<sup>42</sup> Purdie returns to the idea that avant-garde humour limits the mastery of joking and damages serious implication on pages 116-17. She also suggests that the risk that such texts run is in losing their legibility as comedic altogether. Her examples of such texts include what she calls “black humour.”

tendentiousness, provocation, or offense. Part of what makes Purdie's thesis compelling is its identification of humour as a discursive transaction whose signal purpose is to arrogate or contest symbolic authority. On occasion, however, Purdie demonstrates a tendency to use certain binary categories (mastery-ineptitude, proper-improper, subject-object) as de facto formal absolutes. The problem with this tendency is not only that it often results in a type of formal or structural determinism, but also that it sometimes leads Purdie to neglect context as an equally irreducible factor in the reception of humorous utterances. In her initial exploration of "avant-garde" humour, Purdie treats her material with a fair degree of hesitation, trepidation, and uncertainty. At one point, she wonders how radically comic texts are able to accrue symbolic prestige since by definition they refuse to ratify bona fide discursive norms of resolution and reinstatement.<sup>43</sup> Yet what Purdie neglects to consider here are those more local and variable fields and contexts in which the negation of mastery signifies a form of (avant-garde) mastery particular to itself.<sup>44</sup> Surrealist "black humour" and modernist "dark comedy" have the effect of damaging all serious implication (116). But this comic damage itself is serious—not necessarily at the level of content but always at some possible or available loci of reception.

In a later chapter, Purdie offers a subtle and astute discussion of some of the critical implications for subaltern and radical feminist modes of humour. Of particular note, however, are the frameworks with which she introduces this explicitly political material. Unlike her earlier discussion of radical ambiguity and polysemy, here Purdie takes care to highlight such factors as

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<sup>43</sup> "The production—and more so, the critical celebration—of such a textual strategy is rather problematic, because the total negativity they suggest is at odds with the position of cultural authority the texts actually construct" (88). Purdie's examples here are Beckett, Pinter, and Surrealist black humour.

<sup>44</sup> What Purdie fails to address here is how "total negativity" as a textual strategy also performs a type of mastery and how this mastery has the effect of bestowing its practitioners with certain forms of power. In "mainstream" literary contexts, Beckett's writing perhaps signifies as a type of "comic" negativity without reserve. In avant-garde or modernist contexts of reception, however, such iconoclasm is precisely what designates the text as iconic and worthy of critical celebration. For a discussion of this process in a poetic context, see Alan Golding's classic *From Outlaw to Classic: Canons in American Poetry*.

social and subjective location. Purdie begins by reiterating her twin claims that tendentious humour always targets particular subjects, bodies, and collectivities and that these targets are never simply conventional, playful, or non-bona fide. For Purdie, tendentious humour invariably works to diminish or deny the power and agency of actual social actors.<sup>45</sup> As a result, jokes are “oppositional or oppressive depending upon whether the target stands above or below the jokes in the social hierarchy” (127). Contra her previous claims concerning avant-garde humour, here Purdie identifies social asymmetry as key to the politics of humour. With this formulation, she articulates the same sociological thesis that Todd McGowan critiques in his essay on “The Barriers to Critical Comedy.” No sooner than she gives voice to this position, however, she immediately qualifies it. “But joking always constructs discursive power,” Purdie insists, “and in this sense its operation is always political—quite separably from its possible involvement with ‘high’ or ‘low’ targets (127). Tendentious humour exhibits subversive power when subaltern subjects wield it against authority figures or oppressive structures. Yet it also possesses a formal logic whose political valences appear to operate in a manner irreducible to sociological calculus. In humour, the relation between form, content, and context is always operative, often plural, and hence irreconcilable. Despite these difficulties, Purdie maintains a certain investment in the idea of an oppositional and anti-oppressive humour practice. For many critics, however, the tendency for humour to proliferate ambiguity, insincerity, inappropriateness, and ambivalence across

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<sup>45</sup> For Purdie, however, the tendentious joke only denies the butt symbolic agency in instances where the joker and (laughing) audience view the butt as a threat—and thus in possession of a certain degree of power or equality. Purdie insists on this point and reiterates it at multiple points in her text. Interestingly, Christie makes a similar point when he claims that butts always occupy the position of the neighbour rather than that of the stranger (29). In *Only a Joke Can Save Us*, McGowan argues, “One would always rather be the object of comedy rather than the victim of pathos” because the joking process by definition accords the butt at least a minimal degree of agency and subjective autonomy (70). Comic misrecognition is more “humane” than pathetic non-recognition.

(conceptual, interpretive) domains is warrant enough to render it suspect at best as a vehicle of progressive political thought.

### **2.3. The Politics of Humour and Humour as Politics: Tendentious, Critical, Stranger**

Joking makes us feel good, so we want to feel good about joking.

—Susan Purdie, *Comedy*

We can easily imagine a group of cruel teenagers laughing hysterically at the farting homeless woman.

—Todd McGowan, *Only a Joke Can Save Us*

#### **2.3.1. Subversion-Reaction and Other Humorous Tendentious Binaries**

In *Comedy*, literary critic Andrew Stott offers an in-depth analysis of the alternative (leftist, feminist, anti-racist) comic tradition prominent in the UK during the late 1970s. Stott is clearly sympathetic to the alternative comedy project of placing humour in the service of a progressive, emancipatory politics. In the last instance, however, he is unable to give this project his full support or to view it entirely as successful or even viable (118). Whereas tendentious humour benefits from the serious-nonserious deployment of aggression and stereotypes, critical humour suffers from it.<sup>46</sup> Of necessity, progressive politics demand a sensitive, rational, even righteous discursive-affective orientation to social change—and a certain steadfastness and unequivocality in the face of various forms of tyranny and oppression. Often, comic approaches to serious socio-political issues (racism, sexism, homophobia) work to minimize or negate each other's effectivity.<sup>47</sup> They further run the risk of insulting or offending the very constituencies

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<sup>46</sup> “When laughter is directed aggressively, it can be an extremely powerful tool, victimizing its targets in purely negative terms and reinforcing prejudice. Comedy that seeks to do the same to tyrannical or prejudicial ideologies, however, often has to relinquish a reasonable base for its arguments before it enters the arena” (118).

<sup>47</sup> In essence, Stott views political comedy as an oxymoron, neither funny nor political in the final instance—though perhaps something else of interest. See, for example, his reading of the final scene of the English playwright Trevor Griffiths' *Comedians* (1976), which is definitely an example of English's “stranger politics.”

that they aim to support or defend (118-19). Throughout his text, Stott dedicates a significant amount of time to thinking about whether humour serves subversion or the status quo, examining many instances of both. In conclusion, however, he strongly suggests “that comedy has nothing to offer politics,” at least “when the project requires something more than simple derision” (119).

Stott’s skepticism about the critical or emancipatory potential of humour finds elaboration in *Laughter and Ridicule* by prominent social psychologist Michael Billig. Billig observes the distinction between repressive and contestive humour. Yet he troubles the classic sociological claim that humour is repressive or contestive simply depending “upon the social position of the person using the humour and the uses to which the humour is put” (202). For Billig, humorous utterances and acts are always ambiguous, in part because they invoke a wide range of “ethical, personal, and ideological considerations” (203).<sup>48</sup> Politically, they are further problematic in that 1) subversive humour is entirely able to perform conservative social functions and 2) figures of authority or reaction have no difficulty positioning their jokes as rebellious rather than disciplinary. For Billig, however, the chief reason for why humour is suspect as a vehicle of progressive or radical politics is not simply its tendency towards ambivalence, paradox, and “unreason.” At the extra-subjective level, the issue is that joking constitutively works to regulate and police social norms, which it accomplishes by means of its association with laughter, ridicule, and embarrassment. In an important chapter on “Laughter and Unlaughter,” Billig claims that humour minimally involves three paradoxes. The first of these “is that humour is both universal and particular. It is to be found in all societies, but not all humans find the same things funny” (176).<sup>49</sup> In the postscript to *The Mastery of Discourse*, Purdie

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<sup>48</sup> With humour, “[m]otive, content and effect do not fall into distinct rebellious or conservative piles. The ‘positives’ and ‘negatives’ are not in necessary alignment” (211).

<sup>49</sup> The second paradox is that humour is at once social and anti-social, the third that it is at once analyzable and inaccessible to analysis.

responds to this paradox in the following manner. She posits “that all language-users will play with marked transgressions of its rule, and that the basic Law of Symbolic Order must be universal . . . but that the construction of joking may vary to some extent, in ways that will reflect different *ideological* constructions in the nature of language and identity” (172). For Billig, disciplinary and rebellious humour are identical to the extent that they are both instances of ridicule. The salient difference lies in their aim and object. Whereas rebellious humour mocks the rules, disciplinary humour maintains the rules by mocking those who transgress them. Individual jokes are always ambiguous because they appear among endlessly varying concrete particulars. Nevertheless, the social fact of humour as ridicule is universal—an everyday cultural and affective technique that all societies everywhere use to protect and regulate themselves from disruption. As Billig recognizes, the contradiction here is that humour often operates precisely as this disruption. Mobilizing ridicule, laughter, and embarrassment to discipline subversions of the law, humour also enables pleasure at the law’s subversion. For Billig, the solution to this contradiction is that social need is primordial. At best, rebellious humour is epiphenomenal to disciplinary humour. At worst, it is another form of repression and punishment.

Among other things, Billig’s work is valuable for its critique of what he calls “ideological positivism”—the predominant view that humour is primarily pleasurable, affirmative, and emancipatory. Yet his position that humour is fundamentally conservative is not without significant problems, two of which are of importance here. Like Purdie and many other theorists, Billig identifies ambivalence, contradiction, and paradox as salient features of humorous speech acts and performances. At moments, he seems content to leave these features open and to explore the lateral or double movements according to which humour often seems to operate. Like Purdie, however, Billig ultimately finds it necessary to circumscribe the movement of humour via

recourse to some universal. For both theorists, humour is reactionary because it subverts the law only to reinscribe it. Both theorists locate humour within the binary of subversion and discipline, privileging the second of these terms in the final instance. Where they differ is that Purdie locates the universal within the (Lacanian) symbolic order, whereas Billig locates it within what he views as the real of social need (for self-preservation). This difference is crucial in that it explains why Purdie is able to accommodate the possibility for a politically oppositional humour while Billig is not. Purdie is suspicious of the possibility of subversive humour because the symbolic law is fundamentally “phallogocentric” in its function and logic. As Purdie recognizes, however, the very existence of humour proves that this law is neither monolithic nor univocal in its function and identity. In fact, it too operates through a kind of “double action,” interpellating bodies as subjects while also functioning as a site of social power and subjective agency. For Purdie, this doubleness offers at least two opportunities to those (minoritarian) subjects for whom the symbolic is primarily a vehicle of oppression. The first is to articulate comedy as “the mastery of discourse” to a politics of difference. The second is to fashion a mode of political humour that vacillates between transgression-reinstatement or whose reinstatement involves difference rather than a return to the same. Near the end of her discussion of gender and humour, Purdie introduces a third reason for why not all humour necessarily reasserts dominant social mores—namely, because “joking is hugely overdetermined” and its effects always multiply “in relation to its context, its content, and their interactions” (147).

For Purdie and Stott, oppositional humour is risky because comedy skews right while also introducing ambiguity into sensitive, fraught, or determinative political topics. Yet Purdie takes solace from the fact that radical minoritarian subjects also laugh and tell jokes, suggesting that “joking can—and sometimes does—confirm relationship and identity beyond the miserable

limits of patriarchy” (148). In Billig’s thinking, however, the universal of social control plays a much more determinate role than in Purdie. Billig explores how humour is at once rebellious and disciplinary, but then he (re)solves this contradiction by assigning the former to the realm of the psychological, the latter to the sociological. In this framework, individual subjects are not necessarily wrong when they experience tendentious joking as disruptive or liberatory. It is simply that the extra-individual consequences of such joking always tend toward the mockery of particular subjects in the interest of maintaining social homeostasis. Purdie’s discussion of the comic mastery of discourse draws on Lacanian psychoanalysis, so it is no surprise that she deploys a universal—but one that lacks self-consistency or has gaps in it. It is also not surprising that her feminist orientation leads her to think hard about the paradoxical logic whereby tendentious humour constructs subaltern subjects simultaneously as powerless and as threats. In Billig, however, humour as social ridicule appears to operate the same in all instances, times, and upon all persons. As a social universal, it is absolute and moves in one direction only: from socius to subject. Unlike Purdie, Billig views transgressive humour and the socio-symbolic power that underlies it as strictly punitive, never constitutive. Part of what leads Billig to these conclusions is his (liberal, humanist) view that ridicule, discipline, and punishment are “negative” as such, no matter who or what occupies the position of teller, butt, or listener. For Billig, all transgressive humour leads tellers and listeners to disavow their own power and deceive themselves about the meaning of their laughter. No matter what it targets, humour as ridicule is objectifying and oppressive, making it entirely inappropriate as a vehicle of emancipatory or progressive political expression. In degrading the butt, it also degrades teller and laughers.

In the opening pages of *Laughter*, Henri Bergson announces his now classic thesis that “the comic demands something like a momentary anesthesia of the heart” (5). In his chapter on “Embarrassment, Humour, and the Social Order,” Billig echoes Bergson, stating that comic ridicule is liberatory—but only in the sense that it frees laughers from “the constraints of empathy” (225). These claims are familiar to the sociology of humour and humour theory more generally, in part because critics desire to protect those subjects, identities, and groups that are most often subject to hostile and derisive laughter. This desire motivates Billig as well, but his claim also goes far beyond it. At one point, Billig addresses the malapropisms and stupidity jokes constantly in circulation during the George W. Bush presidency. Later, he asks rhetorically, “Who cares whether George Bush woke in the middle of the night, sweating with embarrassment at the thought of his misplaced word?” (225). Almost by definition, the great majority of people who mock and laugh at the president of the United States occupy a lower position in the social hierarchy. Such mockery is certainly understandable in that it performs a range of affective, cultural, and political functions (from expressing genuine antagonism to containing more threatening socio-political energies). Yet here Billig suggests that this type of joking is problematic primarily because it works to injure feeling human beings and rob them of their essential humanity, regardless of whether they are Black, female, queer, disabled—or one of the most powerful men on the planet. In *The Odd One In*, Alenka Zupančič describes a form of comedy that deploys concrete particulars—but only to leave all underlying universals fundamentally intact. For Zupančič, “the paradigm of these comedies” is the humorous disclosure that “the aristocrat (or king, or judge, or priest, or any other character of symbolic stature) is *also* a man (who snores, farts, slips, and is subject to the same physical laws as other mortals)” (30). According to Zupančič, such comedies are still comic, but it is a “false” type of

comedy. Billig's sociology of laughter and ridicule is "false" in precisely the same sense.

Universally, tendentious humour has the capacity to injure (emotionally, psychologically) any particular target. But clearly the (social, political) meaning of particular injuries is in no way reducible to the fact of injury itself.<sup>50</sup>

### **2.3.2. Injurious Speech: Non-Bona Fide Reiteration and the Limit of Humour against Oppression**

When Gayatri Spivak refuses to laugh, she is told she wants to deny the workers their cappuccino.

—Fred Moten and Stephano Harney, *The Undercommons*

What do you call a black man who flies a plane? "A pilot, you racist bastard!"

—Terry Eagleton, *Humour*

In her discussion of humour and gender, Purdie asserts the need for "women (and all abjected groups) . . . to lay claim" to comic modes of "power and pleasure"—but while also taking care not to collude inadvertently "with patriarchy's appropriation of the Symbolic" (145). In "Race and Ethnicity in Popular Humour," the social psychologists Dennis Howitt and Kwame Owusu-Bempah set about answering an even more difficult and fraught set of questions. Is anti-racist humour possible? Is humour able to appropriate pejoratives and stereotypes and transform or recode them as a critique of racism? For Howitt and Owusu-Bempah, part of what differentiates racist humour from other comic modes is precisely its lack of ambivalence and ambiguity. "The function of racist jokes," they write, "is to reinforce the presumed superiority of one racial or ethnic group over another. Examine a joke for this message and it is not difficult to

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<sup>50</sup> Part of the value of Zupančič's thesis here is that it offers a rubric for distinguishing subversive from conservative comedy. The former short-circuits the relation between universal-particular, whereas the latter maintains it (in the final instance).

detect its racial violence” (50).<sup>51</sup> Interestingly, Howitt and Owusu-Bempah not only claim that racist jokes often convert easily into straightforward statements. They also argue that the conventions of humour often work to facilitate recognition of racial, ethnic, and cultural stereotypes (54). Of course, not all jokes that contain “ethnic” content are simple or explicitly offensive or hateful. For Raskin, ethnic humour is “true” when its material is incommensurable with any other particular ethnic group or racialized identity.<sup>52</sup> Accordingly, “true” ethnic humour is not necessarily offensive or disparaging, especially when told by or among members of that particular group.<sup>53</sup> Howitt and Owusu-Bempah concur that “some jokes refer to a specific racial or ethnic group but do not appear to incorporate the racist element of racial superiority” (58). Contra Raskin and Davies, however, they also insist that ethnic jokes are nevertheless problematic along a number of fronts. Unlike explicitly racist jokes, “true” ethnic jokes often require listeners or readers with a deep understanding of particular cultures and a “sophisticated appreciation of race, racism, race categories, and so forth” (58-59). From an anti-racist perspective, moreover, such jokes are often difficult to negotiate due to their much more complex, ambiguous, and uncertain use of various cultural stereotypes and racializing discourses (59).

Howitt and Owusu-Bempah ultimately reject the idea of anti-racist humour for many of the same reasons. For these critics, anti-oppressive politics always involve “shunning or challenging the racist use of racial categories” (59). Of necessity, anti-racist humour invokes or

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<sup>51</sup> In “Comic Racism and Violence,” Michael Billig argues that explicitly racist contexts disambiguate racist humour absolutely. See also Billig, “Humour and Hatred: The Racist Jokes of the Ku Klux Klan.”

<sup>52</sup> Conversely, “false” ethnic humour is that which is merely conventional. This is Davies’ position as well. For Raskin as Davies, all humour is non-bona fide, so even racist humour is nonserious as such.

<sup>53</sup> The *locus classicus* here are the numerous Jewish jokes that Freud recounts with obvious relish. At the same time, most of the Jews in these jokes are not representative of the Jewishness that Freud identifies with, but rather of the Jewishness that Freud (and his forebears) are trying to flee (or have successfully left behind).

alludes to the racist discourses or tropes that it desires to lampoon, undermine, and critique. Unlike serious discourse, however, humorous reference to provocative, offensive, or hurtful material is always ambiguous, ambivalent, or incongruous to a certain degree. At best, successful anti-racist humour confirms anti-racists in their views. Evading the commitment necessary to successful anti-racist declarations, it more often simply confuses or insults the very individuals and identities that it wishes to support. As equivocal or non-bona fide statements, anti-racist jokes are also often entirely vulnerable to racist appropriation and enjoyment. For Howitt and Owusu-Bempah, the attempt at anti-racist humour often ends up producing what they describe as “anti-racist racism” (60). As an example, Howitt and Owusu-Bempah describe a 1993 comedy club performance in which the actor Ted Danson delivers “a litany of obscene, explicit jokes and vulgar stereotypical imagery”—all while “wearing ‘blackface’ make-up” (61). In the media furor that follows, Danson defends his performance as a travesty of racist discourses and stereotypes.<sup>54</sup> According to Howitt and Owusu-Bempah, however, it is simply not possible to “negate racism with racism.”<sup>55</sup> For them, Danson’s attempt to stereotype a stereotype only has the effect of keeping “demeaning racial-ethnic images alive.”<sup>56</sup> Still, the problem with anti-racist humour is not simply that it necessarily reproduces and disseminates racist content. It is that it takes “much the same structure as a racist joke” and so “tries to right one wrong with another wrong.” Anti-

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<sup>54</sup> Howitt and Owusu-Bempah neglect to mention how Whoopi Goldberg—Danson’s partner at the time—not only supported the performance but also provided Danson with most of the material. Of course, Goldberg’s lived experience as a Black woman does not give her veto power over whether the performance was racist, but it does complicate Howitt and Owusu-Bempah’s discussion of the event, at least to the extent of suggesting that Goldberg’s “reading” is somehow “wrong” and theirs is “right.”

<sup>55</sup> The Danson incident (and Howitt and Owusu-Bempah’s discussion of it) is pertinent to contemporary avant-garde poetry in light of the debates around the work of Kenneth Goldsmith and Vanessa Place, which critics like Chris Chen and Tim Kreiner (among others) understand as a type of “blackface” minstrelsy. From a structural-theoretical perspective, these debates tend to follow the logic of bona fide versus non-bona fide, use versus mention, or serious versus nonserious. My wager, however, is that it is often more interpretively and politically trenchant to posit such “humour” as effectively serious-nonserious and to proceed from there.

<sup>56</sup> Howitt and Owusu-Bempah also use the example of Archie Bunker from *All in the Family* (60-61).

racist humour is ineffective because it assumes “that anti-racism is merely the reverse of racism.” The only difference is that “the group attacked is racist rather than a racial minority.”

Howitt and Owusu-Bempah differ from Stott and Billig in that they interrogate racist humour rather than tendentious humour in general.<sup>57</sup> Like Stott and Billig, however, they dismiss humour as a viable political medium in part because they view it as primarily divisive, disparaging, and derogatory. Howitt and Owusu-Bempah’s essay makes many salient points on the dangerous proximity and overlap between tendentious humour and hateful speech. Still, their essay also raises a handful of important questions and issues that it neglects fully to address. Is it really the case that it is always easy to translate racist humour into serious, bona fide terms? Are there by definition no such things as ambiguous or complex racist jokes? Howitt and Owusu-Bempah draw most of their examples from explicitly racist joke books and websites. Is it as simple to analyze racist texts that neglect to signal their intention in advance? Many critics regard laughing at racist jokes as evidence of racist beliefs. In Howitt and Owusu-Bempah’s more complex account, laughing at racist jokes is less a matter of belief than it is of knowledge. For Howitt and Owusu-Bempah, tendentious humour has little to nothing to do with repression. “To understand a racist joke,” they argue, “entails understanding the culture producing the joke. All members of a culture have this understanding” (49). Here, what racist humour requires is knowledge of racist scripts and cultural stereotypes, not necessarily belief in these things. For Howitt and Owusu-Bempah, this theoretical shift from belief to knowledge is important because it identifies the social rather than the individual as the key locus of joke production and transmission. With racist humour, “it is not simply a matter of some individuals having racist stereotypes” and others not (52). Yet Howitt and Owusu-Bempah’s shift from belief to

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<sup>57</sup> Here, I refer to Billig’s work in *Laughter and Ridicule*. He explicitly addresses the issue of racist humour at length in the two essays that I reference above.

knowledge is important (or at least interesting) for another reason. In “Comic Racism and Violence,” Billig notes how “sometimes when an insider tells a joke that repeats conventional stereotypes, the joke can be understood and enjoyed as mocking stereotyping and prejudice” (31-32).<sup>58</sup> Howitt and Owusu-Bempah reject all “ethnic” and “anti-racist” humour outright. They also never explicitly address what happens when minoritarian subjects appropriate or make use of racist, sexist, or classist material. With their emphasis on knowledge over belief, however, they in fact provide a framework for understanding why—at certain times and in certain contexts—Black people are able to experience anti-Black jokes not only as critiques of racist thinking but also as enjoyable or pleasurable as jokes.

In *The Logic of the Absurd*, Jerry Palmer provides a helpful counterexample to the racist jokes that Howitt and Owusu-Bempah and Billig emphasize in their work. As Palmer defines it, humour operates as a double articulation of plausible and implausible “propositions.” This doubleness is at once overt and covert, which explains why humour is always ambiguous. Yet Palmer also recognizes that different instances of humour are ambiguous to significantly different degrees. For Palmer, this twofold doubleness (plausible-implausible, covert-overt) has a variety of consequences. Importantly, it explains why and how humorous utterances go about producing a range of (contrary) subject positions. Palmer echoes Davies and Raskin in viewing some targets of “ethnic” humour as strictly conventional.<sup>59</sup> Unlike Davies and Raskin, he acknowledges that many ethnic jokes have the effect of causing harm by targeting minorities and reinforcing cultural and racial stereotypes (whether intentional or otherwise). The first joke that Palmer examines runs as follows: “What do you get if you cross an aborigine with a plumber?—

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<sup>58</sup> In “Gay and Lesbian Language,” Don Kulick makes much the same point regarding homophobic jokes.

<sup>59</sup> Unlike Davies and Raskin, Palmer nevertheless also says that listeners who find such jokes offensive are entirely in their rights (181).

‘A boomerang that says it will come back in the morning’” (182-83). As Palmer notes, the butt of the joke “is not aborigines, but plumbers.” Still, the joke’s effectivity relies not only on the classist stereotype of the lazy, unreliable labourer, but also on the racist “association of aborigines with the exotic and the primitive.” These stereotypes are the joke’s necessary preconditions. Yet clearly they are not of themselves amusing or humorous. As Palmer observes, “the implausibility which is responsible for the joke’s humour does not directly apply to either: it applies to the boomerang” (183). This “absurd” logic explains why some find the joke pleasurable and others displeasurable. It also explains why neither of these positions is entirely in the wrong.<sup>60</sup> The joke is serious—but it is also nonserious.

Palmer’s boomerang joke resembles Howitt and Owusu-Bempah’s and Billig’s racist jokes in the simplicity of its question-and-answer structure. Yet it not only eschews the explicit racist epithets that make the latter jokes entirely intolerable. It is also a joke whose inner logic allows it simultaneously to emphasize and evade its intent and content. For Palmer, the boomerang joke relies on injurious and problematic discourses and imagery, but it also possesses an ambivalence and complexity irreducible to overt expressions of racism and classism. In search of less ambiguous forms of offensive humour, Palmer next turns to a joke that he introduces as entirely racist in its in logic and aim. The joke uses no racial epithets and is worth citing in full:

A civil rights worker goes to Mississippi to investigate reports of racial assaults upon blacks in the area. One day he is taken by a sheriff to observe the investigation into the death of a black man found drowned. When they get to the river where he was found, it turns out the body is wound round with an enormous weight of steel chain. “There you are!” says the civil rights worker. “Try and deny that he was murdered and thrown in the

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<sup>60</sup> The joke is derogatory but in an indirect way. Derogation is not the necessary cause of amusement, as it is in the racist jokes in Billig and Howitt and Owusu-Bempah.

river!” “Damn fool!” says the sheriff. “Trying to swim the river with all those chains he’s stolen.” (183)

In Palmer’s reading, the joke’s meaning hinges on the sheriff’s explanation for the Black man’s death. This explanation is patently absurd and implausible for a variety of reasons. Indeed, the joke strongly suggests that not even the sheriff believes it. Yet there is a particular perspective from which the sheriff’s explanation is entirely plausible: that of the racist who believes in “the stereotypical associations of blacks and theft” (184). “Is it plausible to anyone else?” Palmer asks. “Or does finding it plausible necessarily implicate anyone who does so in racism?” At first, Palmer answers this question in the affirmative. The joke is clearly a racist insult, and “anyone who finds it funny is not totally immune, at the very least, to racial stereotypes.” Yet immediately Palmer begins to discern another perspective from which the sheriff’s explanation is plausible. At the same time, he shifts to the context of the joke’s reception to bolster his sense of the joke’s unequivocal racism. What makes the joke hateful are not only the formal features whereby it exploits racist stereotypes to travesty a Black man’s death by racial violence. The joke is racist because the teller of the joke is someone that Palmer knows to be racist.<sup>61</sup> This sudden shift to the “evidence” of intentionality is strange and problematic, not least because it bestows undue authority to the joking subject over the meaning of her or his own verbal performance.<sup>62</sup> Still, the value of this shift is that it leads Palmer to consider other tellers, audiences, contexts, and outcomes for the joke—a move that neither Billig

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<sup>61</sup> “But we should note another feature of this joke: it was told to me by someone I knew to be a racist, and therefore it was not difficult to interpret the joke as a racist insult” (184).

<sup>62</sup> The place and status of intentionality in humour are significant points of contention in humour studies. Attardo argues that humour requires intention in his chapter on “The Analysis of Puns.” English takes the opposite view, arguing that “[w]e cannot overcome this complication by invoking the intentions of the joker; a comic transaction is not controlled by the conscious and/or unconscious purposes of its speaking subject or author” (12).

nor Howitt and Owusu-Bempah take in their own discussions of racist humour. As Palmer cautiously muses, “it is possible, perhaps, that the same joke could be told by a black comedian, and used as an insult directed at white racism” (184). In short, the possibility exists that the joke is not exclusively racist but also has the capacity to operate as an instance of anti-racist humour. Undoubtedly, the shift from a “racist” to a “Black” joke teller is crucial to Palmer’s re-evaluation. For Palmer, however, the social meaning of any joke is not entirely reducible to the socio-subjective identity and position of its teller—at least not at the level of analysis. What is important to note is how the joke already contains within itself this capacity for reversal or multiple use. As a racist joke, the Black man is the target, and plausibility resides in potential listeners’ credulousness to racial tropes. As an anti-racist joke, the sheriff is the target, and plausibility lies in the socio-historical fact of Mississippi law enforcement complicity in racial injustice and violence.

For Palmer, humour is at once immanent to its utterance and a result of specific social negotiations. At first glance, this view appears to place him in an untenable position. At the level of formal analysis, humour is always both subversive and conservative. Yet it also has specific political valences—at least in particular instances. In Palmer’s view, semiotics provides descriptions of how humour functions, but only sociology is able to address the question of what particular jokes mean. Pragmatically, humour is irreducibly structural and contextual. Only in theory is it reducible to its individual components. Palmer’s sharp division of interpretive domains appears to offer possibilities for greater analytic clarity. Still, his discussions of individual jokes frequently neglect to maintain these divisions. His reading of the boomerang joke locates formal-discursive incongruity as determinate in the last instance, whereas his reading of the racist sheriff joke hinges on the issue of the teller’s ethos character. His

consideration of the racist sheriff's joke as anti-racist, in turn, relies on context and identity serving as final arbiters of the joke's meaning. His analysis of the political efficacy of humour evidences similar vacillations. What Palmer describes as "the logic of the absurd" has the necessary effect of situating humour in opposition to whichever discourse it happens to mobilize (198-99). In the final analysis, however, "this will to opposition is a very feeble one," in part because humour negates the commitment necessary to all forms of social and political action (213).<sup>63</sup> Like other theorists, Palmer tacitly identifies six key loci of humour analysis: form, content, and context; and teller, audience, and butt. Thetically, he identifies form and context as determinate in the final instance. Yet his analysis of particular humorous utterances and events often relies on any of the other four loci to buttress its claims. Part of the reason for this inconsistency is Palmer's failure to recognize that formal analysis is never strictly formal but also resides in the social. The same is true as regards Palmer's tendency to treat form as something that maps onto the social—rather than as already social. Yet these inconsistencies and failures in no way diminish the importance of Palmer's key insight that humour operates as a double movement between implausibility and plausibility. It is not so much that Palmer fails to manage his own distinction between semiotic form and the social (not to mention the semantic and the intersubjective). It is that humour explicitly works to render these very dynamics unmanageable. Like a shell game or a magician's legerdemain, humour's very purpose is to occlude and confound every possibility of selecting or focusing in on any determinate last instance.<sup>64</sup> In "The Ambiguities of Comic Impersonation," Michael Pickering and Sharon

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<sup>63</sup> Palmer ultimately concedes to two instances in which humour is almost always serious and political: in taboo contexts like funerals, religious services, or national ceremonies; "and when it is part of an organised sub- or counter-culture" (213-14).

<sup>64</sup> Perhaps a better figure here is the game of *Whac-a-Mole*.

Lockyer identify interpretive difficulty as central to humour (183). By logical extension, it is central to humour analysis as well.

### 2.3.3. Critical Humour Theory: The Politics of the Joke-Work and the Tendentious

#### Unconscious

We find ourselves, often, in the position of someone at a party who is expected to both get and appreciate his host's ethnic jokes.

—Aldon Lynn Nielsen, *Reading Race*

One could easily imagine transforming this misogynist joke into a feminist one.

—Todd McGowan, *Only a Joke Can Save Us*

In *Comic Transactions*, English echoes Palmer in insisting that humour has “no automatic hegemonic or oppositional trajectory, no global connection with practices either of domination or of subversion” (17). What most distinguishes English from Palmer—and literary approaches to humour in general—is his claim that humour is entirely social, with no (internal) formal determinants whatsoever. Yet English's approach to humour also finds little accord with most sociological models. For English, the problems with formalist humour theory have to do with its descriptive reductionism, conceptual idealization, and faulty universalism. Even when formalist theories recognize the pragmatics of humour, they rarely view intersubjective and social forces as determinate or constitutive.<sup>65</sup> Central to English's thesis is the claim that humour is mode of discursive exchange and thus inseparable from questions of community formation, disputation, and regulation. From this vantage, humour is irreducible to linguistic, psychological, and cybernetic models of incongruity resolution. According to English, such models posit humour not as a complex site of socio-discursive transaction, antagonism, and contestation, but

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<sup>65</sup> Like Palmer, they reduce these social features to “context.”

“mainly as a cognitive problem that an idealized human mind submits to universal problem-solving procedures” (2).

In English’s view, the disciplines of “anthropology, sociology, and psychoanalysis” offer much more pliable analytic tools for investigating humour. Nevertheless, these disciplines are not without their problems—including their own relative proclivities for “quasi-formalist frameworks” (3). English’s critique of both psychoanalytic and sociological approaches to humour has to do with their misapplication or disregard of what Freud calls the “joke-work.” Where psychoanalytic humour theory frequently errs is in its tendency to reduce the joke-work to “a mere translation of the joke-text’s internal structure or ‘technique.’” It overvalues Freud’s early chapter on “The Techniques of Jokes,” to the detriment of the more radical conception of the joke-work that emerges from Freud’s later, crucial discussion of “Jokes as a Social Process” (3 n8). As for sociology, the issue is that it too often neglects altogether to consider the social processes and logics particular to humour as a discursive transaction. As English writes, its primary effect is to reduce “the complex process of identification to a ‘positive’ or ‘negative’ subjective orientation that has already been settled before the joke takes place and to which the joke-work can contribute nothing” (3 n7).

For English, humour is not an utterance but an enunciation or event. In part, these terms index his desire to abolish form altogether as a constituent feature of the comic transaction. From a broader perspective, however, English’s text not so much negates form as bestows it with a more expansive sense as something at once structural, social, political, and historical. Indeed, central to English’s approach are his claims that comic incongruity indexes social contradiction and that the object of humour is less a particular identity, group, or institution than “what Freud calls a ‘nodal point,’ a site of condensation and overdetermination” (11-12). As English

emphasizes, “the clash between incompatible scripts or universes which a joke brings about is not the product of some abstract comic essence lying within or beneath the social situation, or of an external comic principle or comic vision imposed on the situation. It is but one version or phase of a contradiction that is itself partly constitutive of that situation” (8-9). Insisting that such Freudian tropes as condensation and displacement are less humour techniques than vectors of psychosocial pressure, English opens up humour theory on two important fronts. He invites critics to understand and extrapolate other humour mechanisms as both structural and social. He also allows for a more complex engagement with the question of political humour and of humour as politics.

In his chapter on “The Purpose of Jokes,” Freud writes that “with tendentious jokes we are not in a position to distinguish by our feeling what part of the pleasure arises from the sources of their technique and what part from their purpose. Thus, strictly speaking, we do not know what we are laughing at” (146). A page later, he alerts us to how tendentious jokes “bribe the listener with its yield of pleasure into taking sides . . . without very close investigation” (147). English follows Freud in asserting that laughers are never completely able to attribute the specific cause(s) of their laughter. English is entirely aware that “comic practice is always on some level or in some measure an assertion of group against group, an effect and an event of struggle, a form of symbolic violence” (9). Yet he also warns against the “temptation grossly to simplify the status of the comic object, the butt, or target of the joke” (10). As a social process, the humorous exchange operates by means of condensation, displacement, circumvention, and indirection. Socio-subjective hostility, anxiety, tension, contradiction, taboo—these are what it operates on and takes as its primary material (16-17). Like Palmer and Purdie, English insists that humour not so much reflects as constructs subject positions for speakers, audiences, and

butts.<sup>66</sup> Yet English takes this “bare essential” further still. For English, humour mobilizes but also renegotiates “the (relational) positions of the subjects and objects of exchange” (16-17). It intervenes in social relationships in a manner that always entails “certain shifts in subjective alignment or identification, momentary adjustments along the axes of hierarchy and solidarity” (16). As a site of overdetermination, humour is productive of a multiplicity of ambivalent and polyvocal effects. It is multi-accentual and finds its incitement in the (political) unconscious of its situation and participants (16-17). In simplest terms, the challenge of humour is that “we are always laughing at something too complex, too multiple and divided, to be given a proper name” (12).

English’s thesis broadly coincides with what social psychologists Dolf Zillmann and Jennings Bryant call the “misattribution theory of tendentious humor” (148). Following Freud, Zillmann and Bryant argue that since even the most hostile and obscene jokes contain both tendentious and non-tendentious elements, respondents are never able “to tell exactly which elements of a humorous stimulus condition evoke how much of his or her reaction of pleasure” (149). English’s work emphasizes the overdetermination of the comic object and extends it to the comic situation as a whole. In this regard, it expands the notion of humorous misattribution in important ways. For Freud, “every joke calls for a public of its own and laughing at the same jokes is evidence of far-reaching psychological conformity” (203-04). For English, “the group that laughs is as divided and unstable as the target of laughter” (12). English acknowledges the sociological view of humour as a mechanism for delineating social outsider and insider—laughing at versus laughing with. But he also insists that the unity of group laughter is ultimately

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<sup>66</sup> “[T]he bare essential” of “the effectivity of the comic . . . is the production of subject positions for the speaker and the audience . . . and the production of a position for the butt” (Palmer 175). Palmer elaborates these processes in his chapter on “Comic Identity,” which leads up to his chapter on “Politics and Comedy.”

specious and illusory. “Laughing at the same jokes” intensifies group perceptions of (cultural, ideological) sameness and difference. Yet it also “selectively obscures” other “lines of difference and antagonism . . . effecting false consensus” (14).<sup>67</sup> It is not simply that we do not know the object-cause of our laughter. When we laugh, “we don’t know who the ‘we’ is that is laughing, either” (12).

For English, humour is a site of social transaction, antagonism, and overdetermination. This view is also at the heart of English’s different understanding of the relation of humour to politics. Pace Freud, English holds that humour operates less on individual psyches than at the socio-subjective level of the political unconscious.<sup>68</sup> In his chapter on “Jokes, Dreams, and the Unconscious,” Freud characterizes humour as “the most social of all the mental functions that aim at a yield of pleasure” (238). As English elaborates, humour always operates “on more than one person at a time, fulfilling more than one set of needs and desires” (15). Unlike dreams, jokes restructure the “thought-material” particular and relative to multiple subject positions and “patterns of identification.” Yet the joke-work shows “a very far-reaching agreement with the processes of the ‘dream-work,’” as Freud expresses it (215). For English, this agreement is important because it invites humour theorists to understand textual politics more as an effect of “condensation, displacement, indirect representation, and so on” (Freud 138)—and less “in terms of a stable and altogether ‘serious’ partisanship” (English 16). English is far from “utopian” or even optimistic in insisting on the complexity, multivalence, and “multiaccentuality” of political humour (17). He in no way glosses over “the cultural dirty work, the work of domination and oppression, which is often the special province of comic practice.” He recognizes the need to

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<sup>67</sup> This is how Todd McGowan understands “conservative” humour, whose function is to suture over the socio-subjective “real” of antagonism (*Only a Joke* 12).

<sup>68</sup> English explicitly draws on Frederic Jameson’s book of the same name in his analysis.

arrive at definite political judgments when assessing different modes or instances of humour. Still, English entreats critics to take care at such moments of adjudication—and not simply because (exclusively) political readings of humour risk occluding as much as they disclose. For English, political thinking meets its limit where it “is always a matter of an oppressive system or a reified power and its outside or opposite, of a utopian freedom that would be achieved through subversion of authority, transgression of the law, inversion of the established order, and so forth” (18). English insists that “humor and laughter have no politics—that is to say, no automatic hegemonic or oppositional trajectory, no global connection with practices either of domination or of subversion” (17). Among other things, however, humour effectively operates as a type of social machine for dismantling or destabilizing binary categories. For many theorists and critics, this lack of stability is precisely what makes humour problematic as a vehicle of political thought. For English, humour’s tendency to register and replicate non-binary effects in the social is precisely its (potential) political and critical value. Indeed, he suggests that even Marxist, feminist, and anti-racist approaches to humour are able to benefit from remaining open to the scrambling of binary categories typical to the comic transaction:

Even when we decide to decide, to sum up and situate a comic transaction on this or that side of “the struggle,” we should keep one eye on those places where the joke simply fails to conform to an inside/outside, two-side topography of the social field. Instead of calling upon jokes always and simply to confirm the familiar logics of inside and outside, containment and transgression, hybridization across a border, and so on, we should allow them sometimes to suggest *a stranger politics* than such frameworks can accommodate.

(18; emphasis mine)<sup>69</sup>

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<sup>69</sup> Of course, a lot rides on this “we.”

Unfortunately, English never goes on to elaborate further what he means by “a stranger politics.” In its double signification, this notion nevertheless opens up two key avenues of inquiry. Against popular critical opinion, it configures humour as a making strange of the political—rather than as a travesty of politics as such. More remarkably, it also intimates the possibility of reading humour as a politics of the stranger (the other, the outsider, or the butt). Critics like Stott, Billig, Howitt, and Owusu-Bempah are not wrong to regard the political capacities of tendentious humour with suspicion. To consider otherwise is clearly to enter into slippery and potentially dangerous territory. The broadly sociological thesis that humour inevitably works to reproduce oppressive logics and stereotypes troubles the textual politics of poets like Andrews, Annharte, and Lusk. But it is also not entirely adequate to it. Indeed, this poetry problematizes the sociological thesis as much as vice versa. The value of English’s critical viewpoint is that it is among the only to appear to acknowledge this fact.

### 3. “I Hate Speech”: Humour on the Offensive in Bruce Andrews’ *I Don’t Have Any Paper So Shut Up (or, Social Romanticism)*

The subtitle “Social Romanticism”—you can treat it as a joke.

—Ben Friedlander, “Raiding the Vernacular”

The whole thing is at once oppressive and vaguely comic. But who would think of laughing?

—Jean Ferry, “The Urbane Tiger”

The 1980s mark two significant shifts in Bruce Andrews’ textual practice.<sup>1</sup> The first involves a “social turn” from the strictly formal-semiotic to the more broadly discursive-ideological dimensions of language.<sup>2</sup> The second involves an increasing reliance on humour—and offensive humour in particular.<sup>3</sup> Peter Quartermain identifies a particular brand of poetic and political “wit” as something that all Language writers share in common (“Getting Ready” 161). As Quartermain recognizes, however, there is a world of difference between the lexical polysemy of Andrews’ earlier work and the “overtly political, confrontational, and in some eyes thoroughly offensive work of the 80s” (177). In another essay, Quartermain responds to this aspect of Andrews’ later poetry in the following manner: “All these voices, with the uncertain

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<sup>1</sup> Andrews composes most of the material for *I Don’t Have Any Paper* between 1984 and 1986. Sun and Moon publishes it under this title in 1992. Texts similar in method, style, and content to *I Don’t Have Any Paper* include *Executive Summary* (1991), *Lip Service* (1992), *Tizzy Boost* (1993), and *Strictly Confidential* (1994). Like *I Don’t Have Any Paper*, most of these collect work from the 1980s. Two important precedents to *I Don’t Have Any Paper* are “I Guess Work the Time Up” and “Confidence Trick,” both of which appear in *Give Em Enough Rope* (1987).

<sup>2</sup> Andrews uses the phrase *social turn* to characterize his own poetic trajectory at this time: “In the late 1970s and into the 1980s, my own writing (and not alone among my peers) takes a more explicit ‘social turn’ . . . to aim a spotlight at the social facts of present-day (and often disturbingly omnipresent) discourse, both public and private” (*Paradise* 201). However, this is not to say that Andrews’ earlier work is apolitical, as Louis Cabri notes in *Social Address and the Modernist Word*: “The difference between [Andrews’] early and late work is not that the one is ‘aesthetic’ and the other is ‘social’ so much as that the later work reflexively seeks out given discursive registers of meaning, in order to refract them” (185).

<sup>3</sup> Andrews marks this turn to the social and its concomitant foregrounding of tendentious humour in his opening remarks to his poetics essay “Equals What?,” which I discuss at some length later in the chapter.

and shifting phrasal boundaries, the disjointed syntax. And the wit, the humour, the puns. These are all highly problematic: why do we laugh (if we do), and what at, exactly?" ("Paradise"). Quartermain is far from the only critic to highlight the humorous and offensive dimensions of Andrews' later writing. But he is among the few to highlight the extent and import of their co-implication. Except for a few brief but still helpful asides, however, Quartermain never really addresses or interrogates these aspects of Andrews' later writing. He formulates the question but only to leave it essentially unanswered.<sup>4</sup>

Humour in Andrews is offensive in both senses of the term: "of or relating to offense or attack; attacking, aggressive" and "giving, or liable to give offense; displeasing; annoying; insulting" (*OED*). In an early review article, Brian Kim Stefans describes *I Don't Have Any Paper* as "delirious, vicious, irresolute, aggravating and aggravated." Quartermain uses similar terms in his discussion of the poem "I Guess Work the Time Up," characterizing it as "overwhelming," "brutal," "harsh and indeed terrifying" ("Getting Ready" 177). In *Jokes and Their Relation to the Unconscious*, Freud argues that offensive (or "tendentious") humour always takes one of two forms: "It is either a *hostile* joke (serving the purpose of aggressiveness, satire, or defence) or an *obscene* joke (serving the purpose of exposure)" (140). For Freud, the purpose of both tendentious and non-tendentious (or "innocent") modes of humour is to evoke "pleasure in its hearers" (138). But only tendentious jokes "run the risk of meeting with people who do not want to listen to them" (132). Interestingly, we find an echo of this in Quartermain's own description of possible reader responses to the tendentiousness particular to *I Don't Have Any Paper*: "Some think it offensive, and refuse to read" ("Getting Ready" 163).

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<sup>4</sup> At the conclusion of "Getting Ready," Quartermain suggests that the politics of Andrews' writing requires that it "not make sense" (180). Of course, a lot rides on what precisely Quartermain means by "make" and "sense." Poet and Kootenay School of Writing alumna Donato Mancini takes up Quartermain's position in an unpublished essay, "These Are Not My Words': *Shut Up* in the Space of Reported Discourse."

With all this in mind, then, the question is clearly not only “why do we laugh (if we do), and what at, exactly?” It is also, why do we take offense (if we do), and for what reason(s)? As fellow Language poet Bob Perelman points out, “taste is one of the principle bulwarks against which [Andrews’] writing hurls itself” (*Marginalization* 101). Here Perelman has in mind lines like “Blondes have more enemas” (*I Don’t Have Any Paper* 171) or “why don’t I just squeeze some of my pimple juice into your herpes scar?” (151). For some critics, Andrews’ deliberate offensiveness recalls the willful provocations of Dada and Surrealism—or at least their underlying imperative, *épater la bourgeoisie*.<sup>5</sup> Juliana Spahr finds a more contemporary influence and point of reference: the “uncensored, indecorous, and raw” anti-aesthetic of “late 1970s and early 1980s punk” (*Everybody’s Autonomy* 65-66). In “I Am a Child,” Nils Ya goes so far as to characterize Andrews’ gross-out humour as an atavistic (re)channeling of both the pre-Oedipal infant and the angry adolescent.<sup>6</sup> As Perelman remarks, however, “grossness is just a subset of [Andrews’] larger desire for disruption of perceived systems of control” (101). Bourgeois norms of social, moral, and literary propriety are certainly among Andrews’ targets. But so are the various ideological and institutional apparatuses and strictures upon which these norms rely for their support.

Still, it is not only “bourgeois” readers and critics who find Andrews offensive and thus refuse to read (or critically engage with) his work.<sup>7</sup> *I Don’t Have Any Paper* is arguably

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<sup>5</sup> As a pre-revolutionary Futurist manifesto puts it, “A Slap in the Face of Public Taste.” In *Ugly Feelings*, Sianne Ngai links Andrews’ work to “the modernist avant-garde project of decoupling art from beauty” and as a type of negative aesthetics (348).

<sup>6</sup> Ya’s reading of Andrews’ writing as a type of “tantrum poetics” is perhaps not as unconvincing as it sounds once we remember Freud’s own attempts “to discover the essence of the comic in a preconscious link with the infantile” (*Jokes* 290). Spahr also writes, “Andrews’s works often look like successful attempts to channel all the language that might run through the head of an angry and confused seventeen-year-old boy” (64). Neither Ya nor Spahr are being evaluative or negative. In his seminal *The Theory of the Avant-Garde*, Renato Poggioli also raises the issue of infantilism.

<sup>7</sup> To my knowledge, D. S. Marriott is the only BIPOC writer to appear in the *Bruce Andrews* special issue of *Aerial*. Other racialized writers to engage Andrews’ work include Erica Hunt, Brian Kim Stefans, and Sianne Ngai.

Andrews' bestknown, most influential, and even popular work. To date, however, the only substantial critical treatment of it is Perelman's "Building a More Powerful Vocabulary."<sup>8</sup> Yet perhaps the (relative) critical silence surrounding *I Don't Have Any Paper* is not entirely surprising. Spahr briefly alludes to the frequency with which "racial and sexual slurs" (64) appear in Andrews' writing from this period. In an interview, the poet Colin Smith recalls a 1990 Vancouver poetry reading after which Andrews "got queried about trucking in misogyny" ("Versus" 109). Perelman addresses the issue more forcefully when he writes that many of Andrews' "jokes" simply "attack whatever cultural identity is immediately in front of them" (105): "pre-selfish, amphibious frogs are the / real native Americans / entire homo, reserve us from evil. I hated trim in 3 days. Foreskin reformation" (*I Don't Have Any Paper* 172); "Jews are also Palestinians. Cocklebuster pan- / demonium pills bankroll the bankrupt banquet = we have a / vocabulary to describe the heavens that they lack. Asphyxia- / tion by ballot box, even a deaf mute could do that" (220).<sup>9</sup> As Perelman suggests, the issue is not simply that Andrews' writing makes bourgeois, liberal, and academic readers squeamish. It is that it (re)deploys racial and sexual language in a manner that allows readers to construe or experience as racist and sexist: "homeowners awake to the sound of / clanging black dolls / documentary skin whips up, holds legs up so you admire / machines, homosexual headstands" (223); "quite a little suck-a-thon, humid copter—as soon as you / mention Haitians, we think of genetics. They're lesbians, they / don't salute the flag" (103); "I starved my female bodyguard until it / became a penis" (45).

In the spirit of lines such as these, then, I want to offer what is perhaps a provocative proposal—or at least a good (or bad) joke. In *In the American Tree*, Ron Silliman famously

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<sup>8</sup> Perelman's essay appears in his book *The Marginalization of Poetry*.

<sup>9</sup> By and large, I draw examples (here and elsewhere) from *I Don't Have Any Paper* at random, by opening the book anywhere and choosing what seem like relevant passages.

states that Robert Grenier's "I HATE SPEECH" (1971) inaugurates "a breach—and a new moment in American writing" (xv). For Silliman, Grenier's anti-phonocentrism not only evidences a growing dissatisfaction with the speech-based poetics of projective verse and the New American Poetry more generally. It also effectively announces the emergence of the poetic tendency that we know now as Language writing (so-called or otherwise). My proposal, however, is that we read Grenier's declaration as forming an intransitive rather than a transitive sentence, so that the latter two words function as a verb phrase rather than a predicate: not "I hate speech" but "I *hate-speech*." Minimally, I want to propose that we keep this reading firmly in mind when considering the modes of humour typical of Andrews' *I Don't Have Any Paper*. Here my intention is not to claim that Andrews himself is guilty of hate speech. It is rather to keep present the stakes involved in Andrews' decision to construct poetic texts around such highly volatile instances of racial and sexual language.<sup>10</sup> Too often, critical readings of Andrews minimize, ignore, or disavow the referential, semantic, or thematic dimensions of his writing. This is particularly true among critics sympathetic to Andrews' project, where the tendency is to deploy a broadly formalist approach or else simply to celebrate both work and poet as the ne plus ultra of avant-garde intransigence, non-recuperability, and transgression. In *Lip Service*, Andrews writes, "All truth is misreading, aren't my errors good enough" (222). Similarly I "misread" Grenier's declaration—though not to assert hate speech as the truth of Andrews' poetics. In her pioneering work on Surrealism and the Nouveau Roman, the feminist critic Susan Suleiman convincingly shows how even the most disjunctive and anti-expressivist of avant-garde

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<sup>10</sup> In "Sharpening the Gaze at White Backgrounds," Sonnet L'Abbé argues that writers who appropriate such language as poetic material risk "simply reiterating hate speech," unless they also take sufficient care to "build contexts of anti-oppression" in their texts (219). As practitioners of such a textual politics, L'Abbé singles out poets like Gary Thomas Morse (Kwakwaka'wakw), Shane Rhodes, Jordan Abel (Nisga'a), and M. NourbeSe Philip. Andrews' work fails to meet this criterion, but it deploys injurious speech in a much more complex manner than Vanessa Place's *Gone with the Wind* project, which is L'Abbé's primary object of critique.

texts carries with it a politics of the signified—not merely that of the signifier.<sup>11</sup> Like humour in general, Andrews’ poetry involves an at once reciprocal and asymmetrical legerdemain (or double movement) between the syntactic and the semantic. By punning on Grenier’s “I HATE SPEECH,” my intention in part is to keep the latter from entirely occluding the former.

Of course, the form-content relation is not the only vector at play in both humour and Andrews’ writing. Equally important are the broader cultural, historical, and pragmatic dimensions. Critics and Language poets alike often take care to situate developments within Language writing within their immediate socio-political contexts. Barrett Watten’s “The Turn to Language in the 1960s” and Ron Silliman’s *Under Albany* are only two of many texts that identify US imperialist aggression in Vietnam and its attendant political abuse of public language as key factors in the emergence of Language poetics. In “Mere Essay at Bruce Andrews’ ‘Social,’” Louis Cabri makes a similar move, noting how the “social turn in Andrews’ work occurs just when so-called Reaganomics makes its own ‘turn’ . . . into the hands of corporations and the religious right.” Understanding Andrews’ work from this period as a response of sorts to Reagan-era forms of neoconservative consolidation is certainly helpful. But it still fails to address the deeper issue of why Andrews’ social turn involves (or seems to require) a concomitant turn to a tendentious mode of humour that frequently takes identity categories as its object or target. Given this aspect of *I Don’t Have Any Paper*, I thus prefer to take my cue from Timothy Yu’s *Race and the Avant-Garde*, whose second chapter focuses on identity politics and poetics as they relate to Language writing. In Yu’s account, Language writing emerges less as a textual-cultural corollary to the social movements of the late 1960s than as a response to what he calls “the crisis of avant-garde universality” (33). Taking the work of Ron Silliman as his

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<sup>11</sup> See especially the opening chapters on Bréton, Robbe-Grillet, and Bataille in Suleiman’s *Subversive Intent*.

primary example, Yu's thesis is that Language poets attempt to manage or adapt to this crisis by "positing Language writing not simply as an aesthetic movement but as a social identity, in a process that might be dubbed the 'ethnicization' of the avant-garde" (17). In my view, Yu's reading of Silliman is not entirely transferrable to Andrews (not to mention other Language writers). Nevertheless, I find that Yu's particular articulation of avant-garde crisis offers the most germane and productive framework for addressing the issue of tendentious humour and identity critique in *I Don't Have Any Paper*.

As many humour theorists note, tendentious humour is not only inextricably social. It also frequently functions as a cultural-political strategy for consolidating the identities of particular (dominant) groups, often at the expense of (marginal) others. It is this latter perspective that helps clarify why some readers experience Andrews' text as humorous and others experience it as attacking cultural identities, trucking in misogyny—or even as hate speech. In *Comic Transactions*, however, James English argues that even while tendentious humour "intensifies certain lines of difference and antagonism, it selectively obscures other such lines, effecting false consensus, overlaying a scene of necessary and ongoing conflict with illusions of identity (community) and agreement (communication)" (14). Following Freud, English takes the position that humour invariably operates as a locus of social contradiction, condensation-displacement, and overdetermination (11-12). For Freud, the overdeterminacy of humour means that when we laugh, "we do not know what we are laughing at" (*Jokes* 146). English concurs but also extends Freud's insight by taking it to its logical conclusion, namely, "that we don't know who the 'we' is that is laughing, either" (12). As utterance or event, "humour seeks to shore up identifications and solidarities" (10). But its object or target is always potentially multiple—and the subjective orientation of its audience or third person is never given

in advance. As a result, humour is not simply an invitation (or injunction) to a particular mode of enjoyment but also a site of contestation, conflict, and negotiation.

In *I Don't Have Any Paper*, Andrews uses tendentious humour to violate linguistic and socio-cultural prohibitions, shibboleths, and norms, particularly those pertaining to identity. These violations are as intense as they are frequent. They also produce a host of often incompatible effects. From the perspective of Andrews' own poetics, the aggressiveness of *I Don't Have Any Paper* is legible as a vehicle for attacking and critiquing oppressive processes of identity formation, interpellation, and subjectivization. Within the context of the often fraught relation between avant-garde and "multicultural" poetics and politics, Andrews' tendentiousness emerges more clearly as a strategy for addressing the social, cultural, political, and aesthetic tensions and contradictions that Yu encapsulates with his notion of "the crisis of avant-garde universality."<sup>12</sup> From a Freudian perspective, however, tendentious humour is a mode of address that veils or displaces the origin, impulse, and impropriety of its content, while also allowing these to circulate and become socially visible. Drawing on Freud, English, and other humour

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<sup>12</sup> For recent iterations of this tension, see especially Cathy Park Hong, "Delusions of Whiteness in the Avant-Garde," as well as the various writings of the now defunct Mongrel Coalition Against Gringpo collective. Of course, any strict binary opposition between "avant-garde" and "identity" poetics is ultimately false and untenable, as the work of many radical BIPOC writers demonstrates. Here I'm thinking of Marie Annharte Baker, Amiri Baraka, Mei-Mei Berssenbrugge, Theresa Hak Kyung Cha, Erica Hunt, Larissa Lai, Nathaniel Mackey, Roy Miki, Haryette Mullen, M. NourbeSe Philip, Brian Kim Stefans, Jean Toomer, Lorenzo Thomas, and Fred Wah, among others. From a generation of poets predominantly writing in the years following the publication of Yu's *Race and the Avant-Garde*, I am also thinking of Jordan Abel, Julie Otok Bitek, Liz Howard, Anahita Jamali Rad, Dawn Lundy Martin, Cecily Nicholson, Craig Santos Perez, Joshua Whitehead, among others. As Mullen notes in her important short essay on "Poetry and Identity," however, "the assumption remains . . . that 'avant-garde' poetry is not 'black' and that 'black' poetry, however singular its 'voice,' is not 'formally innovative'" (30). For Mullen, this state of affairs maintains notwithstanding the rich histories and ongoing contemporary practices of "[f]ormally innovative minority poets" or "avant-garde poets of color" (28). These poets and poetics exist but their existence is unaccountable, in part because they strain "the seams of critical narratives necessary to make them (individually and collectively) comprehensible" (28). Critical distinctions between poetics of aesthetic innovation and those of subjective experience and voice are often not only illusory but also ideological, political, and racist. Yet the effects of such distinctions are nonetheless real. For discussions of some of these effects, see not only Mullen but also a more recent *Boston Review* forum on "Race and the Poetic Avant-Garde," which includes short essays from Dorothy Wang, David Marriott, Lyn Hejinian, Prageeta Sharma, David Lloyd, Mónica de la Torre, Erica Hunt, and John Yau. Trish Lowe's "On Being-Hated" is also relevant here.

theorists, then, my claim is that Andrews' turn to humour is legible as a response to avant-garde cultural and political crisis. But it is a response that at once exacerbates and effaces this crisis instead of resolving or even contesting it. In *I Don't Have Any Paper*, humour operates as critique, but it is also a form of avant-garde brinkmanship, perpetuation, and negativity without reserve.

Humour by definition involves an indeterminate double movement between contradictory, oppositional positions: "Regardless of the specifics of the joke in question, humour is *both* subversive and conservative, offensive and inoffensive, serious and ridiculous" (Palmer 182; my emphasis). It is in this capacity that humour recommends itself as a socio-subjective tactic for confronting double binds and circumventing obstacles to our desire. In Andrews, the obstacle is the minoritarian critique of *the* (white, male, hetero) avant-garde. The double bind is how to formulate a poetics of heterogeneity, particularity, and difference while simultaneously perpetuating avant-garde universality or avant-gardism as such. In the face of avant-garde crisis, humour offers Andrews a technique for (surreptitiously and overtly) reasserting the authority of avant-garde critique over identity politics and poetics.<sup>13</sup> It likewise allows Andrews an alibi for continuing the classical avant-garde strategy of mobilizing offensive content as a redoubling of formal transgression.

### 3.1. Perelman's Andrews: Corrosive Irony and the Attack-Phrase

The added mass you get with loaded terminology (the weight of their histories) . . . Now there's no pull-back shot from which to be ironic. No off-stage. The trash talk is all in close-up.

—P. Inman, "Early/Later: 2 Scenarios for/on Bruce Andrews"

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<sup>13</sup> Andrews' more specific terms for these two practices are *poetry as explanation* and *progressive lit*. In Andrews' usage, the latter term is clearly derogatory.

Who laughed? I did. Who laughed?

—Bruce Andrews, “Strictly Confidential”

Strictly speaking, the question of humour is all but absent from Bob Perelman’s “Building a More Powerful Vocabulary.” Still, Perelman’s reading of Andrews offers a useful point of departure for a variety of reasons. Chief among these is Perelman’s insistence that Andrews’ poetry “signals a major divide between some multicultural and experimental writing” (101). What motivates Perelman’s interrogation of Andrews is his desire to confront and challenge his textual politics. For Perelman, the problem with *I Don’t Have Any Paper* is not simply that its formal strategies are dangerously mimetic of the deterritorializing logics particular to (late) capitalism.<sup>14</sup> Nor is it simply that Andrews’ text refuses the imperatives of political and readerly connection, relation, solidarity, and alliance crucial to any viable contemporary anti-capitalist socio-cultural project. For Perelman, what most invalidates Andrews’ textual politics is the intensity with which it deploys “attack-phrases” to antagonize and dismiss all socio-subjective identities.<sup>15</sup> At best, Andrews’ text is guilty of invoking highly volatile cultural and geopolitical signifiers in an entirely too cavalier fashion.<sup>16</sup> At worst, it “trashes any autonomy of social parts based on race, class, gender, or sex” (105).

At times, Perelman mitigates the severity of his critique of Andrews’ “anti-culturalism.” He reminds the reader that *I Don’t Have Any Paper* is a text whose radical opposition to any type of linear continuity renders it difficult if not impossible “to treat any one sentence as the site of

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<sup>14</sup> Note the irony of Perelman unconsciously reproducing the terms of Fredric Jameson’s notorious reading of Perelman’s poem “China.” See Jameson, *Postmodernism* (28-31).

<sup>15</sup> Importantly, these also include dominant identities: whiteness, masculinity, heterosexuality.

<sup>16</sup> At one point, Perelman describes Andrews’ text as “playing with fire in a decentered, over-all fashion” (103). In “Reading Hurts,” Joel Bettridge supplements Perelman’s description, writing how “[t]he musically dense, quick-paced lines” of Andrews’ writing in the 1980s and 1990s work to “redouble the already difficult task of reading [its] textual violence.” Bettridge focuses predominantly on Andrews’ later work *Lip Service*, but many of his claims apply equally to *I Don’t Have Any Paper*.

Andrews' position" (102). He also speculates that the actual object of Andrews' aggression is not identity per se but identity as a stand-in for global capitalism.<sup>17</sup> Yet Perelman also goes out of his way to intensify the stakes involved in Andrews' anti-identitarian stance. To begin his essay, Perelman evokes "the 1993 bombing of the World Trade Center" as a figure for the scale and intensity of Andrews' textual violence (6-7). Later, he compares Andrews' poetry to the fascist and anti-Semitic wartime writings of Ferdinand Céline. In the final paragraph, Perelman insists, "I do not want to conclude simply by rejecting Andrews' project" (108)—and perhaps this is in fact the case. Everything in Perelman's essay seems to lead to the conclusion that Andrews' textual politics are not merely offensive and exclusionary, but that they are racist, sexist, and oppressive. In the last instance, however, Perelman pulls back from radicalizing his critique of Andrews to such an extent. His reading opens onto a more fraught confrontation with Andrews' textual politics. But this confrontation never really happens because Perelman incessantly defers it to the realm of aesthetics and the literary.

Early in the essay, Perelman appears to deny Andrews the possible "excuse" that "these are not my words"—that Andrews "is not expressing himself" (105).<sup>18</sup> A few pages later, however, Perelman appears to have second thoughts, at least when he claims that part of what differentiates Andrews from Céline is that Andrews finally "doesn't mean it" when he writes something like "*sink the boat people*" (107). Perelman's intention here is not to exonerate or defend Andrews from critique or rebuttal.<sup>19</sup> It is to suggest that Andrews' writing ultimately

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<sup>17</sup> "Global capital, the ultimate target, is unlocalizable and can never be hit. This means that Andrews attacks the proximate target, the autonomy of the self, all the more fiercely" (105).

<sup>18</sup> Andrews' compositional method famously involves him collecting fragments of "social language" as he encounters it in the streets and in his day-to-day life, writing these fragments down on small flash cards that he carries with him everywhere, and then (often much) later collating, (re)composing, and editing these into larger texts. Among many other places, see Andrews' discussion of this method in "North by Northwest Interview," collected in *Paradise and Method* (103-04).

<sup>19</sup> At the same time, Perelman's critique ironically does make such a reading available.

operates “under the aegis of Kantian disinterestedness, even though that leads to a liberal poetics of free play” (107). Of the possible insults to level at a poet of Andrews’ sensibility, “Kantian” and “liberal” are among the worst—as Perelman is well aware. Perelman buttresses this reading by means of two basic claims (each of which reinforces the other). The first is that Andrews the person is not the same as Andrews the “author-position.” The second is that *I Don’t Have Any Paper* is “a corrosively ironic text” (101) and that irony is Andrews’ “primary mode” (104). Perelman finds it hard to believe that Andrews’ poetry in fact condones violence against refugees, minorities, or women because such sentiments are antithetical to Andrews’ personal political convictions (106). Hence he has no choice but to read the violence of Andrews’ attack-phrases as primarily “verbal and their targets metaphorical” (97). To his credit, Perelman is well aware that claiming irony as Andrews’ master trope in no way negates the serious implications of his poetics and poetry. Registering his frustration, Perelman at one point asks whether there is any point to Andrews’ vicious one-liners “besides triggering a conflicted response” (106). Perelman ultimately answers this question by positing Andrews as “a writer whose actions do not take place in the present political landscape, a writer for whom the aesthetic sphere formed an autonomous space” (108). Rather than trying to make sense of Andrews’ politics qua politics, Perelman finds no option but to dismiss them as “either literary or improbable.”

At other points in his essay, Perelman variously reads Andrews’ “attack-phrases” as bomb blasts, performative rhetoric, catharsis—even “as a megaphone for the political unconscious” (106). He also briefly offers the reader another interpretive option, namely, “that one could call this humor” (99). Like many readers of Andrews, Perelman uses terms like irony and humour more or less indiscriminately. From most perspectives, this is not a serious critical lapse. The purpose of Perelman’s essay is to analyze and contest Andrews’ textual politics, not to

adjudicate between different varieties of “nonserious” (non-bona fide) utterances. Still, Perelman’s privileging of irony as an interpretive category is not without its problems. Contrariwise to humour, irony typically requires readers to commit to a type of binary reasoning or logic. In Perelman’s essay, this logic has its advantages in that it helps compel him to take a hard stand against the viability of Andrews’ textual politics. But it also has its disadvantages. At times, Perelman’s analysis seems to revolve around a single question: whether or not Andrews’ attack-phrases mean what they say (or appear to say). In itself, this question is not a problem (even though answering it in the negative is what leads Perelman to relegate Andrews’ writing to the realm of the aesthetic). The problem is how Perelman’s privileging of irony leads him to smuggle in an either-or logic largely antithetic to a text like *I Don’t Have Any Paper*.<sup>20</sup>

Pace Perelman, my claim is that (tendentious) humour, not irony, is in fact Andrews’ “primary mode.” Concomitantly, humour theory offers a more apt and productive framework in which to interrogate Andrews’ textual politics—and for a variety of reasons. Humour is in fact like irony in that it too relies on binary forms and oppositions. The logic of humour, though, is entirely different: not either-or but both-and (or *at once*). Humour is always already contradictory, paradoxical in its very structure: “both subversive and conservative, offensive and inoffensive, serious and ridiculous” (Palmer 182). In his reading of Andrews, Perelman’s tendency is to try to arbitrate binary pairings: sincere or ironic, casual or non-casual, meaningful or its inverse. He privileges one polarity by effectively cancelling out the other. From a humour theoretical perspective, the first question to ask of Andrews’ text is not whether a particular tendentious utterance means what it appears to mean, whether it subverts or reinforces particular socio-cultural norms, or whether its effectivity derives predominantly from its form or content.

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<sup>20</sup> Andrews’ text certainly includes irony but is significantly irreducible to it.

Humour by definition involves an indeterminate double movement between contradictory, oppositional positions. In analyzing contentious or polemic humour, the first task is not that of adjudication or resolution. It is to ask how this instance of humour deploys contradiction, to what end, and to what effect.

Perelman says that Andrews' attack-phrases express hostility towards cultural and social identities, and he is right. Humour theory supplements Perelman's reading by introducing the following questions. Who or what occupies the place of this identity? Is it something that precedes the "comic transaction" and if so, to what extent? Is the "butt" of any particular joke the referent of a particular signifier? Or is it the enthymematic, discursive, or ideological givens responsible for constructing the butt as a plausible object of mockery and ridicule? In Perelman's view, the "harshness" of "Andrews' attack on all identity . . . leaves only a narrow margin for readers" (108). As elsewhere, Perelman here suggests that readerly outcomes of Andrews' text often involve some form of anger, discomfort, or displeasure. Again, Perelman is not wrong in this suggestion. What it neglects, however, is the equally important question of pleasure. Is it foremost comic form or content that solicits our laughter (or unlaughter)?<sup>21</sup> If both, what is the relation between the two? Humour also enacts more than just an uneven distribution of pleasure-displeasure. It also produces distinct socio-subjective positions and relations for those who (willingly or unwillingly) participate in the comic transaction. Classically, this takes the form of a first person who entices a third person to laugh at a second person (or thing).<sup>22</sup> Critics typically describe tendentious humour as a laughing at, but what Freud and others make clear is that it also

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<sup>21</sup> Perelman seems to suggest that it's all in the content. He cites phrases that attack identities. But the phrases are often non-normative in a way that only increases their opacity of intention. How does Perelman know what they mean exactly?

<sup>22</sup> "Generally speaking, a tendentious joke calls for three people: in addition to the one who makes the joke, there must be a second who is taken as the object of the hostile or sexual aggressiveness, and a third in whom the jokes' aim of producing pleasure is fulfilled" (Freud, *Jokes* 143).

necessarily involves a laughing with.<sup>23</sup> As Freud explains it, “every joke calls for a public of its own and laughing at the same jokes is evidence of far-reaching psychological conformity” (203-04).

Echoing Freud’s point about psychic conformity, Perelman insists that “the subject position from which [Andrews’ poetry] is funny is itself specific” (104).<sup>24</sup> Yet there are empirical reasons for why neither of these claims is entirely true. Are white, hetero, settler, able-bodied men in fact the only readers able to take pleasure (consciously or unconsciously) from Andrews’ tendentious poetics? It seems plausible to suggest that readers who occupy other subject positions or publics are simply the exceptions that prove the rule. But then the problem is how to account for these experiences of readerly pleasure without subscribing to the notion of false consciousness (or some variant thereof). For the humour theorist James English, the way around this problem is to realize that it is in fact a false one. In truth, it is precisely the work of tendentious humour to produce third persons whose laughter runs contrary to their socio-subjective locations, investments, and affinities. On this point, English is worth quoting at length:

Humor makes us laugh not merely with our allies but with our enemies, with those whose psychological organization—whose orientation in regard to the social imaginary, the ideological repertoire—is radically irreconcilable with our own. Indeed, a very important feature of the work performed through comic exchange is that even while the transaction intensifies certain lines of difference and antagonism it selectively obscures other such

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<sup>23</sup> At multiple points throughout *Jokes and Their Relation to the Unconscious*, Freud insists that the first person of the comic exchange depends absolutely on the third person for their laughter. The third person galvanizes or catalyzes the laughter of the first person—perhaps even laughs for him.

<sup>24</sup> Perelman is discussing “On the Pumice Morons,” an OULIPO-inspired parody of Maya Angelou’s “On the Pulse of Morning” by Clark Coolidge and Larry Fagin. Mutatis mutandis, Perelman’s reading also speaks to Andrews.

lines, effecting false consensus, overlaying a scene of necessary and ongoing conflict with the illusions of identity (community) and agreement (communication). (14)

As subjects within a comic exchange, third persons are never unities. Whether as social groups or individuals, they are always sites of intersection, variance, and division. Perelman's essay suggests a view somewhat similar to Freud's: that laughter closes the tendentious circuit, effectively stabilizing the identities of the participants.<sup>25</sup> For English, however, "the group that laughs is as divided and unstable as the target of laughter" (12). Our laughter is never entirely ours or that of the group—but always also that of others.

Humour in Andrews provokes some readers to experience *I Don't Have Any Paper* as sexist, racist, repressive, and chauvinistic. By the same gesture, it compels others to read it as subverting the very discourses that work to undergird misogynistic, racializing, heteronormative, and other domineering ways of being and thinking. Perelman registers this ambivalence when he asks whether Andrews' "corrosively ironic" attack-phrases have any purpose beyond triggering conflicted responses. As readers of Andrews, what English and other humour theorists offer is recognition that producing valid forms of mutual inconsistency is exactly how tendentious humour operates. They also offer a method not for resolving instances of antagonistic humour but for analyzing how and to what end it functions. In general, this method is as follows: to identify potential objects (or butts); to determine their necessary interrelations; and to inquire what it means for the first person (Andrews) to represent these objects and interrelations in this particular form. It is in the final stages of analysis that the method then becomes more explicitly social and pragmatic. This involves discerning which exigencies particular instances of humour

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<sup>25</sup> Like many readers of tendentious humour, Perelman seems to think that the identities are stable and pre-exist ironic (or comic) transactions.

are responding to, and investigating how these work at once to navigate, circumvent, and obfuscate these exigencies.

### **3.2. Triangulating Offence: Andrews, Joke-Work, and the Constitution-Distribution of Humorous Subjects**

Taking offence is mainly a way to make the work *intelligible*.

—Donato Mancini, “These Are Not My Words”

It is difficult sometimes to tell whether a person is laughing or grimacing with hostility.

—Gregory Bateson, “The Position of Humor in Human Communication”

In *Comic Transactions*, James English identifies two problems with strictly sociological approaches to tendentious humour. The first problem is that these approaches tend to conceive humour as a relatively simple social mechanism through which stable, already given identities receive either negative or positive reinforcement. The second problem is that this view denies the mechanisms particular to humour any social effectivity. It divorces the “complex social process” that Freud calls the joke-work from the twin ambits of humorous activity—and critical analysis (English 3). In the context of humour theory, then, the problem with Perelman’s reading of Andrews is that it is too sociological in its orientation. It is not that Perelman is incorrect in his claim that Andrews’ “attack-phrases” target various cultural identities for the purpose of denying them agency, validity, and autonomy. It is that Perelman’s claim implicitly locates Andrews’ tendentious one-liners within the category of what sociologists describe as “outgroup humour”—that is, humour that functions as an exclusionary (rather than an inclusionary) social mechanism. Certainly, Andrews’ humour is exclusionary in its logic. But it is not exclusively so. Sociological approaches to Andrews are no doubt necessary. But they tend to reduce complexity and are insufficient in of themselves.

Perelman first uses the term “attack-phrase” in a section whose focus is on Andrews’ “literary violence” (105). After introducing the term, Perelman provides the following list of examples from *I Don’t Have Any Paper*: “Sharon Tate is not worth the math” (308); “Africans would just be Caucasians in heat” (223); “*sink* the boat people!” (102); “you know, kill the red man & you’ve got yourself a homeland, bro—it’s called the little homeland concept” (302); “Why don’t you just tie a mattress to your back?” (291). Perelman offers these examples in a manner that suggests that their meaning is more or less self-evident. Each references a cultural identity, which it then demeans, belittles, mocks, deprecates. My question is what happens when we read these lines more closely from a humour theoretical perspective? Or when we read them as tendentious rather than simply ironic? Who or what is in fact the object or “butt” of these lines? Are these lines offensive? To whom and in what way? Who or what is the speaker or locus of enunciation?

For Freud, part of the work of the tendentious joke is to constitute and organize a tripartite distribution of subject positions. As Freud insists, jokes are always social precisely because they depend on certain intersubjective relations for their realization (*Jokes* 238). As Freud narrates it, the “primal scene” of tendentious joking unfolds roughly as follows. Occupying the first person is the teller, who encounters some barrier or obstacle to his desire. Almost always, this obstacle takes the form of a sexual object or authority figure. As a means to bypass this obstacle, the first person then solicits some third person, whom he bribes with the promise of enjoyment.<sup>26</sup> This promise takes the form of a joke to the extent that it occurs in a situation where the superego disallows direct forms of expression.<sup>27</sup> The joke employs

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<sup>26</sup> I use masculine pronouns here in line with Freud’s view of the tendentious humorist as effectively heterosexual and male in libidinal orientation and social position.

<sup>27</sup> I use the term *superego* anachronistically here since it is not in fact part of Freud’s lexicon until *The Ego and the Id* (1923). I use it in both its psychical and social registers. Inhibited expression also takes the form of a joke

techniques of displacement and condensation to evade the (un)conscious defences of the listener. When successful, these same techniques also result in an “automatic” unveiling of the joke and dissolution of its form, surprising the third person with a free expenditure of pleasure.

Over the course of Freud’s reading, the psychosocial, affective, and intersubjective relations particular to tendentious jokes take on a number of characteristics. At their most fundamental, however, the relation between teller and butt is one of antagonism, whereas the relation between teller and listener is one of complicity. For Freud, it is axiomatic that tellers are unable to laugh at and thus find pleasure in their own jokes. As a surrogate, the role of the third person is then to laugh and enjoy in the first person’s stead. By laughing, the third person confirms the success of the joke. When successful, the joke marks the second person or butt as an object of public scorn and derision.<sup>28</sup> It proclaims and enacts the “triumph” of the first person over the second person.

For the joke to succeed, however, not just anyone is able to fulfill the role of listener or third person. There are certain qualifications and conditions he or she needs to meet, including a predisposition towards the teller and against the third person. Generically, the teller addresses a third person whose relation to the second person is either sympathetic, indifferent, or antipathetic. The problem with the first of these situations is that it leads the third person to take offense and experience displeasure or unlaughter rather than pleasure or laughter (or both).<sup>29</sup> It is

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because it is ultimately the joke-form—and not the teller—that performs the work of seducing the listener (which is not to say that possible prior identifications between teller and listener do not play an important role).

<sup>28</sup> In *Comedy*, Purdie astutely elaborates the tendency for jokes to represent butts or third persons as objects of degradation that are nevertheless agential and powerful (as threats to presuppositions held by tellers and laughers): “Laughing at someone involves our constructing them as discursively powerful, and then denying them that construction. From being potent speakers who can confirm or deny our subjectivity, they are changed to impotent figures constructed within the language exchanged by Teller and Audience” (64).

<sup>29</sup> The term *unlaughter* is a coinage of the sociologist and humour theorist Michael Billig, who uses it to “describe a display of not laughing when laughter might otherwise be expected, hoped for or demanded” (*Laughter* 192). In this sense, “unlaughter” describes a (visible, public) refusal of laughter rather than simply an instance of not laughing (191). In “Humor, Unlaughter, and Boundary Maintenance,” Moira Smith takes up Billig’s notion,

only through complicitous laughter that the first person is able to overcome (temporarily, indirectly) the obstacle to his desire.<sup>30</sup> Of necessity, jokes strive to convince third persons to help consummate a social transaction that they might otherwise find disagreeable. In part, this is why Freud describes humour as a “Janus-like, two-way-facing character . . . a double-dealing rascal who serves two masters at once” (208). For Freud, every joke-form is a mask or disguise behind which lies a serious intention or forbidden meaning. As propositions to third persons, jokes “really mean what they assert”—but “for reasons that are intentionally faulty” (Freud 152). The joke addresses the (social, political) unconscious as much as third persons. This accounts for its ability to “dupe” the listener “into taking sides with [the teller] without very close investigation” (147). It also explains the sense of unease or guilt that often succeeds the successful joke. By definition, third persons are only able derive pleasure from tendentious humour when they are incognizant of the object-cause of their laughter. The ideal joking situation is one in which the listener is already receptive to the enthymematic or ideological content particular to the joke. But the joke also has a manifold of formal, rhetorical, and affective techniques at its disposal whose purpose is precisely to render the listener as amenable as possible to what the joke has to say.

### **3.3. Humour in the First Position: Who, What, or Where Is the *I* in *I Don't Have Any Paper*?**

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exploring how certain forms of comedy deliberately provoke unlaughter—alongside laughter—as a means to emphasize social difference and exclusion (151). As Smith notes, “jokes frequently give rise to unlaughter . . . because they violate everyday expectations of politeness and ask victims to laugh at their own discomfiture” (153). Of course, the jokes that most deliberately include unlaughter as a desirable outcome are precisely those that Freud describes as tendentious.

<sup>30</sup> “The pleasure in the case of a tendentious joke arises from a purpose being satisfied whose satisfaction would otherwise not have taken place” (Freud 165).

To be attuned to the work of Andrews, for instance, requires that one occupy the subject position the work itself creates; paradoxically, one is included by the very act of shunning or exclusion performed by the writing.

—Sianne Ngai, “Raw Matter”

For Freud, every tendentious joke entails a triangulation of socio-subjective positions. In this context, then, the first question to ask of Andrews’ tendentious one-liners is who or what precisely occupies these positions. On the surface, the identity of the first person or subject of humour appears patent or obvious. As with the other positions, however, this is not entirely the case. In his discussion of *I Don’t Have Any Paper*, Bob Perelman takes pains to differentiate Bruce Andrews the person from Bruce Andrews the “author-function.” It is this doubling of writing subjects that underlies Perelman belief that Andrews’ attack-phrases are not in earnest—at least not in the final instance. For some critics, the political thrust of Andrews’ writing stems from its effective dismantling, dispersal, or outright negation of the conventional (lyric, expressive) writing subject. In this view, the first person singular *I* in Andrews is not a deictic signifier with an available referent (split or otherwise) but rather “a convention in the process of exploding” (Lease 394).<sup>31</sup> Pace Perelman, it is not so much that *I Don’t Have Any Paper* confronts the reader with an author-function that enacts cultural aggression but an author-person who means otherwise. It is that every locus of enunciation within Andrews’ text is radically heterogeneous, multiple, polyvocal, and indeterminate—to the point that it is not Andrews who speaks but rather something approximating the political unconscious.<sup>32</sup> According to Perelman,

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<sup>31</sup> Lease is critical of Andrews in this regard. Interestingly, his use of “exploding” appears unintentionally to echo Perelman’s.

<sup>32</sup> In “Raiding the Vernacular,” Benjamin Friedlander baldly states that “Bruce is America” (Brady et. al). In “Bruce Andrews’s Venus,” Barbara Cole cites the following line from *Lip Service* as evidence that Andrews’ “slightly misogynistic jabs” are not “merely the private fantasies of a lyric, penile ‘I’: “I am but the loudspeaker / of a

Andrews' poetics is voluntaristic in that it regards continuous transgression as a key characteristic of what Andrews elsewhere describes as the "doer position" (Perelman 99, 107-08). But the above reading figures Andrews less as an agent of transgression than as a raw textual conduit for the discursive auto-immunitary spasms of late-twentieth-century capital. The social materials speak Andrews rather than the other way around.

Andrews frequently describes his writing as editing. For Andrews, poetry is not expressive in the sense that it is neither a product of contemplation nor a (phenomenological) exploration of sense experience or subjectivity. What Andrews calls writing more accurately involves methods for assembling, organizing, or manipulating already existing language.<sup>33</sup>

"These are not my words," Andrews titles a 1990 poetics essay. The essay engages the work of Michael Davidson, but the title also appears to function as a de facto slogan for Andrews' poetic method.<sup>34</sup> In this light, is it at all feasible to read Andrews' text or attack-phrases as expressions

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symptom" (*Lip* 50). Nick Lawrence's responses to Cole's claim is worth quoting in full since it applies equally to readings that equate *I Don't Have Any Paper* with the political unconscious:

About that loudspeaker: the great cliché of Bruce Andrews Studies is that the writing's just an enhanced edit of the daily feed, amplifying the distortion and dissonance that continually assault us from the million-plus Clear Channel versions of global-cap's message of sameness . . . But Bruce has both political and philosophical commitments beyond that weak version of mimetic citation. What if the line about the loudspeaker is itself a symptom?" (qtd in Cole).

In this chapter's conclusion, I explore that possibility that if Andrews' text instantiates a political unconscious of some kind, it is that of Language writing as a postwar poetic avant-garde.

<sup>33</sup> Andrews articulates this aspect of his poetics in multiple places. The following is from an interview with Kootenay School of Writing poets Kevin Davies and Jeff Derksen:

Davies: What was the origin of your practice?

Andrews: You mean the literal, material method of assembling works from words written on little pieces of paper?

Davies: Yes. You don't sit down and write poems. Has that always been the case?

Andrews: No, but it's been the case for a long time, maybe the last ten years, where writing is editing, writing is a constructing of previously generated materials, similar to what some of my filmmaker friends do—go out and shoot short chunks of footage, go onto the flatbed, assemble films in the *editing* process. As opposed to writing out draft poems in notebooks. (*Paradise* 103)

Also of note here is Andrews' characteristic resistance to simile; his writing is not like editing; "writing is editing." This use of the copula is prominent in his poetry as well and perhaps offers part of an explanation for the equal signs in L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E writing. I intend to explore this possibility in a future essay.

<sup>34</sup> "These are not my words" operates as a kind of "meme" circulating within and around Language writing, a shibboleth like the qualifier "so-called" and "Instead of ant wort I saw brat guts"—the last of which appears as a

of his own beliefs? If so, to what extent is this possible? How are we to distinguish Andrews' language from the language of others? How are we to discriminate moments (or fragments) of serious from nonserious intent?

In "Raiding the Vernacular," a roundtable of critics alternately describes Andrews' writing as a theatricalization, an orchestration, and an acting out of "different idiolects, clashing snippets of different kinds of language" (Brady et al.). Yet these critics also recognize the apparent paradox that it is always possible—often easy in fact—to identify Andrews' writing as coming from Andrews. Even when the words are not his, the voice recognizably is. Andrews radically and emphatically abjures the prerogatives of the expressive, creative, and lyric writing subject. But this is never enough to prevent the figure or aura of the author from reappearing in different guise.<sup>35</sup> Some of the roundtable critics identify Andrews' "arrogance," his "psychic and emotional energy," his "sardonic" and "no-holds-barred" humour as key elements of his poetic signature or singularity. Others suggest that even "deeper" subjective and authorial markers inhere within both his materials and his compositional method(s).<sup>36</sup> The question of the writing subject and its social identity or location is not at all new to critics and readers of Andrews and Language writing more generally. Indeed, it is quite central to Timothy Yu's thesis that Language writing develops primarily as a reaction to the radical minoritarian poetics and politics

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line in multiple Language texts, including Bob Perelman's *7 Days*, Steven Benson's *As Is*, and Kit Robinson's *Down and Back*. Ron Silliman also uses the line as the epigraph to the Language anthology *In an American Tree*. Perelman offers an anecdote of the line's origin in *The Marginalization of Poetry* (32-33).

<sup>35</sup> Of Andrews' writing, Nick Lawrence observes, "There is this slide back and forth: between a hatred of ego, of subjectivity—sort of the major theoretical aversion of Language writing in the '80s—and then a return to it, through the back door so to speak, simply in confronting the principle of selection as method" (Brady et al.).

<sup>36</sup> For Lawrence, these markers primarily reside in the specificity of Andrews' "principle of selection as method"—but also "[i]n address, in tone, all that stuff; it all comes back to the problem of individual structuring and its motivation, its vantage point in society." As part of the same roundtable talk, William Howe parses the logic of Andrews' poetic argument in the following terms: "that there may be an ego here, but it's not mine. That what's coming out is some other kind of language than the self's. That the ego you're reading and the ego I have are two different things. So that in this welter of language trash, the only ego I'm using is the sorting process, not the culling process."

of the late 1960s and 1970s.<sup>37</sup> My question here, then, has to do with what happens when we approach the identity and status of the first person in Andrews from the vantage of humour theory.

Perelman adumbrates Yu's thesis when he says that Andrews' textual politics "signals a major divide between some multicultural and experimental writing" (101). But he vitiates it when he introduces the possibility of distinguishing between saying and meaning in Andrews' text. Following the logic of the tendentious joke, my claim is that it is far more accurate to say that Andrews (or his text) at once means what it says and does not mean it. In the first instance, humour is a non-bona fide or nonserious mode of communication. By definition, it operates in violation of the norms and protocols that govern everyday language use and conventional sign systems.<sup>38</sup> When using humour, then, speakers not only signal their intentions as non-bona fide or *non-casual*. They effectively declare a lack of commitment to the meaning and truth value of their statements.<sup>39</sup> Immanent to every humorous act or utterance is a logic of retraction and disavowal. Linguistics and philosophers of language make a similar point when they say that humour not so much uses as mentions the discursive content particular to its articulation. In this account, the violations particular to the joke are not actual violations but enactments thereof (Attardo 277). Unlike serious or bona fide discourse, humour always implicitly takes place within inverted commas or scare quotes.<sup>40</sup>

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<sup>37</sup> In some passages, Yu suggests that this crisis is already immanent to the avant-garde—that it simply becomes more central, evident, and difficult to ignore at the moment of Language writing's emergence. Recent essays on race and the avant-garde clearly back up such a claim. See footnote 13 above.

<sup>38</sup> For definitions and discussions of humour as a "non-bona fide" mode of communication, see Salvatore Attardo, *Linguistic Theories of Humor*.

<sup>39</sup> "It is important to note that all jokes belong to the NBF communication mode without exception . . . The most important consequence of this fact is that speakers are not committed to the truth of what they say in the NBF mode" (Attardo 206).

<sup>40</sup> Of course, part of the problem with such an understanding of humour is that it effectively underwrites the idea that people are "incorrect" when they find particular instances of humour offensive or degrading rather than

At the same time, however, humour is always serious and jokers always mean what they say. As Freud and others recognize, even the most banal joke is never simply reducible to an “illegitimate” form of communication.<sup>41</sup> In *Linguist Theories of Humor*, Salvatore Attardo insists “that all jokes belong to the non-bona fide communication mode without exception” (206). But he also acknowledges that “humorous discourse is not a simple negation of serious communication, but presents a cooperative principle peculiar to itself” (205). In Freud’s view, tendentious jokes “really mean what they assert” but “for reasons that are intentionally faulty” (152). By definition, the tendentious joke is an encoder, carrier, and translator of a taboo message. The joke-work veils or displaces the impropriety of its content. Obversely, it also allows this content to circulate and become socially visible (or at least affectively palpable).

Humour is neither nonserious nor serious but at once nonserious-serious. It violates social conventions and norms while marking these violations as ludic and paratelic. Offensive joking merely “mentions”—rather than “uses”—injurious speech and persecutory language. Yet every mention is necessarily a use in its own right. Near the beginning of his essay, Perelman asks, “Is the political agency of Andrews’ poetry compatible with any assertion of identity” (99)? Who or what occupies the position of the first-person singular in poems like “I Regret Zoology,” “I Can’t Watch the Freedom,” or “I’m Too Busy to Compromise”? Is it at all reasonable or even possible to try to identify the *I* in *I Don’t Have Any Paper*? Clearly, humour theory on its own is unable to provide a fully sufficient answer to any of these questions. In Andrews, the formal identity of the first person is that of a subject whose enunciations occupy a position of both meaning and not meaning. At this juncture, what humour theory has to offer is predominantly a structural

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amusing or funny. Moira Smith discusses the “weaponization” of “the sense of humour” in “Humor, Unlaughter, and Boundary Maintenance.”

<sup>41</sup> As Freud writes, “often a jest betrays something serious,” especially when it has “something forbidden to say” (152).

description. But it is a description that is crucial to an understanding of the social, aesthetic, and affective strategies at play in Andrews' text.

### **3.4. Andrews and “You”: Subjectivization or (Mis)interpellation versus the Comic**

#### **Object(ion)**

The humor and the offense are polar portions of the same sentence and the reader is helpless; two diametric emotional responses are demanded simultaneously. Again, the reader is exposed to violence because of his associations.

—Eric Stroshane, “Smashing the Control Machine”

Bad joke, center-of-the-earth—you're handling it like a urine sample.

—Bruce Andrews, “I Can't Watch the Freedom”

Among the more crucial questions to ask of Andrews' tendentious one-liners is who or what occupies the position of the butt. On the surface, the identity of the object of humour often appears patent or obvious. But in fact it is always a site of interpretive strife and quandary (albeit to differing degrees). As humour theory insists, the logic of tendentious jokes is always such that the object of humour indexes two (and sometimes more) socio-discursive identities or locations. At a minimum, these include (1) the specific identity that the joke nominates qua butt and 2) the discourse(s) whose purpose is to construct this identity as a “plausible” object of derision or ridicule. According to Jerry Palmer, “the discourses evoked in order to provide the butt of a joke with attributes needed to make it ridiculous are logically distinct from the identity of butt” (178). Palmer's formulation is inadequate in that it implies that identity is in some way anterior or adjacent to these discourses. Regardless, this insistence on a “logical” distinction between the object of humour and its discursive construction is a crucial one. Otherwise, the only option is to

concede that the second person is in fact a plausible object of ridicule—in that it actually possesses the attributes that the tendentious joke ascribes to it.<sup>42</sup>

In *The Logic of the Absurd*, Jerry Palmer offers a conceptualization of humour as a double movement between the implausible and the plausible. For Palmer, humour comprises two essential moments. The first is the moment of shock, surprise, or *peripeteia* (43). In the classic joke form, this takes the form of the incongruity or disjunction between the set-up and the punchline. As Palmer describes it, the second moment of humour comprises “a pair of syllogisms, leading to contradictory conclusions.” The first conclusion is that the joke content is implausible. The second conclusion is that the joke content “nonetheless has a certain measure of plausibility, but that this is less than the implausibility.”<sup>43</sup> In many ways, what Palmer describes as the logic of the absurd resembles classic incongruity theories of humour—although with a crucial difference. For incongruity theorists, humour operates by means of discrepancies that it subsequently resolves. The joke is incongruous and then congruous (albeit in a novel and surprising way).<sup>44</sup> In Palmer’s formulation, however, humour never quite reaches any stable state of resolution. The implausible element never becomes plausible—but it is never entirely implausible either. Indeed, humour that is too implausible is not humorous but nonsensical.

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<sup>42</sup> In short, the only other “option” is (implicitly) to concede to the “truth” or givenness of what are in many cases hateful stereotypes. Key here, then, is recognition how the joke-work “constructs” its targets as always already self-identical with particular (demeaning) social characteristics.

<sup>43</sup> Palmer’s is an incongruity theory to the degree that implausibility equals incongruity and plausibility equals congruity. Importantly, Palmer’s theory depends on a minimal degree of irresolution between the two, in that implausibility and plausibility are necessarily operative at the same time. They remain co-present and do not resolve into a new, seamless isotopy (as they do in conventional incongruity theories of humour). Characteristically, Freud vacillates on this issue, as Jerry Flieger elaborates in *The Purloined Punch Line*, especially pp. 59-60.

<sup>44</sup> For a discussion of the isotopy-disjunction model of humour as the most prominent incongruity theory today, see Attardo, *Linguistic Theories* (60-107).

Humour that is too plausible shades into a range of other cultural or discursive phenomena—including figurative language but also hate speech.<sup>45</sup>

In his chapter on “Politics and Comedy,” Palmer effectively identifies excessive plausibility as the key formal determinant of injurious humour. In the process, he also provides a formal method for distinguishing whether a particular tendentious joke is, say, merely offensive or in fact racist—or even anti-racist. In Palmer’s view, tendentious humour works by presenting a person or thing under the aspect of the absurd. The process of transforming the second person into the butt comprises three components. 1) There is the second person. 2) There are the (ridiculous, derogatory, implausible) qualities that the joke-work overtly attributes to the second person. 3) There are the enthymemes that the joke-work covertly mobilizes in order to render its implausible depiction of the butt at least somewhat plausible. From this understanding of tendentious humour, Palmer then derives the two conditions under which a joke is in fact a racist or sexist joke. The first condition is that the joke contains sexist-racist stereotypes or presuppositions as part of its enthymematic content. The second condition is that the effectivity of the joke depends on listeners finding this content more plausible than implausible.<sup>46</sup>

### 3.5. Attack-Phrases Plausible and Implausible: Humour, Race, Gender

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<sup>45</sup> Similarly, “it is the balance between plausibility and implausibility that makes the *peripeteia* into comic surprise, and not some other form of surprise, horrific surprise, for instance” (Palmer 44). Palmer discusses the relation between humour and figurative language in his chapter on “The Comic and the Metaphoric.” He discusses humour, racism, and sexism in “Politics and Comedy.”

<sup>46</sup> By and large, this calculation of degrees of plausibility-implausibility happens at the level of the unconscious. Finding jokes funny is not a rational, deliberative process. By definition, enthymemes (or ideologemes) are unknown—at least when they are successful. Palmer’s formulation of this state of affairs is as follows:

The most effective attacks are likely to be those in which the insulting attribute of the butt is assumed as a precondition of the joke, for here, typically, the insulting attribute seems entirely plausibly attached to the butt. Where the insulting attribute is attached to the butt in the mode of implausibility . . . it is very easy to mentally separate the attribute and the butt, and therefore the attack is so much the less effective.” (184)

Hence a good question to ask of any joke is whether it strives to minimize or to foreground the distance between the second person and its representation qua absurd.

It seems evident, for example, that to say *Lip Service* takes a “pro-life” position on abortion because of an ironic line like “fetus using your body without your consent” is to read poorly; it is to refuse responsibility to the poem. As readers we are clearly accountable to what we are reading—we cannot ignore the terms a work sets up for us to explore

—Joel Bettridge, *Reading as Belief*

What is the terminus in terms of extremity?

—John Keene, “On Vanessa Place, *Gone with the Wind*, and the Limit Point of Certain Conceptual Aesthetics”

Palmer’s theory of humour confirms and corresponds with certain of Perelman’s claims concerning Andrews’ “attack-phrases.” According to Perelman, phrases like “Sharon Tate is not worth the math” demonstrate “a continual intent to shock” (105). He also argues that “such phrases attack whatever cultural identity is in front of them.” As with many instances of tendentious humour, the element of implausibility in the line about Sharon Tate relates directly to the element of *peripeteia*. Certainly, the phrase shocks with its callous or cavalier tone and use of Tate’s image. But it also shocks and surprises by means of the formal (joke) technique of substitution. It concludes with “the math” where the rest of the sentence sets expectations for a more idiomatic predicate or expression. As a whole, then, the phrase is implausible because mathematics is not a conventional signifier for value or worth. What renders the line humorous rather than strictly nonsensical—at least for readers for whom such a line is not immediately and obviously offensive?

Common sense has it that math is a task that many people find difficult or tedious (or both). To say something is not worth the math is thus to suggest that something is not worth the

effort. Who is Sharon Tate as someone who is not worth the effort, tedium, or difficulty? For many, Tate's name is evocative of lurid and sensationalist celebrity murder. In this regard, what bestows the line with plausibility is the broader context of a misogynist and violent mass media culture. This grain of plausibility opens up a range of possible literal interpretations. What underlies these interpretations is the broader notion that attending to violence against women is not worth the trouble or effort.<sup>47</sup> From this perspective, the line or "joke" thus seems to confirm the claims of some readers that Andrews' text ultimately reinscribes dominant logics of sex and gender.<sup>48</sup>

What about the possibility of reading this line instead as somehow challenging or laying bare sexist and misogynistic assumptions? For theorists like Palmer and English, the semiotic or social logic of humour is such that contrary readings or experiences of tendentious humour are always available. As is almost always the case, Andrews makes little effort to provide additional textual information or cues as regards authorial intention or political valence. Indeed, his poetry and humour most often strive to maximize and not resolve any readerly concerns or anxieties around these issues.<sup>49</sup> At best, then, any anti-sexism immanent to the Tate line appears to remain

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<sup>47</sup> Wealth, whiteness, and sexuality are also other available markers here.

<sup>48</sup> In *Leaving Lines of Gender*, Ann Vickery quotes Daphne Marlatt's response to Andrews' reading at the KSW New Poetics Colloquium (1985): "He was supposedly writing against the kind of corrupted language that obtains in advertising. But he was using all . . . that commercialized sexual imagery" (132). In "Versus the Atomizations of Power," KSW poet Colin Smith names similar responses to Andrews' late 1980s work among Vancouver and New York audiences (109). He offers his own feelings about these issues in the same passage:

Bruce is both nice and thorny, and his writing is often disgusting and rebarbative, so of course he managed to cause some polarities of delight and alarm. He took some heat for his poetry reading, a lot of which was some of the nastier parts of *Shut Up*, along with stuff from the Mars and Saturn sections of *Lip Service* . . . I could see the need to have these arguments, but I tended not to agree with the outcomes. My feeling was that Bruce was using misogynist material as a means to attacking misogyny itself. Which is nevertheless a risky proposition, yes? I always thought he was going after the debutante sectors, loosely speaking. The rich and the privileged and the taste-makers.

<sup>49</sup> This deliberate disregard for the "ethics" of explicit authorial or contextual framing is what undergirds Joel Bettridge's assertion that Andrews' writing is essentially masochistic. Part of what is of interest in such an assertion is how it pushes back against the now conventional claim that Language writing works to promote or constitute the "active reader."

effectively virtual. Another question to ask is which persons or subjectivities might regard Tate (or women like her) as “not worth the math”? It seems highly unlikely that the line is literally representative of Andrews’ personal views. Even Perelman takes care to stress that “the tensions in *I Don’t Have Any Paper* are not simply the result of a personal gripe” (103).

In this light, perhaps it is not entirely implausible to say that Andrews’ “attack-phrase” takes not Tate as its target, but rather the sexist and violent cultural logics that work to construct Tate as a woman whose death is more worthy as a spectacular object of consumption than of our empathy or outrage. Regardless, not even a “positive” (and generous) reading like this mitigates claims that the joke is ultimately in bad taste, thoughtless, cruel, or ineffective. Certainly, the logic of humour entails that tendentious jokes always have two or more (antithetical or irreconcilable) meanings. But readers are always entirely within their rights to experience particular jokes as offensive, abusive, or hateful. As Palmer makes clear, the general effectivity of jokes is formal and semiotic. But the effectiveness of particular jokes is social and pragmatic.<sup>50</sup>

In addition to the Sharon Tate line, Perelman isolates four examples of “attack-phrases” from *I Don’t Have Any Paper*. Of these, two are more or less legible as citations from other cultural sources.<sup>51</sup> A third is more complex than the Tate phrase—though similar in that its effectivity ultimately also depends on the plausibility of (racial) stereotypes.<sup>52</sup> Perelman’s fourth

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<sup>50</sup> For Palmer, humour has a fundamental semiotic identity because to say otherwise is to say what makes us laugh is totally random. I agree with Palmer to the extent that inattention to form (linguistic or otherwise) evacuates the effectivity particular to the joke-work. I disagree to the extent that Palmer’s distinctions minimize the joke-work’s status as a locus of social forces. In this regard, Palmer’s ideas benefit from supplementation from English.

<sup>51</sup> “*sink the boat people!*” (102); ‘*why don’t you just tie a mattress to your back?*’ (291)” (Perelman 105). The first paraphrases “*Bomb the Boats, Feed the Fish*” (1970), an ironic anti-racist song by the punk band Forgotten Rebels. The second is a direct citation from the cult film *The Warriors* (1979). Perelman catches neither of these references.

<sup>52</sup> “*Africans would just be Caucasians in heat*” (223). As public speech, such a line is paradoxically singular. In *I Don’t Have Any Paper*, its motific aspect is what connects to other seemingly at once demotic and highly idiosyncratic expressions. Among other formal aspects, it echoes other “attack-phrases” via its anaphoric

example reads as follows: “you know, kill the red man & you’ve got yourself a homeland, bro—it’s called the little homeland concept” (302). From the purview of humour theory, the significance of this line is that it calls into question Perelman’s claim that “such phrases simply attack whatever is in front of them.” Like the others, this attack-phrase mobilizes injurious language, stereotypes, and enthymemes. But not only is it much more difficult to discern the identity of the butt in this example than it is in the others. It is also plausible to read the line as effectively anti-racist in its sentiment (at least to the extent that the logic of tendentious humour allows).<sup>53</sup>

As a joke, this line is essentially an instance of what theorists call register humour. Its humorousness is primarily a product of the incongruity or disjunction between what is said and how it is said. The term *homeland concept* derives from the academic discipline of social geography. But the tone and diction evoke the sociolect of surfer, jock, or frat house culture.<sup>54</sup> What renders the line implausible is precisely this disparity between speech registers and communities. As always, however, the joke also contains an element of plausibility. In this particular line, the plausibility resides in the characterization of “bro” culture as a space in which flippant, ignorant, and racist sentiments of this variety are more or less free to circulate. It

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repetition of the significantly gendered, sexualized, and animalized colloquialism “in heat”: “peter pan in heat” (25), “zionist / centipede safe dust in heat” (36), “doctrine in heat” (130), “Looks like a firetruck in / *heat*” (133), “ex-nun’s vagina sewn up to be a dwarf in heat” (210), “Snakes in heat” (250). Though perhaps not immediately apparent, broadly grammatical repetitions of all sorts help structure the entirety of *I Don’t Have Any Paper*. The socio-semantics of these formal mechanisms is another issue, however. As Perelman writes in a slightly different but apposite context, “[t]o any identifying reader these substitutions might feel like insulting jokes. But if one tried to ascribe a particular location to the source of the insult, it wouldn’t be easy” (103). At the same time, “the subject position from which [a text like Andrews’] is funny is itself specific: it is one where all resources of language are present and equally available; the writer must be able to take possession of all the words in the dictionary without any moments of alienation” (104). But see my critique of Perelman above.

<sup>53</sup> Like Andrews’ repetition of the sentence ending “in heat,” variations on this line also echo and recombine through the text. “There was all this land & they didn’t / need all of it, so we killed them” (176) is one such example, among many others. Such examples speak to the problem with giving too much weight to single lines in a text as dense as *I Don’t Have Any Paper*.

<sup>54</sup> “Bro” is the clearest indication of disparate speech communities. But “little” is also equally ridiculous.

matters not whether this characterization is true or not. What matters is that listeners find it true enough for the joke to succeed in its goal of subjecting the butt to public ridicule.<sup>55</sup> No doubt Perelman experiences this line as an “attack-phrase” because he experiences the “red man” as the cultural identity under attack. But the logic of the absurd demonstrates that the line is only plausible as tendentious humour with the “you” or “bro” as object of derision. The line remains offensive for its citation and thus recirculation of racist speech.<sup>56</sup> This simple recirculation of “taboo” language is also likely sufficient for some (most likely racist) listeners to find amusement or humorous pleasure in it.<sup>57</sup> It is certainly sufficient for some readers to reject it, which is entirely within their right and not at all “incorrect.” But the internal logic of the line is such that it makes most sense as a parodic attack on racist (neo)colonial attitudes and the voices that stupidly perpetuate them.<sup>58</sup> It is an example of that subset of tendentious humour that Freud more specifically designates as critical humour.

### **3.6. Analysis Tolerable and Intolerable: Close Reading Andrews’ “Society Starts Walking Again”**

We are confronted here by too much and not enough information.

—Paul Stephens, “Paradise and Informatics”

Restlessly pre-empted by shock-techniques, so that completion involves a gymnastic complicity between writer and reader.

—William Fuller, “The Hunting of the Foxes”

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<sup>55</sup> Stereotypically or otherwise, the language games particular to surfers, jocks, and frat boys are not responsive to earnest discussions of such freighted historical, political, and cultural subject matter as Indigenous dispossession and genocide.

<sup>56</sup> This is especially the case since the pejorative terms are unmarked qua pejorative (at least explicitly).

<sup>57</sup> I say “most likely” because—as Freud points out—forbidden or repressed language or sentiment almost always forms some component of the inappropriate or even hateful joke.

<sup>58</sup> Here I mean stupid literally. The line represents the speaker as beyond stupid. The voice could be ironic citation or ventriloquism. Either way the outcome is the same.

Palmer's theory of humour posits that tendentious jokes operate by lending a degree of validity to two (or more) incompatible propositions. To varying extents, the target of any humorous attack is at once the joke's butt and the joke's enthymematic content. Whereas the "Sharon Tate" line registers most forcefully as a sexist joke, the "homeland concept" line makes more sense as a travesty of racist-colonialist speech and thinking. Yet these lines are also plausible as anti-sexist and offensive to Indigenous peoples, respectively.

This double movement between implausibility-plausibility or butt-enthymeme is crucial to Andrews' poetics in *I Don't Have Any Paper*. In Andrews, however, this dynamic takes place not only at the level of the individual line or phrase. It also occurs within and across individual phrases, passages, and poems. As Perelman notes, "there is a great difference between reading [Andrews'] book and quoting a sentence from it" (100). *I Don't Have Any Paper* comprises one hundred poems, each of which is about two and a half pages long. The pages are dense, and the syntax is complex (with a high degree of disjunction across all units of composition). Perelman writes that Andrews' "opposition to narrative" has the paradoxical effect of rendering "any one sentence or phrase . . . the recursive site of agency, whether political or literary" (102). He also maintains that Andrews' most provocative lines frequently appear in "passages which are also more syntactically normative" (106). Both of these claims are valid and cogent—although they have their limitations too.<sup>59</sup> In reading Andrews, the problem with focusing on single "attack-phrases" is that it runs the risk of bestowing a false interpretive or thematic coherence to

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<sup>59</sup> Frequently, Perelman's examples of attack-phrases are not as clear or normative as he makes them out to be. Joel Bettridge gives a reason for this "misprision" in his highly original reading of Andrews' later text *Lip Service*, which bears many similarities to *I Don't Have Any Paper* in terms of (sexual) aggression and humour:

The appearance of grammatically straightforward, sexually violent, or disturbing lines anchors *Lip Service* in abusive associations by giving readers' minds something to grab onto—something to ease the mental pressure of reading—while moving through an otherwise anti-narrative poem. The sexually aggressive, grammatically normative language of *Lip Service* is relatively scarce, but its fleeting presence allows it to stand out and dominate readers' experiences of the poem. ("Reading Hurts")

Andrews' poetry.<sup>60</sup> It also runs the risk of minimizing the non-normative (formal, syntactic, isotopic) aspects of Andrews writing—to the point of insisting that a particular line or passage is saying something that it quite literally is not saying. Perelman states on multiple occasions that *I Don't Have Any Paper* is a text that denies all connection and relation. But such a reading is only possible if we ignore the various structures, modes, and forms by which the text organizes its various materials (humorous, provocative, and otherwise).

According to Perelman, “one could cull unleashed attack-phrases from just about any page” of *I Don't Have Any Paper* (105). In accordance with this dictum, I choose the following excerpt more or less at random:

I want to stick it in the gills. And if you'd rather do it in a plastic bag . . . Fat that the blacks grow, I'm not even that Jew conscious. Roots are good. Essentialism, quite fashionable now in circles, is fascism of the genes, effective patricide gets a full-time joint appointee. You've ruined me for my own material, you should be ashamed. What is a brown mule?—'s a kind of popsicle—what all we wankers want. Queened my blob.

Whites are like refined sugar that's a fungus, a dozen vials of bull semen. I game up my claim on that idea.

S/he is—anal abortion; radio breeds absolution: I think

people should stutter more. (254)<sup>61</sup>

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<sup>60</sup> Perelman acknowledges that by themselves “such resolutions won't work” (100). Peter Quartermain recognizes the same thing: “It is essential: these poems must not make sense” (“Getting Ready” 180).

<sup>61</sup> This comes from the fourth “verse section” of “Society Starts Walking Again”—a poem whose title sums up or contains or echoes Andrews' type of humour.

As this excerpt demonstrates, Andrews' particular brand of disjunctively caustic humour is not only antagonistic to myriad processes of cultural expression and identification. It also poses a significant challenge to conventional forms of literary analysis (such as close reading).<sup>62</sup> Humour theory not so much remedies this difficulty as suggests a slightly different avenue of questioning. As it turns out, the passage is rife with first, second, and third persons. What are the relationships between these positions as the text constructs them? How are they humorous, provocative, or offensive (or any combination of these)? Following Palmer, what are the outcomes of Andrews' decision to represent these subjective positions, objects, and discourses "in the form of the absurd?" (198).

The first two phrases of the excerpt produce humour by means of surprise and substitution, sexual innuendo, set-up, and punchline. As per convention, the ambiguity of the pronoun *it* in these lines most likely works to suggest *penis* and *sex* respectively. The word-image substitution "gills" is surprising due to its incongruity or implausibility. It is unlikely that the *I*—or male subjects in general—in fact desires sexual congress with fish.<sup>63</sup> But the substitution is humorous rather than simply nonsensical to the extent that fish gills resemble or are able to perform the function of some type of sexual orifice (vaginal or otherwise). At the level of form, the first line break functions almost entirely like a punchline. The "plastic bag" substitution is humorous for the same reason as the "gills" substitution, which it more or less doubles.

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<sup>62</sup> It rewards close reading also, though. But it rewards with excess, which tends in the direction of punishment via over-signification. Bettridge makes a similar observation in "Reading Hurts."

<sup>63</sup> Yet note how immediately my reading ushers in a range of enthymemes and normativities.

From a Freudian perspective, these lines are simply smut operating at the level of obscene humour.<sup>64</sup> Neither is an attack-phrase, at least not as Perelman uses the term. In this interpretive context, their chief purpose is to effectuate a non-bona fide mood and discursive milieu. Still, no humour is neutral, and neither is the logic underlying these particular lines—the effectivity of which largely depends upon familiar because hegemonic notions of gender, sexuality, and homosocial relations among men. Like all tendentious jokes, the purpose of these lines is to bribe certain readers with pleasure and to threaten others with displeasure. They not only triangulate and assign different subjects to different positions relative to each other and especially to the object(s) of humour. They also labour to help (re)produce the very subject positions necessary to its optimal functioning and outcome.

After the ellipsis, the reader encounters the following strangely disconcerting lines: “Fat that the blacks grow, I’m not even that / Jew conscious” (254). As above, the double structure of the lines appears to mimic that of the joke (call and response, question and answer, set-up and punchline). In themselves, there is nothing explicitly racist about the words “Jew” and “blacks”—although their use here is more than vaguely offensive. Minimally, the cavalier deployment of these racializing terms works to help further lower (or heighten) readerly inhibitions. As always, there is also the possibility of their giving pleasure to readers for whom the mere mentioning of such terms is inherently “funny.” As a unit, the lines are implausible to the extent that the socio-semantic content of the first line makes little conventional sense. Is there a degree of plausibility somewhere that allows these lines to function as humour of some variety (even anti-humour) rather than simply as “nonsense”? Are the second persons as readily identifiable as they perhaps seem?

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<sup>64</sup> For Freud on the centrality of what he calls “mere” smut to tendentious humour, see *Jokes and Their Relation* (140-46).

Certainly, the lines implicate “blacks” and “Jews” to the degree that they represent them under the aspect of the absurd. As a whole, the lines are only plausible from a perspective that views any declaration of cultural identity as ridiculous. The tenor of the second line clearly relies heavily on the identity of the speaker—which is always opaque in Andrews. Unless the *I* is Jewish and this is a case of “in-group” humour, the line is offensive if not racist (at least from a strictly sociological point of view). It is possible to conjure up some type of stereotype that posits a relationship between obesity and black people. In this context, the word *grow* becomes particularly offensive. Still, the meaning of this line is not at all as straightforward as that which follows it. It is not entirely clear what it is in fact “saying.” Like poetry, humour need not function according to the grammars that regulate everyday modes of communication. Yet it is important not to gloss over such moments of socio-semantic dissonance or deterritorialization when it occurs in Andrews’ writing, whether at the level of content or form. Certainly, critical readers of Andrews need not maintain any allegiance to avant-garde shibboleths about *Verfremdungseffekt* and the politics of the signifier. But it is important not to claim a literal meaning where there is not one. Otherwise, lines like “Fat that the blacks grow” risk becoming identical to a racial slur when this is not in fact the case.

Helpfully, the next two lines offer a clear instance of irony and along with it some clarification of sorts. In “Building a More Powerful Vocabulary,” Perelman writes that “a sentence such as ‘I’m deeply worried about the rapid pace of Israeli colonization of the West Bank’ (*Shut Up* 162)” is “very probably true enough if we read the ‘I’ as referring to the person of Bruce Andrews” (104). In the context of the entire text, however, it merely “comes off as one of the more ironic in the book.” For Perelman, this overriding allegiance to irony effectively makes it impossible to ascribe any position to Andrews the person (with the exception of a few

instances that are transparently autobiographical).<sup>65</sup> To my mind, however, there are numerous instances in the text that correspond more or less exactly to Andrews' cultural, political, and theoretical beliefs. The line "Roots are good" in fact articulates one such belief (albeit in inverse form).<sup>66</sup>

The subsequent line takes an opposite tack, declaring that "Essentialism, quite fashionable now in circles, is fascism of the genes" (254). Unlike that which precedes it, this line is completely in earnest—even though its tenor is that of a tendentious joke. At the local level, its purpose is to mark that which precedes it as insincere and ironic. But it also displays a formal rhetoric and thematics central to Andrews' textual project as a whole. Structurally, the logic of Andrews' tendentious equation of essentialism to fascism is that of  $x=y$ .<sup>67</sup> To say that  $x$  is or equals  $y$  is to say either that 1)  $x$  is identical to  $y$ , 2)  $y$  is the truth of  $x$ , or 3)  $x$  and  $y$  exist in a relation of mutual predication. In "Smashing the Control Machine," Eric Stroshane suggests that the function of the equal sign in *I Don't Have Any Paper* is to juxtapose and collide discrepant particulars—to the point of "derailing the very act of equation." Stroshane's claim is not implausible, even though neither his examples nor his close readings are entirely convincing. From the perspective of the absurd, moreover, it is more accurate to say that Andrews' discrepant copulas and equations undermine the logic of universal fungibility—but at the same time as they actualize and effectuate it. At the level of rhetoric, the logic of  $x=y$  readily lends

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<sup>65</sup> For Perelman, certain instances are transparent in this manner. For other readers, they are less so. See pp. 104-05.

<sup>66</sup> "My roots, no thanks" (187) perhaps offers the "earnest" obverse sentiment here.

<sup>67</sup> The formulation  $x$  is, equals, or means  $y$  is second only to substitution among Andrew's repertoire of joke mechanisms. Let me (in real time) open the book five times at random: "Pulp filibuster / is hiltness" (184); "Fertility is absolute altruism" (90); "Liberalism equals the gulag" (215); "Beelzebub fastening habits laughable, that's holocaust?" (130); "Afro-cubist that mass equals crass dim men pop / a sauce that monsters fault" (141). Another favourite structure of Andrews is  $x$  my  $y$ , frequently ending with an exclamation mark: "Sling your sword in my bloody gap" (163), "take over my dolls! (266), "Make My Rehab Triumphant," (247), "lick my funky floss!" (38), "injure my decorum" (108).

itself to hyperbole—and thus also to provocation. But it equally conduces towards blanket statements and universalizing claims—of which Andrews’ writing contains many.

As a structure,  $x$  is or equals  $y$  maps fairly easily onto both Palmer’s logic of the absurd and classical notions of humour as incongruity resolution. But it also makes visible another key aspect of Andrews’ humour, that involving the double movement between the particular and the universal. To say that essentialism is fascism is to imply that essentialism and fascism are the same or that fascism is an (essential or universal) predicate of essentialism. But it is also to elicit some third term whereby it makes sense—becomes plausible or congruous—for fascism to signify as the (local or universal) truth of essentialism.<sup>68</sup> In Andrews, the joke that essentialism is fascism lacks the element of novelty or surprise that Palmer and other theorists regard as necessary to humour’s effectivity. In general, the association of essentialism (identity politics, feminism, cultural nationalism) with fascism is far too familiar and shopworn to elicit laughter from any but the most receptive reader.<sup>69</sup> Clearly, the term that allows  $x$  to equal  $y$  in this instance is biologism—a conclusion that Andrews perhaps anxiously gives away when he particularizes essentialism as “of the genes.” Particularizing fascism in this manner also has the (potential) effect of minimizing offense, as well as adding a second level of implausibility via the initial or apparent discontinuity between fascist ideology and genetic science. But it is ultimately the universalizing tendencies that dominate. As tendentious humour, the line effectively essentializes essentialism, constructing it as the same in every instance, regardless of historical moment, socio-cultural context, or political exigency. It also uses the logic of  $x=y$  to posit (fascistic) biologism as a universal predicate of essentialist thinking. It is a joke whose

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<sup>68</sup> In short, what is the  $z$  whereby  $x=y$ ?

<sup>69</sup> The odious term *feminazis* is the best example of this overfamiliarity. As a chain of signifiers, the metonymic logic of this discourse is essentialism=fascism=feminism and so on.

(potential) social effectiveness requires it to reinforce rather than undermine the (false) universal truth value of its enthymematic content.

By means of paronym, Andrews constructs essentialism not simply as “*fascism* of the genes” but as “quite *fashionable* / now in circles” (my emphases). From a certain perspective, this joke functions as a key of sorts to the humour and thematics of the passage as a whole. Minimally, it helps make sense of the two lines that follow: “effective patricide gets a / full-time joint appointee. You’ve ruined me for my own mate- / rial, you should be ashamed” (254). As a narrative unit of sorts, these lines present an anonymous first person who “jokingly” blames an “effective patricide” for a variety of grievances. In the first line, the incongruity involves the implausibility of an act like patricide resulting in something like academic tenure. In concert with the anti-identitarian thematics of the earlier lines, this incongruity “resolves” itself when we substitute “patricide” with a correlative term—say, a radical feminist. As a substitute for patricide, radical feminism is plausible in that it too aims to precipitate the death of the (law of the) father. Yet it is not this (symbolic or real) act of violence against the phallic signifier of the father’s body that the first person holds worthy of ridicule and scorn. Radical feminism and identity politics, the joke appears to say, are not fashionable or effective because they threaten to dispatch the patriarchy. They are fashionable and effective because they allow the patricide or essentialist to accede to a position of power within the patriarchal structure of the university.<sup>70</sup> Via the joke mechanisms of incongruity, substitution, and implicature, the line elicits the conclusion that gender politics are less political than instrumental (or perhaps merely naive).

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<sup>70</sup> In the first line, Andrews blames the second person—say, radical feminism—for killing the father, but only to take the father’s place within patriarchal institutional structures rather than to destroy these structures. In short, it is not patricide but “selling out” that is the problem.

Although not in form, the structural logic of the punchline is that feminism reduces to career advancement by other means.<sup>71</sup>

The following line at once extends and doubles the first person's complaint against the patricide qua tenured feminist. As with the other lines in this passage, here too the identity of the first person remains anonymous, appearing only in the objective case. But this is not to say that the "me" or "I" in fact operates independent of any determinant content. Perelman is correct to say that the *I* in *I Don't Have Any Paper* is irreducible to Andrews the person. In the interest of analysis, then, let us name not the speaker but rather a plausible social location—say, that of the straight, white, male avant-garde poet. As a radical feminist and female academic, the second person ruins the avant-garde poet's relation to his material for at least two reasons. Along with critics and "writers of colour", she calls into question the notion that the avant-garde necessarily represents "the forefront of revolutionary culture" (Yu 1). Second, she threatens the traditional avant-garde prerogative of regarding transgressive (violent, misogynist, racist) content "primarily as a metaphor for the transgressive use of language" (Suleiman 75).<sup>72</sup> As a patricide, the feminist further ruins the (white, male) avant-gardist's material because she embodies a post-phallic moment in which the various hierarchies on which the vanguard historically depends find themselves already upset, defamiliar, out of order. Yet, the poet's grievances are not merely cultural and political. Humorously, they also extend into the realm of the domestic and personal. Consciously or otherwise, what the enjambment of the line discloses is that the second person

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<sup>71</sup> In a sense, this is classic anti-feminist humour in that it seeks to discipline the duplicity of women. As a critique (or a critique of a critique) of queer identity politics, consider also the following one-liner from "This Unity Sounds Like Posturepedics to Me": "he's / not really gay, he's just an opportunist" (272).

<sup>72</sup> Another possible reason is that, as tenured feminist, the second person looks to other sites of radical textual production, thus depriving the white male avant-garde poet of his birthright. "this is a / conspicuously *ignored* avant-garde, that's for sure," the speaker complains in "Life Is a Scholarship" (175). Perelman identifies this line as an example of earnestness in Andrews (105)

deserves additional shame for having “ruined me for my own mate-“(254). Adding insult to injury, the “effective patricide” ruins the phallic coordinates and modes of enjoyment particular to the avant-garde poet’s erotic life as well as his poetics.<sup>73</sup> Her actions and subjectivity warrant discipline and ridicule because they contribute to the dual crises of avant-garde and heterosexual universality.

The following lines of the poem return us to the mode of sexual humour with which the excerpt begins: “What is a brown mule?—‘s a / kind of popsicle—what all we wankers want. Queened my / blob” (254).<sup>74</sup> The entire line feels vaguely disturbing in its suggestive smuttiness, even though it appears to have but a single explicit sexual marker—and a bathetic one at that. In particular, it is the relation between the mule and popsicle that seems most implausible and suspect. But other issues arise as well. Is the purpose of the syncope to suggest a particular dialect (perhaps in concert with the largely British “wanker”)? What about the brownness of the mule? Are there racializing overtones here, particularly given the earlier reference to “the blacks” and identity more generally?

As with innuendo, tendentious humour often results in a type of “paranoid” reading. A sense of infraction and abuse persists even in the absence of any explicitly violent, sexual, or offensive language.<sup>75</sup> In a first pass, the tone and diction of this line suggest mockery of some sort for non-normative or “perverse” sexualities. In this sense, it echoes the avant-garde poet’s

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<sup>73</sup> To the question of how the second person ruins the speaker for his mate, there are many possible answers. She causes him to question his masculinity or his mate to question her femininity. Perhaps her presence on the scene, discourse, politics, or bodily affect and erotics work to “queer” the poet or his mate. Perhaps it causes the poet’s mate to start to question phallic norms of social and sexual intercourse (and so on).

<sup>74</sup> At various points in *Jokes and Their Relation*, Freud uses the term “fore-pleasure” to describe the means through which humour works to distract, bribe, and disable the critical faculty of the listener—in preparation “for the automatic course of the joking process” (206). He also speculatively identifies “displacement and representation by the absurd” as the joke techniques most in accordance with this “fore-pleasure principle” (206, 187). Not only in the passage above but also in much of Andrews’ text, this principle or its inverse—fore-displeasure—is continually in play, with an absence of release as its concomitant.

<sup>75</sup> See note 59, above.

earlier complaints about some variant of feminism having “ruined me for my mate.” A quick Internet search reveals that such a reading is in fact not entirely paranoid. According to the *Urban Dictionary*, a “brown mule” describes “the act of inserting your [sic] penis into ones [sic] mouth after the performance of anal sex.”<sup>76</sup> *Urban Dictionary* also describes the verb “to queen” as “the act of a girl [sic] sitting on your face.” Even without this definition, “Queen” as a verb suggests some variety of emasculation (as well as sovereignty and power) while “blob”—along with “wanker”—appears to adumbrate the “semen” of the following lines.<sup>77</sup>

As with the “essentialism” section, these “obscene” jokes about brown mules, wanking, and queened blobs index a specific socio-semantic network, isotopic structure, or discursive configuration. But their lack of concordance makes them much more difficult to parse than regular jokes. Another problem involves tracking the multiple vectors along which they simultaneously dissolve and exacerbate incongruity. Is the “we” of these lines parodic, an instance of comic ventriloquism? Perhaps it includes the “author” in earnest, making him the “sex pervert” who wanks and desires a brown mule? Is this an expression of queer desire? Or a mode of jocularity more typical of cis-male homosociality? No doubt the answer to these or other similar questions revolves around maintaining rather than trying to resolve either-or structures. But it also introduces the important question of what it means for “Andrews” to mock or ridicule an identity category to which he also possibly belongs.

In “I m Dracula,” Juliana Spahr argues that part of what makes Andrews’ work politically important is “its continual mocking exposure of dominant identities.” In *I Don’t Have Any*

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<sup>76</sup> A more reputable source confirms this. As Carmen M. Cusack writes in *Animals, Deviance, and Sex*, “[s]lang terms ‘the mule’ and ‘brown mule’ refer to withdrawal from anal sex immediately followed by oral or vaginal penetration; or withdrawal from vaginal sex followed by anal sex” (73).

<sup>77</sup> A quick Internet search also reveals “blob” as slang for condom and menses—and “queen” as queer slang for an effeminate gay man.

*Paper*, these identities include US nationalism, heterosexuality, and masculinity.<sup>78</sup> They also include whiteness, as the subsequent line demonstrates: “Whites are like refined sugar that’s a fungus, a / dozen vials of bull semen” (254). As with much of Andrews’ writing, the force of this line derives from the startling novelty and (initial) implausibility of its juxtapositions and propositional content. Wherein lies the plausibility—and thus the humour—in this comparison between such seemingly intransitive objects? Of course, “Whites are like refined sugar” in that they are both white. But there is clearly no humour in such a redundant observation. As with most of Andrews’ best jokes, the humour instead draws its coordinates from the dominant ideology or political unconscious. Historically, what whites most share with refined sugar is that whiteness is natural to neither. As a commercial product, refined sugar is the endpoint of an industrial process whose purpose is to remove all “impurities” and “colorations” from raw cane. At the level of allegory, the same is more or less true as regards the construction of whiteness as a racial, social, cultural, and political marker.<sup>79</sup>

On its own, “Whites are like refined sugar” is a rather brilliant and broadly palatable piece of political comedy. But the following attributions are much more typical of Andrews,

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<sup>78</sup> “America shops, atomic veterans, delegates of the word with / bayonets up their rectums” (12); “men + women = jeans, close to / 4/4 time, Antonio Gramsci’s idea of hegemony: girls—get the / tip of your penis removed!” (43); “all homophobes subjected to temporary sex-change opera- / tions” (48); “USA = immaculate / conception air assault sticks in million dollar baby’s mouth” (63); “Help defeat your country—power faults keep cranium free of / lint wrench to choose from a mind as free as Republicanism” (102); “I don’t bring straights / out of the closet anymore for political reasons; they have to / ask—politely” (102); “I don’t vote: personality of the hole / young ideas dick young flag impersonates nation” (159); “Sports = soap opera, Amerikan / male” (218); “that old conch-shell stablemate you call your / nation” (250); “in America country means / white” (260); “forget visiting the ivory tower we love / rich dead men covered in steel” (301).

<sup>79</sup> Whiteness is not the result of an industrial process, but it certainly emerges during the historical moment of settler colonialism, immigration, and industrialization. See, for example, Theodore W. Allen’s pioneering work on *The Invention of the White Race*, which explores the social, political, economic, and ideological processes leading to “the transformation of English, Scottish, Irish and other European colonists from their various statuses as servants, tenants, planters or merchants into a single new all-inclusive status: that of whites.” In this context, then, consider also the industrial use of bleach to whiten brown (cane) sugar. By analogy, comparing whites to refined sugar suggests how whiteness is also not natural but the product of a historical, material process. (For the above Allen citation, see the back cover of the 2002 Verso impression.)

pushing the humour into a register beyond the pale of “bourgeois” taste and sensibility. Because of the non-standard syntax, the line “Whites are like refined sugar that’s a fungus” is both odd and ambiguous. As humour, however, the line seems to make most sense paraphrasing it as follows: “Whites are like a (type of) sugar that is (also) a fungus.” Typing “white,” “sugar,” and “fungus” into a search engine, the majority of results pages link to websites about candida. Via the twin mechanisms of condensation and displacement, then, the joke at this point seems to suggest that whiteness equals, is, or means a malodourous fungal discharge. While it works well as an insult, this comparison is less successful as humour—in part due to its relatively high degree of implausibility. But wait, it gets worse and (importantly) slightly more plausible.

As per the joke logic, whites compare both to sugar and candida (a white fungus that feeds on monosaccharides). Yet somehow they are also like “a dozen vials of bull semen.” On a first pass, the obvious point of connection is again whiteness. Like sugar and candida, (bull) semen is some variety of white in colour. The sheer volume of the seminal fluid (a dozen vials) has the effect of ratcheting up the coarseness and thus potential offensiveness of the line. The same holds true with regard to the seminal fluid being that of an animal. Yet there is in fact a context in which bull ejaculate bears some relation to whiteness as a national, ideological, and especially mythological category: the abduction and rape of Europa by Zeus, which he effects in the guise of a white bull. Of course, it is from the figure of Europa that the European continent derives its name. There is also the sense in which Europe is the homeland or birthplace of the “white races”—and that the term *European* is more or less synonymous with whiteness. The comparison between whites and bull semen, then, is plausible via reference to this entirely implausible yet extant originary narrative.

Clearly, the determinations particular to this joke are too many to track adequately. Whites compare to bull semen in that the latter is the mythological substance that gives birth to the former? The myth of Europa and the white bull is like the sugar industry to the extent that both represent their products as always already white? Whites or whiteness is like candida in that beyond certain thresholds it results in infection, low immunity, and disease? Whiteness is a (literal and figural) admixture of fungal semen and candidiasis? No one who finds Andrews' lines humorous need have any overt sense of the complexity of their meanings and relations. To the contrary, their success necessarily involves a degree of unknowing on behalf of the reader (not to mention the other persons in the comic transaction).<sup>80</sup> In Freud's words, "we can scarcely ever know what we are laughing at in a joke"<sup>81</sup> (207). The pleasure of humour is only possible because the joke-work bars us from conscious awareness of the process that produces it (202). Similarly, the various interpretive improbabilities, discontinuities, and contradictions to which Andrews' lines give rise in no way impede their potential effectiveness as tendentious humour. Indeed, these are as vital to the joke's success as are the propositional or enthymematic content whose purpose is to suture over or "resolve" them. In *Comic Transactions*, James English argues that the object of humour is never simply a particular identity, social body, or discourse. The object of humour rather designates a particular nodal point within the social where all of the joke's component parts adjoin, overlap, or transect. Citing Freud, English describes the object of humour as a nexus of intense condensation, displacement, and thus overdetermination. As English writes, "this overdetermination of the object is one reason why, as Freud repeatedly

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<sup>80</sup> As Freud writes, "an awakening of conscious intellectual interest usually makes the effect of the joke impossible" (202). Humour often operates as a type of sleight-of-hand. It attracts the listener's attention to one place only to distract it from another. To a certain extent, humour is always happening—the kernel of any joke always resides—elsewhere than we expect or believe to find it. It is literally ob-scene—that is, off stage, another scene, elsewhere.

<sup>81</sup> We can, however, "discover it by an analytic investigation," as Freud also writes (207).

insists, ‘we do not know what we are laughing at.’ We are always laughing at something too complex, too multiple and divided, to be given a proper name” (12-13).

What are we laughing at when and if we laugh at a phrase like “Whites are like refined sugar that’s a fungus, a dozen vials of bull semen”? One possibility is the sheer incongruity of the line (form as well as content). Another is the increasing hyperbolic, vulgar, sexual, and bodily nature of the language. English stresses that humour is often irreducible to strict sociological readings or terms. But he also recognizes that it almost always functions as a mechanism for policing group membership and identity.<sup>82</sup> In this context, the pleasure of the comparisons to sugar, fungus, and semen derives from the ridicule to which they subject “white” people. In this reading, the line corresponds with Freud’s notion of tendentious humour in the strictest sense. Yet the line perhaps makes most sense not as attacking “white” people” but as travestying the ideologemes of white supremacy. From this purview, it is more apt as an example of what Freud describes as critical humour.<sup>83</sup>

Irrespective of its criticality, the line is still offensive in both senses of the term. For Freud, critical humour is necessarily a subset of tendentious humour. As tendentious humour, Andrews’ line aggravates white identity, thus potentially offending people who identify as white or with whiteness (regardless of how problematic such identifications are).<sup>84</sup> Individuals who find a particular joke funny almost always resist the claims of others that the joke is offensive.

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<sup>82</sup> “Comic practice is always on some level or in some measure an assertion of group against group, an effect and an event of struggle, a form of symbolic violence. The inescapable heterogeneity of society, the ceaseless conflict of social life, the multiple and irreconcilable patterns of identification within which relations of solidarity and hierarchy must be negotiated—these are what our laughter is ‘about’” (9).

<sup>83</sup> Freud introduces critical jokes as a subset of tendentious jokes in his celebrated discussion of Jewish marriage broker jokes. Tendentious marriage broker jokes are those that ridicule the marriage broker. Critical marriage broker jokes are those that ridicule (the exploitation particular to) the marriage broker system.

<sup>84</sup> When tellers or listeners (or both) experience a tendentious joke as apt critique, this does not mean that it is not in fact offensive or that those who take offense are missing the point. Tendentious, critical humour is often at once true and offensive. Conversely, the proper response to injurious humour is not to say that it is not funny but that it is wrong, racist, immoral, and the like.

The claim that whites are like sugar, fungus, and semen is implausible to a significant degree. In addition, these terms are completely unfamiliar or atypical as “racial” epithets for whiteness. Yet there is no denying that the comparison is disparaging and degrading. The latent truth claims of the line in no way mitigate its offensiveness or its nonseriousness—and vice versa. It operates as critical and tendentious humour at the same time.

My reading of this section operates under the assumption that the social location of Andrews’ text is that of the straight, white, male avant-garde poet. As a result, it opens up the possibility that Andrews’ “white jokes” contain at least a degree of self-mockery. According to Jerry Palmer, self-deprecating humour is often less critical than a means to disarm criticism (whether proleptically or after the fact) (10, 182). As for Spahr, she is right to say that Andrews’ writing frequently attacks white privilege and white collectivity. What she neglects to address are those instances where Andrews’ writing indexes whiteness in a more ambiguous fashion: “El Salvador / by the sword; protective environments, that’s *white* culture: / neon babies” (85); “I’m white & I’m middle / class so mash me to a pulp” (122); “Let’s pretend we white” (172). For Susan Purdie, humour is “oppositional or oppressive depending on whether the target stands above or below the jokers in the social hierarchy” (127). Ojibway author, critic, and humourist Drew Hayden Taylor adopts a similar position in an essay on political correctness and Native humour. According to Taylor, jokes are only offensive when they move down “the Ladder of Status,” never when they move from bottom to top (71).<sup>85</sup> In addition to Natives, those who occupy the bottom of the social ladder include “‘niggers,’ ‘kikes,’ ‘chinks,’ ‘fags,’ ‘dykes,’ ‘dagos,’ ‘micks,’ ‘chicks,’ etc.” (71).<sup>86</sup> As for the top of the social ladder, this is the exclusive

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<sup>85</sup> As Taylor quips, “successful jokes are filled with helium, not lead” (71).

<sup>86</sup> Note Taylor’s use of quotes, whose purpose is to indicate that this is not Taylor’s language, that it is not he who is speaking here. In presenting these “examples” of hate speech, he also deploys the humorous mode. Are Taylor’s citations offensive? Clearly, they are. Some critics, linguists, and language philosophers argue that there are

position of “the male honky” (71).<sup>87</sup> From the perspective of Taylor’s metric, then, Andrews’ “white jokes” are not only entirely permissible but even “logical”—and for two key reasons.<sup>88</sup> First, Andrews is white, and jokes that move laterally across social, cultural, or economic terrain are potentially contentious but never offensive, hateful, or racist per se. Second, whiteness occupies *the* dominant position within social hierarchies of race. As a result, it is always available as a licit target of critical-tendentious humour. By definition, white jokes are never racist in the strict sense of the term.<sup>89</sup>

Taylor notes how “the comic material of African-American, Asian, or Native comedians . . . often consists of making fun of the dominant white culture” (71). With this observation, Taylor suggests that such comic material is always to some degree critical and not simply tendentious in its orientation or outcome.<sup>90</sup> In “I m Dracula,” Spahr argues that Andrews’ writing

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differences between using and “mentioning” language, that the act of citation or “quotation” occupies a metalinguistic position in relation to language use—a position that mitigates the offensiveness of injurious language such that Taylor (and I) reproduce here, and that renders the speaker innocent of any hateful intention. Yet, it seems fair to say that neither Taylor nor I deserve or warrant censure for our citations of “social” language. For a germane critique of the use-mention distinction that also wants to defend certain forms of reiteration, appropriation, and resignification as valid oppositional and empowering cultural techniques, see Judith Butler’s *Excitable Speech*, especially the opening chapter, “Burning Acts, Injurious Speech.” See also the work of critical race scholars like Mari J. Matsuda and Richard Delgado who view any instance of hate speech as a perlocutionary act and thus always injurious and in need of some form of policing. The canonical text here is *Words That Wound: Critical Race Theory, Assaultive Speech, and the First Amendment*.

<sup>87</sup> Pace Taylor, do “minoritarian” social identities in fact occupy equitable social positions in relation to white masculinity or to each other? What about Indigenous joking at the expense of Black people (or vice versa)? There are critics who effectively assume (or even assert) that such humour does not occur. This is not Taylor’s position, but his theory is unable to say anything about such humour except that it is potentially dangerous and a bad idea in general. Importantly, however, Taylor is aware of the limitations of his position and goes out of his way to complicate it, as when he jokes about the need for an “Oppress-o-meter” to register the social hierarchy more accurately (71). Humour is a type of bet hedging, but here Taylor’s own joke discloses his own opposition to at least particular forms of identity politics.

<sup>88</sup> “If you’re a white person, it is logical to make fun of white people” because “venturing outside that sphere of knowledge can reveal your ignorance and affect the nature of your humour” (that is, it can reveal your racism) (74). Taylor later says that there are exceptions.

<sup>89</sup> “White people can be racist against Native, Asian, or black people, but it is not technically possible for a black person to be racist against a white person. Wrong direction” (Taylor 73).

<sup>90</sup> As a humorous and thus non-bona fide text, Taylor’s essay is also already suspect from an earnestly critical-theoretical point of view. Throughout his essay, Taylor incessantly counters his own examples and questions his own conclusions till he reaches the pragmatic (and ironic) conclusion that “it’s always more fun to be amused” than “to be outraged”: “You can always be politically correct tomorrow” (80).

takes up the enjoinder from within critical white studies for white writers to become “race traitors”—that is, to participate actively in the “betrayal” and abolition of whiteness. Against Perelman, she also argues that Andrews’ “attack-phrases” function less as aggressions against “ethnic and cultural identity” than as statements that interrogate “the endlessly complicated construction of subjectivity in contemporary society.” In forwarding these claims, Spahr limits her reading to Andrews’ poem “Confidence Trick,” from his earlier, 1987 collection *Give Em Enough Rope*. In a later text, she goes so far as to render this limit absolute in its degree of explicitness: “I should specify here that I am talking about one specific work and not about Andrews’ oeuvre as a whole” (83).<sup>91</sup> Consistent with Taylor and Purdie, however, she ultimately maintains her position that Andrews’ “continuous mocking of dominant subjectivities” is always oppositional and never oppressive in its logic.<sup>92</sup>

*I Don’t Have Any Paper* contains many tendentious one-liners that complicate any strictly sociological or partisan political reading. It is not that such readings of Andrews’ are

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<sup>91</sup>In a footnote, Spahr makes clear that by “Andrews’ oeuvre” she means *I Don’t Have Any Paper*. This disclaimer is odd in two ways. First, the Bruce Andrews (and Lyn Hejinian) chapter in *Everybody’s Autonomy* appears at least ten years after the publication of *I Don’t Have Any Paper*. Second, this chapter frequently engages Perelman’s essay, which deals explicitly and solely with *I Don’t Have Any Paper* (although it does cite writing from *Tizzy Boost* as a means to compare earlier with later Andrews material). “Confidence Trick” mobilizes signifiers of whiteness much more than *Shut Up* and more than any other racial signifier. Yet the poem also more than anticipates the form, aesthetics, and “problematic” textual politics of *I Don’t Have Any Paper*. In fact, it is effectively identical to them: “Nominate squares, white mice, bustle argument it— / Solar radiation to rope a stray; I am the bishop—Her whispery tiny bad / girl voice & pneumatic bosom are in the rightwing tradition” (*Give Em* 146); “Is either reassuring tribal chant or else you get treason, trespassing, / arm rest of the mind, or , if you’re graduating, fix me an Islamic / fundamentalism Molotov—Caucasians swore by the factory system” (158); “A lot of it is class privilege, let s get down on wonton; average / normal—Crumb the exams more correctly, yes, Hitler did have large- / scale plans, now here is a classic from Roy Drusky, ‘Second Hand Heart’” (174). By distancing its claims about “Confidence Trick” from Andrews’ work in *I Don’t Have Any Paper*, Spahr’s later chapter on “Confidence Trick” recapitulates many of Perelman’s chief concerns at the same time that it disputes them. Spahr’s chapter on Andrews and Hejinian is thus also about her critical anxiety in trying to navigate issues of identity within (white) avant-garde textual practices (as she acknowledges at various times throughout the book, which also has chapters on avant-garde writers of colour, particularly Harryette Mullen and Theresa Hak Kyung Cha).

<sup>92</sup>In articulating this position, Spahr effectively conflates white identity and bourgeois subjectivity, leaving unanswered the question of intersectionality (e.g., the white lumpenproletariat, Black Republicans, queer nationalists, and the like).

fundamentally incorrect. As Taylor notes, “humour, by its nature, is often at somebody’s expense. Rare is the joke that has no victim. That immediately makes it a potentially ‘oppressive’ medium” (70). The tendentiousness of humour is to some degree always operative, regardless of which social position the teller, audience, or butt happen to occupy. The sociological reading is necessary, but it is not at all sufficient. There are important reasons for qualifying claims that Andrews’ “phrases attack whatever cultural identity is immediately in front of them” (Perelman 105). Such claims not only tend to imply that these identities simply pre-exist the moment of comic exchange, but also that their social referents are readily identifiable, coherent, and comprehensive.<sup>93</sup> In Andrews, it is often difficult if not impossible to ascertain whether it is a particular cultural identity or the (often oppressive) discourses productive of this identity that is under attack. As a result, *I Don’t Have Any Paper* is not only legible as a travesty of the culture and politics of identity. It is also plausible to read it as operating as an extension of identity politics, at least to the extent that it uses humour to deconstruct and critique violent and hegemonic forms of racialization, interpellation, and subjectivization.

At the close of his essay, Perelman somewhat qualifies his critique of Andrews’ textual politics with the following claim: that “the harshness of his attempts to write beyond race, class, and gender should not endorse a retreat to more normative genres and content” (108). In *Comic Transactions*, English outlines a critical approach to humour that at once complements and supplements Perelman, at least to the extent that it offers a means to situate Andrews’ textual politics in a more oblique relation to such social, cultural, and political binaries as violation and norm:

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<sup>93</sup> English articulates this position in his critique of sociologist Lawrence La Fave’s approach to humour. For English, the problem with the sociological approach is that it “idealizes the individual recipient and reduces the complex process of identification to a ‘positive’ or ‘negative’ subjective orientation that has already been settled before the joke takes place and to which the joke-work can contribute nothing” (3 n7).

What I am suggesting is that even when we decide to decide, to sum up and situate a comic transaction on this or that side of ‘the struggle,’ we should keep one eye on those places where the joke simply fails to conform to an inside / outside, two-side topography of the social field. Instead of calling upon jokes always and simply to confirm the familiar logics of inside and outside, containment and transgression, hybridization across a border, and so on, we should allow them sometimes to suggest a *stranger politics* than such frameworks can accommodate. (18 emphasis mine)

Part of the aggression of Andrews’ particular brand of tendentious humour is that it compels readers to “decide” even while destabilizing or refusing the very ground upon which any such decision depends. To see how English’s notion of such a “stranger politics” perhaps functions in the context of Andrews’ writing, let us to turn to the final phrase in the excerpt plus two others: “S/he is—anal abortion” (254); “Autopsy revealed that Mary Jo Kopechne was wearing no / panties” (81); “They’re lesbians, they / don’t salute the flag” (103).<sup>94</sup> As is almost always the case in Andrews, the humour of these lines is multiform. An “anal abortion” is implausible-plausible at once because the anus is not the site of abortion but is analogous to the vaginal canal in the mythos and phantasy of the anal birth.<sup>95</sup> To call someone an abortion is

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<sup>94</sup> Even obliquely, many of Andrews’ lines are in fact quite topical and contain a high degree of social reference. Take the following lines from “Jerk Off in the Breadcumbs” as an example: “Why did the Israelis / let the Christian militia into the camps?—to impress Jodie / Foster” (159). Here, the poem summons and links together the 1981 attempt of John Hinkley, Jr., to assassinate US president Ronald Reagan and the 1982 Sabra and Shatila massacre, which involved the extra-judicial mass killing of civilian Lebanese and Palestinian Shi’ites at the hands of Lebanese Christian paramilitary forces. Part of what is interesting about these lines in particular is how they explicitly take the form of a simple joke. Pace Perelman, it is utterly impossible to understand lines like these as instances of irony. Obviously, the political purpose of these Israeli-Lebanese war crimes is not to impress Jodie Foster. Much more productive, then, is to take the joke form at face value. Under what ideological and geopolitical contexts, for example, is “to impress Jodie / Foster” not only an implausible but also a plausible “punchline” to the set-up that precedes it?

<sup>95</sup> A “thicker” description of this analogy is also possible: the abortion as feces, the anus as an orifice like and proximate to the vagina, and the like. Hence the humour is also misogynistic to the extent that it “degrades” the female sex organ, substituting it with the “universal” anus within a classical, perverse masculine fantasy of reproduction.

clearly an insult. To call someone an anal abortion intensifies the insult because it collocates multiple abject terms: anus, fetus, corpse, feces. The taboo nature of these terms and associations no doubt suffices to produce a humorous response (at least in some readers). Of greater significance is the function (and reappearance) of the  $x=y$  structure.<sup>96</sup> Grammatically, the term *s/he* operates as a gender-neutral pronoun meaning *either she or he*. In this sense, the joke-insult is indeterminate in that the pronoun refers to an absent individual of either gender. Another option, however, is to experience the signifier-pronoun itself and not any particular signified as the butt or target of the line. In this reading, who or what then is the anal abortion? Perhaps it is the category or figure of the transgender itself. In general, this reading conforms with the complaint that Andrews' project is intensely anti-identitarian in logic and outlook.<sup>97</sup> At the same time, the patriarchal, heterosexist imperative of strict gender identity is not the only context in which transgender signifies as anomalous or "unnatural." Indeed, the same logic appears in the gender politics particular to radical feminism and lesbian womyn-born womyn—both potential targets of Andrews' claim that "essentialism . . . is fascism of the genes." From this perspective, "s/he is—anal abortion" is still an attack-phrase. Yet what it attacks is not transgender identity but essentialism as a locus of transphobia. At first, the line appears reactionary, but it also reads plausibly as progressive or radical in its gender politics (though no less offensive for that).

Of course, an entirely valid question to ask at this point is whether the context of the earlier essentialism joke still sufficiently maintains to function as a type of interpretive ground

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<sup>96</sup> The line does not in fact use the equal sign or say that *s/he is* an anal abortion. Yet it is an instance of conjunction via disjunction. This renders the reader complicit to the degree that a reader is necessary to actualize the connection. At the same time, the reader has little choice since extra-individual determinants are clearly at play. Importantly, the  $x=y$  structure also contains its own determinants. It is at once synthetic and analytic in that it impels the reader to add a term, quality, attribution, or association to the couplet while also suggesting that the relation is already there (that it pre-exists the joke and the reader's co-production of it).

<sup>97</sup> "Andrews' attacks on identity have gotten more intense in *I Don't Have Any Paper*" (Spahr, *Everybody's Autonomy* 183 n56).

for the lines that follow. The issue is not simply that Andrews neglects to mark essentialism as a type of thematic for the passage as a whole. It is that neither the essentialism joke nor any subsequent line is consistent in its representation or sense of the relation between essentialism, identity politics, “racial” consciousness, cultural roots, feminism, whiteness, sexuality, or gender. Certainly, this lack of thematic consistency introduces a concomitant inconsistency into my reading of this passage. Part of the work of humour is to produce and reinforce a false sense of continuity where there is in fact discontinuity and difference. In a text as complex as *I Don't Have Any Paper*, it is perhaps inevitable for this double movement of continuity and discontinuity to affect critical commentary as much as readerly response. In this context, then, it is entirely (if ironically) apt to say my reading is just as implausible-plausible as any other—and perhaps even more so. Moreover, my reading is not at all a point of closure. As with any textual analysis of humour, its purpose is to facilitate a more direct opening up onto questions pertaining to the social. These questions not only return us to those that Peter Quartermain asks of Andrews' text—namely, “why do we laugh (if we do), and what at, exactly” (“Paradise”)? They also include the issues of who “we” are that laugh, of who is unable or refuses to laugh, and of the social, cultural, and political context in which this laughter occurs or fails to occur.

Where is the humour in the line “They're lesbians, they / don't salute the flag” (103)? First, there is the element of shock or surprise created by substitution and enjambment. The form, syntax, and grammar of the line mimic that of the syllogism. “What defines lesbian identity, at least in the negative?” it appears to ask. But the line refuses the very answer that it appears to require and elicit: “They don't have sex with men” (or something to that effect). In contexts where same-sex relations between women are antithetical to national cultural values, lesbianism occupies the position of the butt. Where homophobic and nationalistic views fail to obtain,

however, these views themselves become available as objects of tendentious attack. As with much of Andrews' writing, the line importantly has little sense as an instance of irony qua reversal. Its meaning is not that lesbians in fact do salute the flag (even although some of them do). Nor is it that they are not lesbians if they do in fact salute the flag. At the same time, each of these meanings indexes a range of other possible readerly responses. As English insists, all jokes take place "within a process of exchange from which it is always already too late to withdraw or set aside inconvenient third persons" (14). What English means here by "inconvenient third persons" are readers for whom the joke provokes neither pleasure nor laughter and perhaps even displeasure or unlaughter. Unlaughing third persons almost always include readers whose own sense of identity resembles or overlaps to some degree with that of the second person (the butt, the target, the object of humour). As a rhetorical-performative strategy for disarming or critiquing tendentious comic exchanges, unlaughter possesses a not insignificant degree of social power and effectivity. As Michael Billig points out, however, unlaughing third persons are also frequently "a favourite target for the laughter of ridicule" (194). In the context of Andrews' lesbian joke, the readers most likely to experience displeasure or express unlaughter are clearly patriotic queer women.<sup>98</sup> From this perspective, the (ostensive) incongruity between nationalism and queerness emerges as a potential object of laughter. The same is true of the narrow scope or even existence of the category *patriotic lesbian* as social identity or designation. Hence the (virtual) targets of Andrews' lesbian joke are not simply lesbianism and homophobia.<sup>99</sup> They also include such social materials as nationalism, conservative or traditional cultural-political tendencies within queer communities, and beyond. Indeed, the joke even suggests that women

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<sup>98</sup> This is not to discount patriotic lesbians who possibly find this line humorous because of its mildness, its lack of pejorative language, their awareness of the stereotypes and cultural logics at play within the joke, among many other possible—even "strange" or "perverse"—reasons.

<sup>99</sup> Here I use the term *virtual* in the Deleuzian register: real but not actualized.

who have sex with women are not in fact “lesbians” when they salute the flag—that is, when they express nationalist or patriotic views, serve their country in the military, and the like. In this regard, the joke also makes sense as potential travesty or critique of the broader discourse of homosexuality in the armed forces (or even government or other public services).<sup>100</sup>

In “Building a More Powerful Vocabulary,” Bob Perelman describes Andrews’ textual politics as “playing with fire in a decentered, over-all fashion” (103). The following sequence from “Education Makes Me Squirt” gives extra credence to Perelman’s claim: “Autopsy revealed that Mary Jo Kopechne was wearing no / panties; / help retarded children overthrow the government—who thought penis size was important?” (81-82). The Kopechne line in particular seems inordinately cruel, vicious, and insensitive—and it is.<sup>101</sup> Yet it too reinforces English’s insight that we know neither “what we are laughing at” nor “who the ‘we’ is that is laughing, either” (12). In this instance, who or what is the object of laughter (or unlaughter)?

Clearly, the most obvious object is Ted Kennedy or Kopechne herself. In the first instance, Kopechne’s missing underwear suggests that Kennedy is guilty not only of her death by misadventure but that this misadventure was sexual (and perhaps coercive or violent). In the second instance, the absent panties figure Kopechne as a woman of suspect “morality” and thus at least to some extent deserving of her fate. The first of these readings maps onto general public speculation about the Chappaquiddick incident, while the second taps into less conscious (but still pervasive and systemic) misogynistic structures of feeling. This second reading is more

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<sup>100</sup> This list is by definition non-exhaustive. For instance, another possible target is the “Don’t Ask, Don’t Tell” policy. Another is lesbians who “sell out” by joining the military. It is not so much that the line targets these identities or discourses but that it makes them available as possible targets.

<sup>101</sup> Mary Jo Kopechne “was an American teacher, secretary, and political campaign specialist who died in a car accident at Chappaquiddick Island on July 18, 1969, while she was a passenger in a car being driven by U.S. Senator Ted Kennedy (“Mary Jo”). The accident and the events surrounding it are popularly known as the Chappaquiddick incident. The appearance of the term “retarded” is patently crass, cruel, and juvenile as well.

offensive to the extent that it mobilizes and reinscribes an ideology responsible for naturalizing violence against women. From the perspective of the joke, however, both readings are equal in that they are both entirely plausible. What then renders the line more implausible than plausible, as per Palmer's logic of the absurd? The line certainly mocks Kennedy or Kopechne (or both). At heart, though, the humour of the line derives from the incongruity of needing an autopsy to determine whether Kopechne is wearing underwear or not.<sup>102</sup> In a first pass, the line resonates quite strongly as misogynistic, and it is more than capable of eliciting anti-feminist laughter. In Freud's terms, however, the joke ultimately reads as more critical than simply tendentious. As a forensic procedure, an autopsy is capable of discovering evidence of rape or other sexual trauma. But the idea of it revealing "that Mary Jo Kopechne was wearing no / panties" is patently absurd (as well as in bad taste). This absurdity skews the joke in a particular direction. It suggests that it not so much casts sexist aspersion on Kopechne's "moral" character as targets Kennedy's male class privilege, systemic juridical sexism, the debacle of the Chappaquiddick event, its media transformation into pop cultural grist, and the like. This variety of potential targets in turn guarantees that the group who laughs comprises a heterogeneity of subjective identities and social positions. It promises pleasure to those who despise Kennedy for his Boston Brahmin privilege, his philandering, and his abuse of public trust, as well as those who despise him for his opposition to the wars in Vietnam and Iraq, his support of gay marriage, and his progressive or liberal politics more generally.<sup>103</sup>

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<sup>102</sup> The detail about Kopechne not wearing underwear is a historical fact. But it was discovered by the medical examiner, not by a coroner. State officials desired an autopsy, but Kopechne's parents refused to accommodate it. Importantly and perhaps tellingly, the judge supported the parents' decision.

<sup>103</sup> Of course, it also offers pleasure to misogynists and rape joke aficionados, whose investments may or may not overlap with those of the above. Much depends upon how much interpretive purchase to give to the semantic gap between *autopsy* and *medical examination*. This gap may not be intentional on Andrews' behalf or that of his source. The logic here is similar to that of Andrews' line "100,000 march in gay orgy," where the key formal-semantic incongruity is that which misconstrues orgies as somewhere where marches take place. Yet the joke still forcibly links gay rights protests with sordid practices—sordid in the heteronormative imaginary, that is. A possibly

“Where’s a battered woman,” Andrews writes in another poem, “I want to beat her up?” (193). As Perelman remarks, the line appears to condone abusive men, but “the rhetoric is indecisive” (106). The issue is particularly troubling because it appears to revolve around a crucial but unanswerable question: “How much credence are we supposed to put in that question mark?” The same is true of the Kopechne line. The substitution of *autopsy* for the more precise—and historically accurate—*medical exam* is not only subtle (particularly given Andrews’ penchant for excess and hyperbole). The difference between the two terms is also arguably too slight to support fully a critical (rather than tendentious) reading of the line. This aspect of *I Don’t Have Any Paper* leads again to the question of why Andrews’ turns to humour when the impetus behind many of his attack-phrases appears to be critical (at least upon closer examination).

### 3.7. Shut Up: Or, Tendentious Poetics

One could say that the desire of this poetry is to become intolerable.

—Sianne Ngai, *Ugly Feelings*

Poetry is at its very root tendentious.

—Vladimir Mayakovsky, “How Are Verses Made?”

Perhaps the best place to look for an answer to this question is Andrews’ poetics essays and talks, particularly “Poetry as Explanation, Poetry as Praxis,” in which he sharply delineates between two types of political writing. The first is a writing that attempts to empower, mobilize, and represent particular (already existing) identities “in order to push for the priority of group interest, or self-expression”: “so-called ‘progressive lit’” (*Paradise* 54, 49). The second is a writing that chooses instead to interrogate, disclose, and destabilize the (oppressive, hegemonic)

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operative (homophobic) enthymeme is the idea or belief that queer solidarity parades are less about politics than lifestyle. Yet other enthymemes are available too (for the same reasons as above).

social, semiotic, and discursive structures that not only antecede individual subjects and cultural identities but are also the very mechanisms of subjectivization and identity production.

Alternately, Andrews calls this second (superior) mode of textual politics “poetry as explanation,” “writing as reading,” or “method as politics.” Whereas “progressive lit” deploys poetic language to write about politics, “poetry as explanation” views language as the unsurpassable locus of politics proper. Andrews never directly aligns “poetry as explanation” with his project (and Language writing more generally) and “progressive lit” with the project of women, black, queer, and other minoritarian poets. But his language leaves entirely clear that what he understands as identity politics and poetics are in fact his targets.<sup>104</sup>

Unfortunately, Andrews never discusses the issue of humour in “Poetry as Explanation, Poetry as Praxis”—or in any other of his essays or talks.<sup>105</sup> Yet this absence is not entirely surprising. In *I Don't Have Any Paper*, Andrews' use of humour not so much coincides or operates entirely in the service of his textual politics. Its more precise function is rather to address, circumvent, and exacerbate—even weaponize—a set of overlapping tensions, contradictions, and double binds particular to Andrews' poetic and political project. Andrews' humour produces tendentious and critical effects. But these effects are responsive to pragmatic, symptomatic, and unconscious exigencies and motivations. In “Poetry as Explanation” and other

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<sup>104</sup> “More than just a pluralizing of voices and traditions . . . and more than adding to the multiplicity of voices all situated within a system of social sense” (*Paradise* 41). “Not celebrating identity, but recognizing its stereotyping and containment: how it's set up & positioned” (53-54). “Any time you help to reinforce the status quo of identity . . . you help to bolster the power of the dominant hegemony which has commandeered the social order” (90). “Identity, that lathe: an official framing” (145). “To create contexts . . . beyond face-off pluralism (or constituency-based cooptational empowerment of something [united colors of] to talk about)” (150). “That drawback is always feeling the meaning (the sharing) has to pass directly through that filter of ‘I’—an identification” (189). “I am a writer. That wasn't my voice. Style = insincerity.” “Writing about ourselves raises our credibility so I've given up on my individual psychology, it's just not worth that much” (202). As with Andrews' poetry, however, these “statements” are much more complex—even nuanced—in their original context.

<sup>105</sup> In the preface to his poetics essay “Equals What?,” Andrews' briefly notes the “troubling humor” of much of his writing from the late 1980s and early 1990s (*Paradise* 201).

poetics essays, Andrews advocates a political writing that totalizes rather than pluralizes.<sup>106</sup> He acknowledges the existence of social heterogeneity—that “the social order” comprises “a great deal more indeterminacy, more pluralism, a more variegated field of operation” (*Paradise* 59). Yet he also argues that any poetic or political recourse to plurality, identity, or cultural difference is “worse than a cop-out” in that such an approach only risks making “things more reinforced, more solidified, so that *an overall perspective* on what the social world consists of becomes even more fugitive, even harder to get a grasp on” (64 my emphasis). The critical tendency is to read Andrews as a poet of indeterminacy, plurality, and variegation. Yet the imperative to totalize ultimately marks Andrews’ poetry as much as his poetics statements.

The poems that comprise *I Don’t Have Any Paper* are unambiguously riotous, disparate, spasmodic. As a whole, however, the book is strangely static, homogeneous, even monolithic. After a while, all of the poems (all one hundred of them) start to read and sound the same. There are a handful of critics who note this aspect of Andrews in passing. Rob Fitterman remarks that Andrews’ “poems have an uncanny ability to combine several discourses, and yet keep a consistent syllabic harmony as an overlay or superstructure” (110). Andrew Levy highlights Andrews’ desire to thematize “new uniformities in a ‘cultural cacophony’” (84) while questioning his “insistence on a virtuosic yet uniform technical arsenal” whose ultimate result is a “unity of discourse” (87). The only critic to address this counterintuitive aspect of Andrews’ writing at any length is fellow Language poet Barret Watten.

According to Watten, Andrews’ writing ultimately neglects to consider the historical, temporal, diachronic dimensions of language, resulting in a “bad” social formalism.<sup>107</sup> In *I Don’t*

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<sup>106</sup> Humorously though not ironically, Andrews titles his “long essay project on poetics, *Tips for Totalizers* (*Paradise* 251). The key essay is “Total Equals What: Poetics and Praxis” from 1986.

<sup>107</sup> To Andrews’ poetics, Watten opposes the “good” social formalism of Louis Zukofsky.

*Have Any Paper*, Andrews “risks the specificity of actual language” (Watten, “Social” 368) because it allegorizes the social “as a kind of decentered constellation of different practices, of differences, of heterogeneity, of pluralism, a micropolitics of fragments” (Andrews, *Paradise* 34). For Andrews, however, all specificity or particularity finds its final meaning within the totality of a dominant paradigm or ideology, whose purpose is to organize these differences, heterogeneities, and pluralities—to circumscribe or code their social effects. As Watten describes them, Andrews’ poems “are acts upon particulars”—but particulars whose ineluctable fate is to “displace themselves outward into conditions at large” (368).

For Watten, the “expansiveness and ‘over-allness’—the totalizing form—of Andrews’ project” is problematic for a number of reasons (381). Its determinations are at once unidirectional and circular to the point that the conclusions are already contained in the premises. It collages a wild array of sign processes, language games, and discourses, but only to flatten them all into synchronic artifacts of an ineluctable—because a priori—estrangement and reification. Andrews’ project is to provide an “objective” map of the conditions of possibility under late capitalism. But his vertical (Frankfort School) and ahistorical (structuralist) theoretical coordinates are incapable of rendering these as anything but conditions of impossibility. “Seen as an atemporal description of ideology,” Watten concludes, “*Social romanticism* [sic] enacts deflected speech acts in commoditized frames—the motivations of writer and other voices in the text are rendered equivalent, and a ‘monumental stasis’ appears as the totalized outcome of neutralized interests. No one is getting anywhere in Andrews’ scenarios” (372).<sup>108</sup>

Watten’s reading of Andrews gets quite close to some of the issues that Timothy Yu raises with his critique of “avant-garde universality.” Watten speaks of totality rather than

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<sup>108</sup> It is interesting here to consider Watten’s use of the term *equivalent* in relation to Andrews’ poetic-political fondness for the cupola *is* and the equal sign.

universality, which is not the same thing (even though Yu likewise often conflates them and uses them interchangeably). Watten accuses Andrews of “bad” social formalism. Yet Watten’s own text also discloses a type of formalist ahistoricism in that it fails to situate Andrews’ practice. Even though he focuses exclusively on *I Don’t Have Any Paper* and cites it at length, Watten also makes no attempt to address it at the level of social content. He alludes to the problems of Andrews’ aesthetic ethnocentricity and status as an “objective” social scientist or ethnographer but lets pass such tendentious “one-liners” as “Sounds like maybe he’ll make / it as an Asian. You suburbanites might have to go for your hunt- / ing rifles” and “I gave up my culture to get bet- / ter bathroom privileges” (367). What Watten provides, however, is a clearer sense of how *I Don’t Have Any Paper* makes strategic use of the relation between particular and universal (and other quasi-cognate binary pairs like heterogeneity and totality). He offers a formal, analytic hermeneutic complementary to Yu’s more explicitly social and cultural reading of the Language text as a socio-aesthetic response to identity politics.

### **3.8. Humour, Provocation, Offense: A Poetics of Avant-Garde (Dis)pleasure**

The expected ending of the turn, the denouement after the punchline, never arrives. The sequence implicitly triggered never reaches its affiliative closure.

—Donato Mancini, “These Are Not My Words”

*Shut Up* may be the apotheosis of the last possible mode of socio-critical poetry available to those of the "avant-garde," or at least to those who do not think that simplified reiterations of the major themes of "progressive" social discourse are legitimate avenues of expression . . . If there is comedy here, it is not so much in the individual phrases . . . but in the fact that it just doesn't stop.

—Brian Kim Stefans, Review of *I Don't Have Any Paper so Shut Up (or, Social Romanticism)*

For Freud, the chief purpose of jokes is to “make possible the satisfaction of an instinct . . . in the face of an obstacle that stands in its way” (*Jokes* 144).<sup>109</sup> Jokes endeavour to “evade restrictions and open sources of pleasure that have become inaccessible” (147). They “make aggressiveness or criticism possible against persons in exalted positions who claim to exercise authority. The joke then represents a rebellion against that authority, a liberation from its pressure” (149). In essence, Freud regards joking as a cultural technique for eluding the strictures of repression, whether psychological, somatic, or social. With these definitions, Freud provides us with two important questions to ask of Andrews’ text. What precisely are the satisfactions, sources of pleasure, and liberties that Andrews seeks to (re)access by means of his turn to tendentious humour? Conversely, what are the prime obstacles, restrictions, and pressures that he strives to circumvent (especially when we consider humour as a response that activates both polarities within a double bind rather than attempting an impossible escape)?

In *Race and the Avant-Garde*, Timothy Yu argues that Language poetry emerges in the 1970s as response to what he describes as “the crisis of avant-garde universality” (33). As Yu notes, avant-garde cultural formations have a long history of drawing upon non-European cultural resources in the interest of revitalizing Western aesthetics. In the late 1960s, however, American avant-garde artists begin to find “their positions in the forefront of revolutionary culture actively challenged by writers of color, as these latter writers were awarded increasing degrees of moral, political, and aesthetic authority by readers and critics” (1). Yet this loss of radical cultural cachet is not the only “narcissistic injury” suffered by the avant-garde at the

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<sup>109</sup> Of course, Freud translator James Strachey here (and elsewhere) infelicitously translates *Trieb* as instinct. It translates better as drive but also desire (of an implacable nature).

hands of identity poetics. As Yu elaborates, “white writers in the 1970s could no longer simply claim the mantle of ‘*the avant-garde*’ that had previously been awarded to white male experimentalists. Instead, writers such as the Language poets had to acknowledge themselves as a socially as well as aesthetically delimited group, characterized by their own racial, gender, and class positions” (3). From the 1970s onwards, there is no longer (has never been) a singular avant-garde, only a plurality of (potentially competing) avant-garde practices. Where *the avant-garde* persists, it is only as a code name for white (male) avant-gardism. For many (white, male) radical artists and writers of the postwar period, avant-garde techne seems to offer a politics of aesthetic revolt independent of the particulars of sex, race, class, and gender. The crisis of avant-garde universality marks the end of this fantasy.

According to Yu, Language writers respond to the crisis of avant-garde universality in two ways. The first is to develop “an occasionally uncomfortable awareness of their own social particularity” (13). The second is to devise an aesthetic able to “integrate diverse materials within elaborate formal structures” (14). In Yu’s reading, these twin strategies conspire in what he calls the “ethnicization of the avant-garde.” They produce Language writing as a de facto identity politics and poetics, positioning the term *Language writer* as equivalent to social identities like *woman writer* or *Black poet*.

Importantly, Yu’s analysis appears to suggest that these two poetic strategies not so much resolve as defer, evade, and thus ultimately perpetuate the crisis of avant-garde universality. Language writing is not a particularization of avant-garde universality. Its logic is that of a double movement between the particular and the universal. Language writing particularizes itself as a cultural practice specific to “politically progressive white men” (Yu 39).<sup>110</sup> But it

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<sup>110</sup> The key text here is Silliman’s “Poetry and the Politics of the Subject.”

universalizes itself because this gesture in no way prevents white male experimentalists from maintaining “access to, indeed a monopoly over, the universalizing category of ‘the aesthetic’” (Yu 50). By encouraging attention “to the writer’s multiple and mediated positions,” paratactic methods like Ron Silliman’s “new sentence” “break up attempts at the natural reading of universal, authentic statements” (Perelman 63). But these methods also abet universalizing statements, particularly when they help ratify the claim that the Language text is (theoretically) capable of cognitively mapping all present-day socio-political conjunctures or of containing within itself all discursive and experiential purviews.

By and large, Yu derives his reading of Language writing from his more specific analysis of Ron Silliman’s poetry and poetics. But this is not to say that his critical framework and concepts are exogamous to the work of other Language poets or the field of Language writing itself—only that his conclusions and generalizations are not always transferable. Yu’s notion that Language poetry comes into existence as a (potentially reactionary) response to identity politics is particularly helpful. It maps well onto more general cultural-historical narratives about white left-liberal anxiety over the late 1960s emergence of increasingly militant and “separatist” feminist, queer, and minority nationalist movements. It also complements other critical examinations of the “Eurocentric, sexist, racist, and homophobic” exclusions constitutive of avant-gardism as such (Sell 2).

Yu insists that “Silliman’s curious sense of Language poetry as social identity” is “shared, to varying degrees, by his peers in the movement” (39). He also argues that a text like Silliman’s *Ketjak* “cannot be characterized as polyvocal” because almost every line “with an identifiable speaker can be usefully read as emanating from Silliman’s authorial position”

(68).<sup>111</sup> Perhaps these claims are also true of Andrews—at least in the final analysis. But they are far from self-evident at the outset, in part because Andrews refuses the phenomenological writing subject that Silliman uses to organize his material. Unlike Silliman, Andrews responds to the crisis of avant-garde universality not by “ethnicizing” the avant-garde writing subject but by perpetuating avant-garde universality—albeit by other (tendentious, critical, and humorous) means. It makes sense to think of Andrews’ simultaneous critique and disavowal of identity as itself a type of identity politics and poetics. It is equally helpful to think of his social turn in the early 1980s as involving a similar vacillation or double movement between the universal and the particular—but with this difference. In texts like *Ketjak*, Silliman incorporates the particular as an instantiation of—but also as a buffer against—the “pervasive presence” of “white male consciousness” (Yu 72). In *I Don’t Have Any Paper*, Andrews’ similarly uses particulars as points of access to the social. But he accesses the social only to subsume it with a totalizing universality.

Yu’s reading of Silliman’s work is original, compelling, and convincing.<sup>112</sup> But it largely leaves open the question of how the crisis of avant-garde universality plays out in other Language texts. In addition to Silliman, the only Language writers whom Yu discusses at any length are Bruce Andrews and Charles Bernstein—and this in the context of their editing of *L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E* magazine and not in terms of their own poetic practices. Yet the archival record proves an ideal frame in which to examine more closely the function of identity in Language writing. In the “private” space of personal correspondence, the three poet-editors address these issues with an openness and honesty likely less possible in more public settings or

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<sup>111</sup> “Silliman never allows his consciousness to cohere into a single voice or narrative and constantly breaks up or rearranges his perspectives. But they are unquestionably, even flamboyantly, all *his* perspectives” (Yu 68).

<sup>112</sup> But it has its problems also, particularly Yu’s overreliance on his mentor Marjorie Perloff’s notion of the primacy of the aesthetic and his desire to maintain the avant-garde as a cultural-political category.

genres. For Yu, the most telling moments occur when Bernstein suggests that the magazine include work by women and racial and sexual minorities—and not only writers more explicitly “central to our effort” (Bernstein qtd. in Yu 52).<sup>113</sup> This proposal gives the poet-editors difficulties because it involves them in a paradox that they are either unwilling or unable to see (at least entirely). As Yu explains, “their political positions require them to consider the writing of those affected by racism and sexism” (56). But their aesthetic positions compel them to regard as “bad” any writing whose politics take place at the level of identity and content rather than at the level of signification and form. Silliman comes much closer than the others to recognizing and even embracing the contradictions inherent to their position as a group. But he also works hard to overcome and resolve these difficulties by positing Language writing as an identity politics by other (aesthetic) means (Yu 57).

Of the three poets, it is Andrews who is the most antagonistic to the idea of using identity categories. For Andrews, the problem with such “purely & complacently political criteria” is that they border on tokenism and quota liberalism (Andrews qtd. in Yu 54). Hence they are neither viable nor honest, “especially given who we *are*.” Here Andrews italicizes the verb, but it is the first-person plural pronoun that is most significant. As Andrews “intends” it, this *we* indexes an aesthetic rather than a social identity. It refers to Silliman, Bernstein, and himself—three poets who share a “desire to use language as our criteria.” But Andrews’ *we* also almost “brings down the whole house of cards” (Yu 57). It at once deflects and indicates that that the poet-editors in fact share a set of social identities and that these identities bear a material relation to their investments in a “language-centred” poetics.

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<sup>113</sup> For another examination of identity (especially gender) and Language writing, see Peter Middleton’s article “When L=A: Language, Authorship, and Equality in *L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E* Magazine.”

“The gamble of all Language writing,” Yu argues, “is that experimental techniques can render the Language poem both particular and universal” (70). The particular-universal relation is certainly an animating tension in Andrews’ textual politics.<sup>114</sup> But the double movement particular to tendentious humour is even more important to Andrews’ writing in *I Don’t Have Any Paper*. In his essays and talks, Andrews is quick to express anxiety, scorn, and aggression towards what he perceives as the emerging hegemony of identity politics within leftist and radical culture. According to Andrews, it is entirely impossible to regard identity as anything other than a false particular. Yet the goal of Andrews’ textual politics is neither simply to deconstruct the reification of identity categories nor to expose the limits of “progressive lit” as an emancipatory socio-textual project. As “poetry as explanation,” the aim of Andrews’ project is no less than to disclose the sum total of constitutive social-discursive forces whose function is to maintain oppressive-repressive social conditions, relations, and structures of desiring and meaning production.<sup>115</sup>

In “Building a More Powerful Vocabulary,” Perelman suggests that Andrews’ target is not identity per se but rather identity as a proxy for global capitalism.<sup>116</sup> Perelman is correct in

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<sup>114</sup> Indeed, it is the universalizing tendency that bestows many of Andrews’ claims with their dogmatic inflexibility and sense of brinkmanship.

<sup>115</sup> In “Raiding the Vernacular,” Taylor Brady responds to this aspect of the “Poetry of Explanation, Poetry as Praxis” in a manner that is worth citing at length:

[Andrews] seems to be making a claim here for the ability of writing, and particularly the kind of poetic writing in which he’s engaged, to engage in a mapping of a social totality. In a sense that rehearses the claim of a theorist like Althusser explaining why Marxism is not just another ideology; there are these particularistic ideologies that all contain some significant blindspots or are based on their position in the sphere of (general) ideology, but Marxism manages to escape that by virtue of being a science. It’s a pretty bold claim for Althusser to make, and it seems like a really outrageous claim for Andrews to make when you shift the ground from critical theory to the practice of a certain kind of poetic writing. He seems to be making the same sort of totalizing claim for a mid-’80s “language writing” that Althusser would have made for his own structural Marxism.

Brady and some of the other critics participating in the roundtable go on to argue that Andrews’ poetics moves away from this “Althusserian” tendency in his later writing, adopting a more “anarchist” purview and practice.

<sup>116</sup> “Global capitalism, the ultimate target, is unlocalizable and can never be hit. This means that Andrews attacks the proximate target, the autonomy of the self, all the more fiercely” (Perelman 105).

that Andrews' "leftist" investment in certain strands of (post)Marxist and (post)structuralist thinking lead him to regard subjective and social identities as second-order products of discursive interpellation, dominant power relations, or ruses of instrumental reason.<sup>117</sup> What Perelman misses is how Andrews exploits tendentious humour as a means to trash "any autonomy of social parts based on race, class, gender, or sex" (104) while *also* attacking racism, classicism, sexism, and heteronormativity. In Freudian terms, humour in Andrews is at once tendentious and critical. More accurately, it is neither tendentious nor critical but rather a performative vacillation between these two positions. Certainly, there are instances in *I Don't Have Any Paper* where it is possible to identify particular attack-phrases as predominantly "sexist" or "anti-sexist" in their logic. Yet most often the "punchlines" are too dense, disjunctive, obscure, or frequent to unpack on first listen or reading. Often it is impossible to unpack them at all. Of course, tendentious one-liners require little interpretation when it comes to taboo language or injurious speech. Moreover, their effects are available to conscious analysis only after the fact. In the moment, they are more affective and unconscious than strictly socio-semantic. As a result, "some think it offensive, and refuse to read" (Quartermain 163).

### 3.9. Total Equals Punchline: *I Don't Have Any Paper* as Tendentious Universality

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<sup>117</sup> The following passage from "Revolution Only Fact Confectured" gives a good sense not only of Andrews' non-thetic essay style, but also of his views on identity, which often evoke the thought of Adorno, Althusser, and Foucault (among others):

We're trained, first, into the form of the person: a minimal packaging, a formation without specifics, maybe even dematerialized. After this, we could notice Ideology, the loading of the social dice: how it helps structure the *content* of that person, that identity. Filling it with its raw materials: bits of discourse, word use, silent beliefs, reluctances. As if we were lightning rods. As if we were the information, or managed data, or the standard machinery of sense. (*Paradise* 145-46)

At times, Andrews identifies politically as a socialist, but he clearly has a complex and agonistic relation to any normative political platform. Characteristically, numerous poems in *I Don't Have Any Paper* also contain lines that appear to critique—or at least travesty—leftist political positions: "New Left neo-Marxist anti-imperialist post- / structuralist anarchist romantic, TV as your own private / asshole shape" (79); "A socialism based on mildew after debunking with men- / tal turncoats" (131); "communism is the highest stage of individualism. / Even whales can be a commodity" (140).

*Shut Up* is a dense, discontinuous but homogenous poem of over three hundred pages divided into one hundred similar sections . . . Wherever the reading eye glances there is energetic syntactic displacement, subversion, shock, Althusserian analysis crumbled amid tossed street and media talk; nowhere is there any sense of even minimal continuity.

—Bob Perelman, “This Just In”

We’re just the *units* of a self-reproductive system—we’re part of the *methods*.

—Bruce Andrews, “It’s Time to Stop Glorifying the White Army”

In an important 1990 interview with Andrews, the poet and critic Jeff Derksen broaches the issue of aggression and hostility in Andrews’ writing. Derksen appears to agree with Andrews’ particular notion of the subject as a necessary site of intervention into the social. Yet he also flags the issue of how some readers experience Andrews’ aggressive identity critique less “as an examination of the constructed nature of the subject” than “as an *attack* on their own subject position” (*Paradise* 102). In responding to Derksen, Andrews not only dismisses the validity of any such readerly experience. He also effectively positions his work as having privileged access to the structures that construct all identities and subjectivities. Generalizing across racial, gender, and class lines, Andrews’ response demonstrates a complete unwillingness (or inability) to recognize different processes of subject formation, with their different locations, histories, and embodiments. In a manner that recalls his distinction between “poetry as explanation” and “progressive lit,” Andrews distinguishes between “negative” and “positive” views of subjectivization. Whereas the first view regards the subject as a locus of power relations, the second view holds the subject as the outcome of individual choices (which deserve empowerment, promotion, and celebration in the face of dominant and oppressive social

prohibitions). In discussing this second view of subject formation, Andrews' language is dismissive—at times to the point of offensiveness.<sup>118</sup> Once again, he appears entirely unwilling or incapable of recognizing the necessity for marginalized subjects to express and validate identity in the face of historical and systemic denigration and erasure. With its emphasis on the fantasy of individual self-actualization, Andrews' critique of "positive" subjectivization applies most immediately to bourgeois or liberal humanist notions of the self. Certainly, Andrews is not ignorant of the fact that racialization, say, involves little to no free choice on behalf of racialized subjects. Yet Andrews rarely if ever goes out of his way to distinguish between liberal identity politics and more radical forms of a politics of difference. Indeed, he often appears deliberately to conflate them in an act of further provocation:

If I'm bringing into the poem a variety of raw materials, social materials that are embodiments of those very kinds of solicitations and commands and inducements and seductions that make the self, make the readers identify what it is, then they might make a celebration of any existing identity, whether it is that of the heroic, privileged individual or the oppressed, marginalized individual, begin to seem—not enough. In other words, that it would cast into some question the pretense or the scope of the claims that are often made about those existing identities. And if somebody is too attached to those claims, then maybe that would unsettle their position, and if that calling into question of those claims, those overstated claims, is done forcefully enough, then it might be seen as offensive, in the classic sense—offensive as different from *defensive*. (103)

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<sup>118</sup> "Now, if you imagine that your self is constructed out of choices you make . . . and that the role of society is largely prohibitive, is largely the big daddy saying no to you, then an empowerment strategy would allow itself to glamorize that existing subjectivity, and promote it, celebrate it, and merely bewail the fact that it isn't free to express itself as it would like, as it would be attractive for it" (102).

What is Andrews trying to accomplish with this response, especially with his final sentence? In essence, Andrews' claim is that his poetic interrogation of subject formation operates as critique not tendentious attack. He also suggests that readers unable to recognize this distinction have too passionate an attachment to "already existing" forms of identity. Indeed, he goes so far as to imply that critical and readerly displeasure at his attack-phrases is merely evidence of their effectivity and necessity.<sup>119</sup> Yet what Andrews clearly misses, ignores, or disavows here is that the offensive modalities particular to his work are not simply critical but irreducibly critical and tendentious, structural and personal, aggressive and defensive. "What I *feel* like I'm doing here," Andrews asserts, "is presenting social materials that tend to be proposed to others as the basis on which their selves, their identities, might be constructed." "Why would someone be offended," he continues, "by writing that tries to bring into itself those social materials, those raw materials, in a sense, out of which they had built their subject positions?" (*Paradise* 102).

In many ways, it is difficult not to read Andrews' rhetoric in this passage as disingenuous. For a writer who so stridently insists on the need for a totalizing critical poetics, Andrews appears remarkably oblivious to the basic tenets of dialectical thinking. Andrews suggests that readers only find his work offensive because it lays bare the interpellative machinery behind ostensibly personal, private experiences of interiority, agency, and identity. Yet perhaps where the offense truly lies is in Andrews' (tacit) belief that he himself manages to

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<sup>119</sup> In a "negative" review (of sorts), the poet-critic Andrew Levy addresses this aspect of *I Don't Have Any Paper* in the following terms:

Hence, a writing of call and response that doesn't in fact allow a reader to participate in the 'dialogue,' but answers for her or him to further impress upon the naïve the actual irrationality and perverse corruption of the totalized and mediated world in which s/he lives. In other words, Andrews does not supply the subject with sufficient substantiality to develop its own position. And to make sure s/he doesn't miss the point, he includes a lot of misogynist language. (82)

write from a position or methodology more or less free from the perils of ideological and identitarian false consciousness. For Andrews, the problem with “progressive lit” is its naïve sense that the truth of cultural difference lies in the experience and telling of it. The problem with “poetry as explanation,” however, is that it posits for itself a de facto critical-poetic Archimedean point. It totalizes but without making itself available to any dialectical process.<sup>120</sup>

In “Building a More Powerful Vocabulary,” Bob Perelman asks whether it makes most sense to read *I Don't Have Any Paper* “as simply cathartic, as a type of megaphone for the political unconscious” (106). There are critics whose discussions of Andrews are largely congruent with such a reading.<sup>121</sup> At times, Andrews appears to endorse it himself. Of course, the obvious question to ask next is, whose or which political unconscious? One possible reading is that it is that of the avant-garde.<sup>122</sup> As a reaction to the twin threat of identity politics and progressive lit, Andrews’ poetry and poetics predicates itself upon two key disavowals. Following a 1988 poetry talk at the New School for Social Research, the poet Andrew Levy asks Andrews whether his notion of “poetry as explanation” is “meaningful anywhere outside of your social and class and intellectual background” (*Paradise* 63). Andrews immediately and aggressively retorts that Levy’s question is “unanswerable”—and then shifts the subject to the more general issue of audience reception of “difficult” or “avant-garde” work. In “Building a More Powerful Vocabulary,” Perelman describes *I Don't Have Any Paper* as a text that attacks all identities “except that of writer-as-demystifier-of-all-subject-positions” (108). As a textual-political methodology, “poetry as explanation” effectively disavows the need to account for

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<sup>120</sup> Of course, it is not necessary for something to make itself available to this process. From a properly dialectic position, it is part of this process regardless. Andrews thus simply neglects to recognize it—part of why the political unconscious for which *I Don't Have Any Paper* is a “megaphone” is perhaps primarily that of the “traditional” white, male avant-garde.

<sup>121</sup> Many of the texts comprising the *Aerial* special issue on Bruce Andrews broadly fall into this category.

<sup>122</sup> Of course, the next question to ask is, which avant-garde? But this is precisely the work of the joke itself.

authorial social location (to the extent that this maps onto that of the “writer-as-demystifier-of-all-subject-positions”). It also disavows the need to interrogate the social, cultural, and political history of writing qua demystification (which in the context of Andrews’ work is precisely that of *the*—that is, the white Euro-American male—avant-garde).

Examining the editorial mandate of *L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E* magazine, Timothy Yu commends Ron Silliman for at least attempting to de-universalize “the standards of language-centred aesthetics” (57). For Andrews, however, Language writing is not simply “the form of social struggle native to white men trained in the ‘industrialized’ tradition,” as it is for Silliman (Yu 57). It is a superior textual politics because language is prior and in fact constitutive—of the political, of identity, of the subject as such. Two instances from Andrews’ “Poetry as Explanation, Poetry as Praxis” talk are relevant here. During the discussion period, the (African American) poet Erica Hunt defends a radical poetics whose primary focus is “remaking identity and uncovering suppressed histories”—to which Andrews responds that “the status of group interests is not very prominent in my way of talking about these issues” (*Paradise* 62). Hunt’s advocacy of a (necessary) diversity of oppositional tactics, Andrews simply writes off as “pluralism”—and against which he offers totalization and poetry as explanation.<sup>123</sup> Later during the same discussion, Andrews all but states that an additional value in recognizing language (rather than identity) as the primary locus of oppression is that it offers a non-partisan site around which to organize emancipatory textual-political struggles in common.<sup>124</sup> In his (non)response to

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<sup>123</sup> When Jackson Mac Low asks Andrews whether he advocates poetry as explanation for himself, “not as a general program for writing,” Andrews responds, “I’m easily provoked on that,” after which follows “[laughter]” (67).

<sup>124</sup> “I also feel, politically, that this kind of understanding is something that could potentially bring diverse groups and competing interests together around some larger project of reconstructing a public sphere which can then take on, at some point in the future, greater and greater importance—and maybe even be able to contest the dominant way that that’s organized, or the dominant way that other possibilities are marginalized” (65).

Hunt, Andrews disavows the specificity of his own social position, denying in advance the reasonable conjecture that his poetics too represents or stems from a particular “special interest group.” In his championing of poetry of explanation over progressive lit, he posits “writing as politics, rather than writing about politics” (50) as a universally applicable and valid strategy for interrogating the “a priori” issue of how material systems of signification work to structure sense and meaning—both subjective and social. In terms of content, *I Don't Have Any Paper* is a text that recognizes and enacts a multiplicity of subjects and “raw” social materials. At the level of form and politics, however, it is a text that views the machinery of interpellation, subjectivization, and identity formation as effectively universal in its social range and application. Andrews frequently calls for a textual poetics able to totalize the social conditions of its own meaning production. In the final instance, however, *I Don't Have Any Paper* is a text that invokes universals much more than it constitutes totalities. Andrews’ poems not only figure and enact interpellation as a process that antecedes identity absolutely and thus constitutes subjects identically. They also neglect to subject themselves and their own various localities to the dialectical pressures necessary to the construction of totalities *in concreto*. In “Poetry as Explanation,” Andrews enjoins poets to “test the horizons—to make an agitated totality, not a rested one” (56).<sup>125</sup> Yet Andrews’ writing ultimately achieves neither, for what is a universal but a totality devoid of all diachronic structure (in agitation or otherwise).

### **3.10. In Conclusion: Tendentious Humour and the Ends of Avant-Garde Crisis**

I'm upset by that material. That material makes me very nervous, it's very unsettling because it's about this social machinery which is horrifying . . . I have a horrific response to what I write, myself.

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<sup>125</sup> Ironically, the notion of the poem as a “rested totality” is from Louis Zukofsky’s 1931 essay “Sincerity and Objectification.”

—Bruce Andrews qtd. in Peter Quartermain, “Paradise as Praxis”

I get off on the ugliness myself. I don't think I've ever seen a poetry that's as unrelievedly ugly as Bruce's . . . Bruce has a loving attitude about the vulgarity and the coarseness and the profanity. That—that's actually enough.

—Ben Friedlander, “Raiding the Vernacular”

For Timothy Yu, part of what gives substance to the cultural politics of the late 1960s and early 1970s is an increasing awareness among artists, writers, and critics of the crucial relation between social location and aesthetic practice (1-2). As radical women and minority writers come to prominence, the avant-garde not only finds itself having to address issues of identity, cultural specificity, and social situatedness. It also suffers an eclipse of its cultural authority at the hands of various identity political movements (feminism, cultural nationalism, queer rights, and the like).<sup>126</sup> Engaging Yu, my wager is that Andrews turns to humour, offensiveness, and provocation as key strategies for responding to this “crisis of avant-garde universality.” As a result, I also maintain that humour theory offers a productive set of interpretative frameworks for reading a text like *I Don't Have Any Paper*—not only formally but semantically, culturally, and politically as well. As Freud notes, humour often functions as a (social, discursive, affective) resource for circumventing particular obstacles, restrictions, and double binds. In *I Don't Have Any Paper*, tendentious humour is what allows Andrews to navigate (at once successfully and unsuccessfully) the “classic” double bind between avant-garde aesthetics and radical or left-wing politics. Many of Andrews’ “attack-phrases” are entirely legible as aggressively humorous critiques of the social-discursive violence particular to constitutive (rather than constituent)

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<sup>126</sup> “In such a political context,” Yu writes, “any avant-garde that claimed to have revolutionary power would have to cope with the fact that the rhetoric of revolution seemed to have moved outside the province of white men” (3).

forms of interpellation, subjectivization, and identification. Yet many of Andrews' attack-phrases are often also (and simultaneously) legible as aggressions against particular social identities and subjectivities. As the poet-critic Benjamin Friedlander wryly notes, Andrews' textual politics are fundamentally paradoxical in that they attack the very readers that they want to liberate ("Social Romanticism" 62).<sup>127</sup> Andrew's tendentious humour provokes specific forms of social, cultural, and political identification—but only to berate readers for taking the bait and not realizing that all such identifications are damaging ideological constructions and ruses. For some critics and readers, it is this endlessly transgressive aspect of Andrews' writing that marks it as "the exemplary instance of American poetry at its limit" (Rasula 23). As the humour theorist Susan Purdie argues, however, there are no instances of comic transgression that are not simultaneously (re)assertions of socio-linguistic mastery (and thus also of power).<sup>128</sup>

In *I Don't Have Any Paper*, humour operates as tendentious and critical attack—and as the vacillation in-between. It is this double movement (among others) that Andrews' "exploits" as a means to navigate the double binds particular to avant-garde crisis. The formal vacillation particular to humour means that interpretation is a necessary but not sufficient means to gauge the political valence of Andrews' poems. Close reading is a woefully inadequate (and misguided) tactic for convincing someone that a particular tendentious joke is in fact inoffensive. Humour is not simply semantic but also powerfully affective. It bribes certain readers with the promise of pleasure while alienating others with the threat of displeasure. Hence the question to ask of Andrews' attack-phrases is not whether they ultimately function as (anti-racist, anti-sexist)

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<sup>127</sup> "And here the paradox of Bruce's work stands revealed: posted as guard against the riot of civil war, he ends up shooting his bullets at noncombatants. Resisting ideology, what he ends up transgressing is the good will of the reader" (62).

<sup>128</sup> "[F]unniness involves at once breaking rules and 'marking' that break, so that correct behaviour is implicitly instated; yet in transgressing *and* recognizing the rules, jokers take power over rather than merely submitting to them" (3).

critique or as (sexist, racist) travesty.<sup>129</sup> It is to ask what tendentious vacillation allows a text like *I Don't Have Any Paper* to accomplish.

In general, what humour affords Andrews is a tactic for “resolving” the crisis of avant-garde universality (which in this context has at least two aspects).<sup>130</sup> At once tendentious and critical, Andrews’ attack-phrases work to navigate (and exacerbate) the fraught relation between avant-garde textual politics and social justice poetics. As anti-identitarian polemic, they also provide Andrews a vehicle through which to (re)assert the textual-political superiority of *poetry as explanation over progressive lit.* As Freud insists, however, tendentious humour not only works to circumvent a particular obstacle or authority—here, what Andrews perceives as the de facto hegemony of identity in radical textual-political circles.<sup>131</sup> It also allows first and third persons to regain or access lost or forbidden modes of enjoyment or pleasurable activity. For Andrews, these textual, cultural, and political pleasures include avant-garde universality. They also involve such conventional avant-garde strategies as provocation, shock, offense, brinkmanship, and negativity without reserve—often engendered by an ambivalent use of freighted language and imagery as so-called “raw” material. In the closing paragraph of “Building a More Powerful Vocabulary,” Bob Perelman critiques Andrews for “the harshness of his attempts to write beyond race, class, and gender” (108). What Perelman misses is that the harshness of Andrews’ humour is precisely what allows him to recapitulate the avant-garde tradition of mobilizing transgressive content as an allegory for formal transgression and textual-

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<sup>129</sup> Of course, the answer most likely falls somewhere in-between. But the work of Andrews’ tendentious poetics is to polarize and provoke, and these are the outer limits of this provocation.

<sup>130</sup> I put “resolving” in scare quotes because it is a type of resolution that is also an aggravation. It addresses the issue of race and identity without really addressing it. It is a reaction (or reaction formation).

<sup>131</sup> Again, the Q&A appended to “Poetry as Explanation” is most instructive here.

political radicality as such.<sup>132</sup> From a humour theoretical perspective, Andrews' attack-phrases work primarily to confront double binds specific to post-1960s avant-garde crisis. Yet humour theory also allows us to read *I Don't Have Any Paper* as a megaphone of the avant-garde unconscious—in that it helps make plain the disavowals necessary to the functioning of Andrews' textual politics. As many critics note, avant-gardes operate by definition as sites of perpetual crisis. As Ben Hickman observes, it is not simply that avant-garde practices and communities typically posit themselves as cultural-aesthetic responses to critical socio-political situations, exigencies, or events.<sup>133</sup> It is that their strategies for addressing moments of social, political, or cultural crisis are almost never those of reparation, negotiation, or dialogue—and almost always those of crisis itself.<sup>134</sup>

Like Language poetry more generally, Andrews' writing clearly responds to the issues of race, gender, and sexuality, as Yu claims all avant-gardes must from the 1970s to the present. Via his particular use of tendentious humour, however, Andrews offers a response that it also a non-response. He responds to identity critique and avant-garde crisis in earnest (in a manner that

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<sup>132</sup> I owe this insight to Susan Suleiman, who elaborates it in her important essays on Alain Robbe-Grillet and Georges Bataille. Suleiman focuses on what she calls "pornography as textuality" in the work of these authors. But her insights also apply (*mutatis mutandis*) to what Chris Chen and Tim Kreiner describe as the "longstanding debates about the racial politics of modern and contemporary avant-garde and experimental poetry," concerning "the relation between literary form and racial 'content'" ("Free Speech). Suleiman's essays appear in *Subversive Intent*.

<sup>133</sup> In the case of Language writing, these crises typically include the Vietnam War, the commodification of language, the collapse of the New Left, the corporate takeover of the public sphere, the dissolution of the linguistic sign, among others. Of course, the biggest crisis to which Language writing (like any post-1950s avant-garde) is a response is the crisis of avant-gardism itself. In addition to Yu, see Barrett Watten, "The Turn to Language and the 1960s" and Ben Hickman, *Crisis and the US Avant-Garde*. Of course, the canonical text on avant-garde crisis is Peter Bürger, *Theory of the Avant-Garde* (1974).

<sup>134</sup> In a chapter on "Language Poetry and the End of the Avant-Garde," Ben Hickman identifies an adversarial "will-to-crisis" (148) as a common feature of Language writing and "historical" avant-gardes like Surrealism. Hickman neglects to elaborate in this direction, but this "will-to-crisis" suggests a type of punning in his chapter title. In this reading, the "end" of the avant-garde means not simply its termination or conclusion. It also marks its "end" as a particular intention or aim. Avant-gardes arise at moments of crisis. It is not surprising that they themselves become sites or iterations of additional crises—of necessity, since crisis is what they require to subsist or survive. Avant-gardes are definitionally tendentious.

echoes Yu's reading of Language poetry as a variety of identity poetics). But he equally ignores and exacerbates them—in that tendentious humour conveys not only aggressiveness but also varying degrees of ambivalence and ambiguity (not to mention commitment and insincerity). *I Don't Have Any Paper* responds to avant-garde crisis by means of perpetuating crisis. Concomitantly, it also perpetuates vanguardism by other (humorous, tendentious) means.

#### 4. “it’s hard to be a political correct squaw”: Illiberal Humour and (Mis)recognition in Marie Annharte Baker

The savage who cracked his tomahawk and shouted “Ha! Ha!” was the first humorist.

—Stephen Leacock, *Humor: Its Theory and Technique*

There’s the laughter that comes from crystallizing an idea the audience already knows.

It’s the laughter of recognition.

—Don Kelly, “And Now Ladies and Gentlemen”

If bitching heats up the dialogue, then maybe the chill of silencing “Others” will be offset.

—Annharte, “‘A Weasel Pops In and Out of Old Tunes’: Exchanging Words”

In *Red Skin, White Masks*, the Yellowknives Dene scholar and critic Glen Coulthard outlines the various processes whereby “recognition” and “reconciliation” come to supersede “assimilation” as the dominant paradigms through which the Canadian settler-state mediates its relationship with First Nations peoples, tribal governments, and bands. Today, “Indigenous recognition politics” more or less converge “with the more recent transitional justice discourse of ‘reconciliation’” (21). As legal and political rhetorics and frameworks, however, each paradigm has its own history and operates according to its own logic. As Coulthard details, the language of Indigenous recognition first emerges in the 1970s, as Indigenous communities and activist groups begin to petition the Canadian government for official acknowledgement of their inherent rights as first peoples and nations (1). Indigenous demands for recognition achieve their most significant political victories in the following decades: “Canada’s eventual ‘recognition’ of ‘existing aboriginal and treaty rights’ under section 35(1) of the Constitutional Act of 1982,” and its acknowledgement of the right to First Nations self-government in 1995 (2). According to

Coulthard, “the politics of reconciliation” only begins “to gain traction in Canada during the 1990s”. Unlike recognition politics, whose beginnings reside in Indigenous resistance to the federal government’s notorious 1969 White Paper, the origins of reconciliation politics are international in scope, emerging in the Cold War era as juridical-institutional mechanisms for aiding large scale social redress and transition from authoritarian to democratic forms of state governance. As Coulthard argues, however, the models of recognition and reconciliation prevalent in Canada today are effectively identical inasmuch as they have the same aim and outcome of perpetuating colonial access, dispossession, and control over Indigenous lands, resources, and populations. Part of the problem with contemporary recognition politics is the presumption that the liberal yet still colonial space of deliberation is simply able to bestow the “gift” of recognition upon the colonized, subaltern, or slave.<sup>1</sup> Constitutively, the official reconciliation mechanisms of state apology, inquiry, and reparation quickly meet the contradictions and limits inherent to articulating forms of transitional justice within the “nontransitional context of the Canadian settler state” (22). Coulthard’s position is not to reject notions of recognition and reconciliation in their entirety. Instead, it is to explore how such a politics potentially functions within radical contexts of Indigenous affirmation, autonomy, and resurgence. Along with other Indigenous critics like Taiaiake Alfred (Kahnawake Mohawk) and Leanne Betasamosake Simpson (Mississauga Nishnaabeg), however, Coulthard is unequivocal in his rejection of all settler-state models of recognition and reconciliation, which he views as antithetical to the goals of decolonization, Indigenous freedom, and genuine relations of reciprocity between First Nations and Canada.

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<sup>1</sup> I use the term “slave” here in the context of Hegel’s elaboration of the master-slave dialectic, which Coulthard discusses at length.

Critical discussions of the Anishinaabe poet Marie Annharte Baker often elaborate her quite singular, contrary, and at times contentious humour as an instance of trickster poetics or discourse. This tendency is especially the case among critics writing about Annharte's second book, *Coyote Columbus Café* (1994). Tension, antagonism, and confrontation partly characterize each of Annharte's books and her textual politics in general. Yet her work following *Coyote Columbus Café* seems to scale up the intensity even further. "What [Annharte] writes in her third book," critic, poet, and activist Reg Johanson writes, "isn't intended to make her popular among 'Indian' or non-'Indian' readers" (Review 7). "*Indigena Awry* is darker and tougher than its predecessors," scholar and critic Lorraine Weir notes in a review of Annharte's text (134). In his introduction to Annharte's *AKA Inedagosekwe*, Johanson identifies a number of "avatar[s] of Annharte's 'Coyotrix' persona"—the female trickster figure who (mis)guides readers through the poems in *Coyote Columbus Café*.<sup>2</sup> As Johanson enumerates, these newer figures "of Annharte's critical style" include the "street-savvy lady," the "circuit speaker for Horrible Anonymous," "the Bird Clan Mother," and the "word warrior" (v-vi)<sup>3</sup>. They also include the "mad woman," "crazy bitch," and "sicko cunt" (iii). What are we to make of this accumulation of personas, avatars, and figures? How are we to frame and understand the increasing darkness, toughness, divisiveness, and "unpopularity" of Annharte's already aggressively humorous, intransigent, and transgressive poetics?

Two years after the publication of *Coyote Columbus Café*, the landmark, five-year Royal Commission on Aboriginal Peoples (RCAP) finally comes to a close.<sup>4</sup> By the time Annharte

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<sup>2</sup> *AKA Inedagosekwe* is Annharte's collection of critical essays, biographical notes, and other writings. Johanson is its editor. Annharte translates "Inedagosekwe" (Anishinaabemowin) as "reflecting woman."

<sup>3</sup> Each of these personas is Annharte's self-designation.

<sup>4</sup> "Published two years behind schedule in November 1996, the \$58-million, five-volume, approximately four-thousand-page Report of the Royal Commission on Aboriginal Peoples offers a vision of reconciliation between

publishes her next two books, recognition and reconciliation have fully emerged as official Canadian state policy for managing settler-Indigenous relations—but also for pacifying the type of First Nations militancy, direct action, and land defense (Oka, Gustafson Lake) that led the federal government to establish RCAP in the first place.<sup>5</sup> As Coulthard and other Indigenous critics persuasively argue, current recognition and reconciliation paradigms operate less as “a source of freedom and dignity for the colonized” than “as the field of power through which colonial relations are produced and maintained” (Coulthard 17). Certainly, these new fields of state power promise to accommodate Indigenous cultures, identities, and even degrees of governance into the fabric of the liberal multicultural nation-state. Yet they are profoundly (neo)colonial in that they are asymmetrical and leave the deep structure of Indigenous dispossession, displacement, and subjugacy fundamentally intact. In its current state, then, the real work of recognition and reconciliation politics takes place at the symbolic and structural level, as both Coulthard and Alfred attest. In “Restitution Is the Real Pathway to Justice for Indigenous Peoples,” Alfred describes “truth and reconciliation” as a “pacifying discourse” (182). Coulthard views the “commemorative and educational goals” of “the Truth and Reconciliation Commission” (2008) as important. Nevertheless, he concurs with Alfred in that the chief effects of the TRC are “to assuage settler guilt” and to “absolve the federal government” of the need to address colonialism as it exists in the present (Coulthard 127). For Alfred, part of what characterizes the “postmodern” colonial condition is that its logics are not simply negative or prohibitive but at once constituent and constitutive (*Peace* xiii). They

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Aboriginal peoples and Canada based on the core principles of ‘mutual recognition, mutual respect, sharing and mutual responsibility’” (Coulthard 118-19).

<sup>5</sup> For these latter claims, see Coulthard (116-18). As Coulthard reminds us, Oka and Gustafson Lake are not the only significant Indigenous actions to take place in the 1980s and 1990s. See Coulthard for a list and elaboration of some of these actions, which include the Innu, “the Lubicon Cree,” “First Nations blockades in British Columbia,” “the Algonquins of Barriere Lake,” and “the Temagami First Nation” (117).

“empower” and bestow “citizenship” upon Indigenous people and communities who learn to equate state models of recognition and reconciliation with decolonization and Indigenous freedom. By the same gesture, they pathologize those unable or unwilling to “get over” the harmful legacy of settler colonialism or to accept state-sanctioned processes of apology, forgiveness, and settlement (Coulthard 126). At a subjective level, then, the colonial discourse of recognition and reconciliation operates foremost as a mode of interpellation whose main function is to reconstitute “the colonized population into subjects of imperial rule” (Coulthard 31). Where this discourse fails, however, it often produces what the settler-state and transitional justice literature are only able to view as illiberal subjects of resentment and irreconciliation.

Coulthard acknowledges that “negative emotions like resentment and anger find few defenders in the field of reconciliation politics” in part because such emotions have the capacity to reinforce unhealthy and disempowering behaviors and other “internalized forms of violence” (111-12). As Coulthard contends, however, “Indigenous peoples’ resentment” is less a pathology in need of treatment and personal and social overcoming than an entirely legitimate and inherently political “response to the neocolonial politics of reconciliation that emerged in the wake of RCAP” (110-11). In this context, Indigenous “ugly feelings” not only signify as an immanent form of moral protest, but also provide the necessary starting place or ground for more “positive” iterations of Indigenous resistance, resubjectivization, and resurgence (22).

As Johanson remarks, Annharte’s poetic and critical “method is predominantly negative: she debunks, ‘bitches’ (her word), snipes, backtalks or ‘backchats,’ grumps, and gossips” (Introduction ii). Suggestively, Johanson turns to Coulthard’s reevaluation of Nietzschean resentment as a frame for exploring Annharte’s negative methodology, her “bitching,” and her predilection for such figures as the “pariah,” the “crazy lady,” and the “squaw.” He also

summons Coulthard in his suggestion that Annharte's "negativity" expresses "a refusal to be placated, reconciled, or 'reasonable' in the face of insistent demands to 'get over it'" (v). I concur with Johanson that "Coulthard's work illuminates . . . many aspects of Annharte's critical concerns" (x). More specifically, my sense is that Coulthard provides a productive framework for discussing the central place that humour, provocation, and offence occupy in Annharte's radically decolonizing poetics. In "Decolonize or Destroy," Amy De'Ath elaborates how Annharte's poetry unveils the "colonialist, racist, and patriarchal" logic of liberal recognition politics by means of what De'Ath calls "transformative antagonisms" (303). I appreciate De'Ath's important insight, and her reading of Annharte chimes very much with my own. Yet what I find most striking about Annharte's humour is precisely its tendency to resist and refuse transformation (at least of particular types). Within humour studies, the most influential humour theory is the isotopy-disjunction model. At its most basic, this model posits that humour operates by introducing contradiction or incongruity into a particular context only later to resolve it. For some critics, resolution is a necessary feature of the humorous utterance or event. Others maintain that resolution of some sort always occurs—but that some minimal residue of the initial "disjunction" always remains present. My claim is that what makes Annharte's humour effective as a vehicle of anti-colonial critique is that it resists the movement of resolution all together, including the dialectical modes of resolution particular to liberal recognition and reconciliation politics. In "The Politics of Recognition," influential Canadian political theorist Charles Taylor takes a progressivist-dialectical approach to the "problem" of difference in order to posit liberal communitarianism as a framework in which all particulars are (theoretically) able to accede to the universal. My wager is that humour operates in Annharte as a type of "negative" dialectics, working at once to stall, block, and disrupt the colonial logics of recognition and reconciliation

while also refusing the absorptive mechanisms that make “postmodern” colonialism such a threat to Indigenous survivance.

This chapter broadly divides into three sections. The first section is primarily critical and theoretical. It rehearses and interrogates Eva Gruber’s important and synoptic work in *Humor in Contemporary Native North American Literature: Reimagining Nativeness*. It also addresses Glen Coulthard’s *Red Skin, White Masks: Rejecting the Colonial Politics of Recognition*, particularly Coulthard’s elaboration of Hegel’s master-slave dialectic and the crucial role that it plays in Charles Taylor’s thinking on the issue of settler-Indigenous reconciliation. The following two sections then turn to a close examination of Annharte’s writing: her poetry (primarily though not exclusively from *Indigena Awry*), as well as the essayistic texts comprising *AKA Inendagosekwe*. Both of these latter sections endeavour to show how Annharte’s textual politics and practice work at once to elicit, estrange, and deflect dominant recognition paradigms. Whereas the discussion of Annharte’s “Squaw Guide” posits a largely settler context of reception, the discussion of “Breed Apart” and “Better Dressed” considers how Annharte’s “illiberal” humour operates and signifies within Indigenous communities of readers.

#### **4.1. Humour, Theory, Recognition**

As an overview of “the state of research on humor in Native writing” (229), Gruber’s work affords a discursive map of the literary-critical landscape in which my reading of Annharte most immediately takes place. At the same time, Gruber’s text is not simply summative but also thetic and argumentative in its approach to Indigenous literary humour. As a scholar and critic of contemporary Native writing, Gruber is entirely capable, knowledgeable, and conscientious. In the context of Annharte’s poetics and textual politics, however, what stands out most about Gruber’s thesis is its explanatory dissonance. In her readings of various works of Native literary

fiction, Gruber's tendency is to align the political efficacy of Indigenous humour with the socio-formal imperatives of recognition, reconciliation, and resolution. Only negatively, then, are her central claims and arguments able to shed any light on Annharte. Still, the various "problematics" of Gruber's text are also part of what recommend it—at least in this context. With its normative claims and judgments, Gruber's thesis proffers a set of positions against which the radical intransitivity of Annharte's joking method comes more sharply into relief. Part of the tendentiousness of Annharte's writing lies in the (humorous-serious) aggressiveness with which it confronts "official" sites of Indigenous cultural production, which it often regards as internal or subservient to the cultural apparatus of the contemporary liberal, settler Canadian state.<sup>6</sup> By the same token, the structural, political, and affective "illiberality" of Annharte's own comic practice helps make clear how settler-state notions of recognition inflect the study of Indigenous literary humour. With Annharte as both guide and counterexample, this chapter's opening section engages Gruber not simply due to her status as an expert in the field, but in order to subject her theory of Indigenous humour to a form of ideology critique.

Critics and readers are quick to note the provocation and intransigence of Annharte's language, affect, and socio-semantic content. Part of the argument of this chapter, however, is that the radicality of Annharte's text is equally formal, syntactic, and structural. In the chapter's second section, then, I turn to the work of Yellowknives Dene critic and scholar Glen Coulthard, whose important and influential critique of "the colonial politics of recognition" helps to connect the formal features of Annharte's humour and poetry to the socio-historical forms to which they are a repudiation and response. For Gruber, the value of Indigenous humour lies in its ability to

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<sup>6</sup> "Part of me is unhappy with native lit," Annharte remarks in an interview with Reg Johanson (AKA 167). Annharte is unhappy in part because of the excessive overlap between "native lit" and "official" forms of Canadian literature—which Annharte also describes as "settler lit" (AKA 118).

mediate difference, negotiate sensitive and potentially volatile subject matter, and to stage and (ideally) reconcile or dissolve antagonism. In other words, Gruber not only adheres to the standard (liberal, humanist) notion of humour as a playful form of incongruity resolution, but she also extrapolates it to the social. As Coulthard emphasizes, the recognition-reconciliation paradigm for settler-Indigenous relations finds its theoretical ground in Canadian philosopher Charles Taylor's influential liberal, communitarian interpretation of Hegel's master-slave dialectic. Drawing on Franz Fanon's seminal *Black Skin, White Masks*, much of Coulthard's critique of Taylor's recognition platform runs through Hegel as well. As Coulthard stages it, this "debate" between Fanon and Taylor has applications within the field of Indigenous literary studies, such as providing a frame for gauging the political valence of particular modes or instances of Native humour. For some critics and readers, the problem with Annharte's version of Indigenous humour as provocation is its social divisiveness. As a "laughing at" rather than "laughing with," it unavoidably plays "into the settler's 'divide and conquer' game" while undermining the important work of strengthening Indigenous communities and building solidarity with potential settler allies.<sup>7</sup> Coulthard (like Annharte) recognizes the importance of decolonial healing and relations of solidarity within and between Indigenous social groups of all kinds.<sup>8</sup> As a critique of liberal recognition frameworks, however, what Coulthard's work helps to clarify is how Annharte's tendentious humour evidences less an illiberal or perverse spirit of

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<sup>7</sup> In "Guerrilla Backchat," Johanson asks Annharte, "[H]ow do you walk the line between critique and solidarity? In other words, how do you prevent your critique of aboriginal writing from playing into the settler's 'divide and conquer' game?" (AKA 169). I address Annharte's response to this question in the chapter's final section.

<sup>8</sup> Coulthard advocates a "resurgent politics of recognition" in opposition to "a conciliatory form of settler-state recognition" (24). For Annharte's discussion of the politics and practices of decolonial healing, see especially her essays "Questions Raised About 'Creative Maladjustment' Concept," "Media & Movies & Madness," and "Cry Not Crazy Lady," all of which appear in *AKA Inendagosekwe*.

ressentiment or irreconciliation than an unconditional refusal of neo-colonial modes of dialogue, harmonization, and conjugation.

Via its treatment of Hegel, Fanon, and Taylor, Coulthard's work also helps bring to light how Annharte's radically decolonial humour signifies and operates as a homologue of various settler-Indigenous relations across a range of social scales: inter-subjective, communal, and national. Part of the complexity of humour is how it works at once as a bringing together and a pulling apart, all the while lubricating these procedures via context-specific distributions of identification, resolution, and pleasure (and their antinomies). In this light, Coulthard's genealogy of settler recognition politics not only elaborates, maps, and names the quasi-hegemonic (neo)colonial episteme in which Annharte's writing most immediately takes place. It also aids in translating the social forms particular to humour (and Annharte's humour in particular) into this domain of recognition theory and practice (and back again). Within the perspective of Coulthard's critical framework, it is difficult not to experience Gruber's "positivist" reading of Indigenous humour as either an iteration or product of the recognition-reconciliation paradigm. By the same token, this framework offers an explanation for Annharte's ambivalence and at times aggressiveness towards Indigenous literature as it operates within academia and the liberal humanities, "official" sites and forms of First Nations cultural capital, and even towards particular Native writers, politicians, and community leaders or "Elders."

#### **4.2. Settler Laughter and Misrecognition in Annharte's "Squaw Guide"**

Pleasure or anger in the face of the performance misses the point.

—Jodi A. Byrd, *The Transit of Empire: Indigenous Critiques of Colonialism*

With the critical, theoretical, and socio-historical framework for addressing Annharte's textual humour largely in place, the subsequent section shifts scale by focusing in on a single line

from Annharte's poem "Squaw Guide": "it is hard to be a political correct squaw." As a locus of tendentiously humorous, political, and antagonistic intensities, this "punch" line crystallizes Annharte's comic poetics in a number of regards. Often, Annharte's humour is diffuse, trans-semantic, and thus hard to index directly (except perhaps at the level of affective response). As with this line, however, it also takes the form of more or less discrete, compact, and (seemingly) straightforward utterances. In this instance, there is the somewhat obvious and incongruous collocation of "political correctness" and the intensely racist dysphemism "squaw"—a term that many Indigenous people (especially women) regard and experience as the ne plus ultra of settler colonial hate speech.<sup>9</sup> Yet the "joke" is much more complex than it perhaps first appears, giving rise to more questions than answers, and circulating more incongruities and conflicts than it resolves. The bulk of this section seeks to elaborate and explicate the various exigencies and implications at work in this particular line, via reference to the poem of which it forms a part, but also in dialogue with an important essay by the poet and critic Amy De'Ath, who prioritizes "Squaw Guide" in her analysis of antagonism as transformation in the work of recent Black and Indigenous women poets.<sup>10</sup> As a means to surmise the origin and intention of Annharte's particular conjunction of humour, poetics, and politics, this section also engages with what is likely the most obscure of Annharte's writings: a 1991 review article on Tomson Highway's play *Dry Eyes Ought to Move to Kapuskasing*. Like all of Annharte's writing, this review of Highway is highly complex in its at once direct and indirect style, rife with discursive about-faces, ellipses,

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<sup>9</sup> See, for example, Ntawnis Piapot, "Indigenous Women." In "Journal: One Pariah Two Pariah," Annharte registers her own experience with such racist and violent colonial imprecations in the following terms: "I sure believed the dirty drunken squaw stereotype just like my mother must have. I tried to get an education but nothing would erase the shame about being an Indian woman who has been a victim" (AKA 179). In *As We Have Always Done*, Leanne Simpson similarly notes how she, her mother, and her grandmother all "grew up believing the stereotypes and believing that if we existed outside of the domestic sphere, outside of heteropatriarchal, monogamous Christian marriage, we embodied the dirty, stupid, useless, promiscuous, and irresponsible assumptions built into the word squaw" (95).

<sup>10</sup> De'Ath also pays especial attention to the work of the Black US poet Dawn Lundy Martin.

and involuntal currents. What makes it invaluable to the critic, however, is the steady commentary that it offers on Highway's use of humour in the play—a usage that Annharte finds compelling yet repugnant at the same time. Among other things, Annharte's ultimate suspicion and dissatisfaction with Highway's comic model provides a compelling (if contradictory and incomplete) image of precisely what Annharte's humour is not. Along with Thomas King, Highway is arguably the most prominent First Nations humorist in the period when Annharte first begins writing and publishing in earnest.<sup>11</sup> With its notion of “transformative antagonism,” De'Ath's essay provides a useful entry point for theorizing Annharte's tendentious humour and decolonial textual politics. The review article on Highway offers a window onto some of the cultural-political exigencies to which Annharte's “guerrilla backchat” is a response, and insight into what makes it so prickly and recalcitrant in comparison with more “popular” instances of Indigenous literary humour.

The section concludes by returning to the text of “Squaw Guide,” with particular focus on moments where Annharte's speaker adopts the persona of a stand-up comedian to take on various (imagined and actual) “hecklers.” This focus allows for an examination of Annharte's exploitation of humour as mode of interpellation, which the poem leverages by means of its strategic use of the third-person pronoun. This discussion of interpellation adds clarity to the mechanisms through which Annharte's textual jokes and punchlines work at once to solicit and refuse settler modes of recognition and identification, but it also helps set up the subsequent section, which continues to explore “Squaw Guide” but now in a much more explicit Indigenous framework. There is a considerable body of work by Indigenous scholars, critics, creative writers, and activists on how liberal discourses of reconciliation effect both settler and

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<sup>11</sup> As it turns out, Annharte also has critical essay on Thomas King, which I address first, in the section on Gruber's *Humor in Contemporary Native North American Literature*.

Indigenous identities and subjectivities (though differentially, unevenly, and with varying outcomes). Annharte shares this perspective and concern, and much of her writing and humour operate as an intervention against the “psycho-affective” attachments that bind Indigenous “subjects of empire” to the colonial project.<sup>12</sup> According to Coulthard, the primary means to counteract “the subjectifying nature of colonial recognition” is to promote and engage in various Indigenous-specific and broadly “endogamous” processes of radical “desubjectification” and “resubjectification” (48).<sup>13</sup> It is more than possible to read the ubiquitous decolonial humour across Annharte’s body of work as outlining a similar process. At the same time, the “awryness” of Annharte’s status as “Indigena” or “Inendagosekwe” also puts her at odds with certain tendencies within the broadly “nationalist” projects of resurgence that have come to the fore over the last several years. As Janice Acoose notes on the back jacket of *AKA Inendagosekwe*, “Annharte, like our traditional Anishinaabe ‘callers of spirit,’ encourages the *re*Creation of knowledge” (emphasis mine). Yet Annharte’s humour tends to fall much more frequently on the side of the *de*- (decolonization, deconstruction, defamiliarization) than it does of the *re*- (of resurgence, reclamation, recovery).<sup>14</sup> Indeed, part of the argument of this chapter is that Annharte’s tendentious refusal of “comic” re-resolution operates as social homologue to its psycho-affective and structural refusals of re-cognition and re-conciliation. In many ways, this “irresolution” is the “scandal” of Annharte’s humour and textual politics—and part of why her

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<sup>12</sup> These terms are Fanon’s and Coulthard’s, respectively.

<sup>13</sup> The last of these processes is what Coulthard describes as Indigenous resurgence (48-49). See also the final chapter to *Red Skin, White Masks*, “Lessons from Idle No More: The Future of Indigenous Activism.” “Endogamous” is my term not Coulthard’s, and I use it to mark the turn to examinations of “in-group” Indigenous humour in Gruber’s work and in the later section below.

<sup>14</sup> The poet Fred Wah notes as much in his blurb for *AKA Inendagosekwe*, which describes Annharte’s writing as “a wake-up call to a DE-poetics (demystify, decompose, derange, etc.).”

work is especially (yet productively) uncomfortable in and to certain contemporary Indigenous literary, cultural, and political conjunctures, articulations, and imaginaries.

#### 4.3. “Endogamous” Humour and Indigenous Political Correctness in *Indigena Awry*

The third section of this chapter expands upon many of the issues of the second section—but within an Indigenous context of reception. Annharte’s writing not only addresses Indigenous readers and audiences but also “solicits” and “bribes” them as “objects” of her jokes (in all senses of the term). As comic exchanges with Indigenous readers, what are the psycho-affective, cultural, and political valences of (punch) lines like “it is hard to be a political correct squaw,” “she ate lard & gophers diet for weeks to boost native awareness,” or “big party aboriginal you kept me up / last night with your one beer fight”?<sup>15</sup> To what extent is it possible to read such lines as instances of Indigenous “in-group” teasing, with a trajectory that moves from (playful yet serious) critique to recognition, identification, and (communal) reconciliation? Are there instances where Annharte’s tendentiousness exceeds such a mandate, and to what purpose, outcome, or end?

To address such questions, this section of the chapter divides into five further parts. The first part continues to excavate and elaborate the internal workings of “Squaw Guide,” here shifting to those parts of the poem that appear directly to address Indigenous readers or Indigenous-specific territory (literal and otherwise). The second and third parts involve a conceptual-terminological shift of sorts in that they interpolate “political correctness”—as theorized by a number of critics and writers, including Annharte herself—as a supplement to recognition as a key framework for getting at how Annharte’s “politically incorrect” humour works to elicit and expose colonial imperatives as these operate across urban and reserve

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<sup>15</sup> The second and third lines are from “Breed Apart” and “Better Dressed,” respectively. I address these two poems at some length in the final pages of this chapter.

Indigenous spaces and subjectivities. With a sense of how Annharte appropriates and reconfigures “political correctness” (and other liberal settler terms like cultural appropriation, internalized racism, and reverse racism) to her own particular decolonial ends, the section then concludes by looking at two other poems from *Indigena Awry*: “Breed Apart” and “Better Dressed.”

Overall, this final section strives to demonstrate a number of claims, including how Annharte’s “guerrilla backchat” disrupts literary-critical conventions around “endogamous” Indigenous humour, and how it mobilizes (irreducible) comic incongruity as a formal marker and enactment of ongoing social stratification within Indigenous communities. In reading “Breed Apart” and “Better Dressed,” however, what emerges is a clearer sense of how Annharte uses “in-group” humour to destabilize various discourses about what precisely constitutes “authentic” and “inauthentic” forms and expressions of Indigenous identity. In “Breed Apart,” Annharte facetiously offers “half breed” readers a “formula map genealogy” for acquiring the status of a “hi bred” or “real deal hard core indin” (109). In “Better Dressed,” she taunts and derides a lover for his oblivious credulity to the full gamut of banal commodity and colonial signifiers of Indigenous (sartorial) authenticity, which he further supplements cosmetically with “ndn skin colour enhancer” (22). On the surface, these poems appear opposite in their intention and target. “Breed Apart” deflates pretensions to cultural superiority and “pure blood” Indigenous descent, whereas “Better Dressed” takes down a buffoon-like character whose “tribal” accoutrements are patently and pathetically “fake.” In tandem, however, what these two poems expose is how, for Annharte, the problem of discerning “genuine” from “ersatz” forms of Indigenous expression and identity is the problem of the colonial (mis)recognition paradigm itself.

In “Medicine Lines,” Annharte describes how “maintaining an Indian identity is a struggle” (54). Part of the reason for this struggle concerns “the cultural snobbery” (or “political correctness”) that she experiences “among the ‘born again’ Indian faction” (54). It also has to do with the double binds particular to logics of settler recognition, which place Indigenous people in the difficult position of needing to dismantle colonialist-racist representations of the “Native” while also asserting the specificity of Indigenous selfhood and experience—both of which too easily slip into performing “legible” forms of “Indigeneity” for settler citizens and institutions.<sup>16</sup> In “Breed Apart,” “Better Dressed,” “Squaw Guide,” and other poems, Annharte rarely wields tendentious “in-group” humour simply to laugh at or criticize these double binds and the various instantiations of Indigenous identity and selfhood that result from them. This humour also functions rarely if at all as a vehicle for chastising transgressors of Indigenous norms or protocols in the name of bringing them back into the cultural fold. As within settler contexts, the complex irreducibility of Annharte’s “inside” jokes works to elicit (consciously or otherwise) the various contradictions, overdeterminations, and antagonisms undergirding contemporary Indigenous experience—while also refusing to resolve or reconcile them (comically or otherwise). Although the political affordances and effects of humour always vary according to differences of social location and positionality, Annharte consistently targets readers with “illiberal” forms of humour that make it difficult exactly to answer questions as to the identity of

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<sup>16</sup> Responding to the question of what she finds appealing about humour, Annharte offers the following insights on Indigenous performativity, settler readerly expectations, and laughter: “Well, anger is a tag that’s always put on First Nations’ writing. I feel it’s often a way to dismiss it . . . If you listen from the perspective of a First Nations person, you may hear anger but you definitely go for the humour. It’s not because the anger is so uncomfortable, it’s just that it seems to be part of the whole ‘Indian Act’” (AKA 8). On the surface, Annharte’s comments here appear to contradict aspects of my reading of her work in Indigenous reception contexts. Yet what is important to note is how Annharte in fact resists “essentializing” Indigenous responses to her humour. Indigenous readers “go for the humour” not so much because their “insider” status guarantees their understanding of Annharte’s intentions, but because of their lived experience of the incongruities operative within (often legislative and juridical) settler-colonial determinations concerning “genuine” Indigenous identity.

butt or the “we” that laughs (or refuses laughter). In both contexts, the question, then, is not so much how to discern who or what is the “true” object of Annharte’s humour. The question is how and why Annharte turns to the “comic” indiscernibility immanent to colonial (mis)recognition as a key catalyst of her otherwise unambivalent radical decolonial poetics.

#### 4.4. Indigenous Humour Theory and (De)colonization

##### 4.4.1. The Hermeneutics of Recognition and the Postmodern Trickster Moment

Stripped of the burden of belonging to any particular time or place, the trickster was then free to represent the critics’ ideals.

—Kristina Fagen, “What’s the Trouble with the Trickster?”

Humour emerges as important focus of Indigenous literary criticism in the late 1980s, particularly as the era of the “postmodern” trickster starts to supercede the earlier period of “Native American Renaissance.”<sup>17</sup> By the early 2000s, Indigenous humour is a de facto cultural, political, and critical dominant—to the point of complaint, critique, and backlash.<sup>18</sup> In *Troubling Tricksters*, Kristina Fagan (Labrador Metis) identifies two tendencies within academic discussions of Indigenous humour during this period. The first tendency is to treat Indigenous humour in an overly ideal, celebratory, and homogenous fashion (5-6). The second is to obscure “the complex political and social functions” of individual instances of Indigenous humour (9).<sup>19</sup>

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<sup>17</sup> Especially influential or comprehensive elaborations of the postmodern trickster in Indigenous literatures and cultures include Gerald Vizenor, “Trickster Discourse: Comic Holotropes and Language Games,” Kenneth Lincoln, *Indi’n Humor: Bicultural Play in Native America*, and Allan J. Ryan, *The Trickster Shift: Humour and Irony in Contemporary Native Art*. Of course, Lincoln is also responsible for the notion of a Native American Renaissance, which he consolidates in his 1983 monograph of the same name. I borrow the notion of a “hermeneutics of recognition” from Wapsewipi critic, scholar, and poet Dallas Hunt’s excellent recent essay “In search of our better selves.”

<sup>18</sup> For two especially forceful critiques of postmodern trickster humour from an Indigenous literary nationalist perspective, see Armand Garnet Ruffo, “Inside Looking Out: Reading *Tracks* from a Native Perspective,” and Niigonwedom James Sinclair, “Trickster Reflections.”

<sup>19</sup> These tendencies also overlap, particularly in the work of settler critics who read Indigenous (trickster) humour ahistorically as a pan-tribal or even global figure for some universal tendency towards flux, subversion, hybridity, and disorder.

Crucially, the socio-political complexes of Annharte's writing and humour pattern the complexity of its reception. As Reg Johanson writes, "Annharte's work causes trouble in, and for, many of the places where she would seem to fit 'naturally,'—as 'feminist,' as 'queer,' as 'native,' as 'native writer' (maybe especially as native writer), as 'experimental'" ("Straight Forward" 133). Two texts for which Annharte's work causes trouble are Eva Gruber's *Humor in Contemporary Native North American Literature* and Jennifer Andrews' *In the Belly of a Laughing God: Humour and Irony in Native Women's Poetry*.<sup>20</sup> The titles of these texts clearly announce their status as necessary reading for any project examining humour in works like Annharte's. Indeed, Gruber's book is almost exhaustive in its analysis and overview of Indigenous humour from a literary, critical, and theoretical perspective. As the first book length study of Indigenous women's humour and poetry, Andrews' text performs no less a feat and service. Significantly, both Gruber and Andrews also directly address Annharte's work and offer close readings of a number of her poems. In many important ways, however, Annharte's writing and humour are ultimately non-assimilable and even antagonistic to the conclusions and frameworks that both Gruber and Andrews forward and favour. In "The Trickster Moment, Cultural Appropriation, and the Liberal Imagination in Canada," Margery Fee rehearses the "appropriation of voice" debates of the late 1980s and early 1990s, which bring to the fore the essential incommensurability between liberal universalism and Indigenous assertions of cultural and political priority and difference. Charles Taylor grapples with a similar incommensurability in his highly influential work on "The Politics of Recognition." My sense is that these tensions and blind spots are also at work in Gruber's and Andrews' discussions of Indigenous humour in general and Annharte in particular. More strongly, I venture that Gruber and Andrews ultimately

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<sup>20</sup> I address Andrews' monograph in the conclusion to this chapter.

misrecognize and misrepresent the political impetus of Annharte's radical, decolonizing humour because their interpretive frameworks are liberal-humanist and cognitive-reconciliatory in their logic.

As its title declares, Gruber's study focuses not simply on the figure of trickster but Indigenous humour more generally. Nevertheless, her work is very much a product—perhaps even a summation—of what critics describe as “the trickster moment” in Indigenous literary studies. Gruber acknowledges that Native North American literature evidences a wide variety of comic strategies, forms, and genres. Yet her reading of Indigenous humour is uniformly celebratory and idealizing in its claims and conclusions. Indeed, she often ascribes a power to it that approaches the miraculous in its ability to mediate disputes, short-circuit conflict, and dissolve oppressive colonial structures.<sup>21</sup> What also situates Gruber work within the trickster moment is her sense of the “astonishing parallels between some forms of (humorous) writing as it emerges from Native narrative traditions and mainstream postmodern literature” (40). Gruber recognizes that to equate Indigeneity with the postmodern is to impose “Western” philosophical views on Indigenous culture (115 n26). Like many other Indigenous literary critics at the time, however, she consistently characterizes Native humour and culture as highly discursive, hybrid, and anti-essentializing in its relation to identity, history, truth, and world. On par with such postmodern ideals, she also holds language and signification over land defence, treaty rights, and resource sovereignty as the most important sites of Indigenous struggle. In a manner that echoes liberal recognition-reconciliation paradigms, Gruber places the focus firmly on the politics of representational sovereignty.

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<sup>21</sup> This proclivity for the celebratory appears in many guises in humour criticism and theory more generally. But it takes on especially distinctive political meanings in Indigenous and colonial contexts.

What most distinguishes *Humor in Contemporary Native North American Literature* is its insistence that Indigenous humour has less to do with subversion and transgression than with mediation and reconciliation. In “Comic Relief,” Renee Hulan and Linda Warley observe the tendency for settler critics and readers “to focus on the subversive aspects of Native texts, noting such thematic issues as cultural conflict, while ignoring or undervaluing other matters” (140). From this perspective, Gruber’s decision to privilege less antagonistic modes of humour is a necessary corrective. Where Gruber goes astray, however, is in her tendency to absolutize the distinction between Indigenous humour in settler and Indigenous contexts and to dismiss any instance of tendentious humour that rises above the threshold of playful mockery or teasing. Often, Gruber engages the field of humour theory in a largely uncritical manner, perpetuating clichés and truisms rather than interrogating them. Humour “is, at heart, a sign of shared humanity,” she offers in the opening paragraph of the book’s first chapter (7). Drawing on an especially lax strand of comic theory, she later defines humour as what “arises from the resolution of playful incongruities”—but without offering any explanation for the necessity of either play or resolution (40).

According to Gruber, Indigenous cultures privilege humour as resolution, reciprocity, negotiation, identification, “good medicine.” Yet clearly there are also instances where it is aggressive, contentious, and divisive in its outcome or intent. Citing the anthropologist Walter Zenner, Gruber acknowledges that “inter-ethnic” humour often works to enhance in-groups at the expense of outgroups: a laughing at rather than a laughing with. In settler contexts, then, Indigenous humour ideally works towards “intercultural communication,” but it “may communicate aggression (against colonial domination)” (45). Gruber also acknowledges that Indigenous humour is confrontational whenever it “has as its target Euro-American history,

values, and characteristics” (45-46). Even when more antagonistic than diplomatic, such humour is not without its benefits, necessities, and exigencies. As Gruber elaborates, “Native laughter at white expense” is legible as a strategy for defending “Native cultural identity against such forces as cultural appropriation or compulsory assimilation.” It articulates defiance and resistance in the face of “Euro-American dominance and oppression.” It also has the effect of shoring up solidarity and feelings “of moral superiority” among Indigenous readers, audiences, and communities (46-47). For Gruber, however, these outcomes are Pyrrhic victories at best. Where not illusory, they are short term in their effect. They also serve as de facto acknowledgements of the centrality and power of the very targets they strive to undermine (46-47).

In a startling yet telling move, Gruber uses the term “separatist” to describe forms of Indigenous humour that are either “offensively anti-Euro-American” or “inaccessible” to settler audiences and readers. In settler contexts, “separatist” humour situates “Euro-American” readers and audiences as both audience and butt of the joke. Humour that playfully mocks settler norms and values operates “by triggering recognition,” allowing settler readers to laugh with Indigenous tellers while also laughing at themselves (46). “Separatist” humour “contributes little to enhancing Native-White understanding in the long run, since it forecloses productive interaction and dialogue” (47). As a mediational strategy, humour works to reconcile Indigenous-settler relations, while “humour that disparages the dominant out-groups . . . achieves just the opposite” (46).

In *Jokes and Their Relation to the Unconscious*, Freud describes humour as a strategy for circumventing obstacles, impasses, and double binds. Although Gruber makes scant references to Freud, her articulation of Indigenous humour more or less accords to this key insight. At the level of implicature, Gruber outlines the double bind particular to Indigenous writing along the

following lines. In settler contexts, all Indigenous writing of necessity confronts non-Indigenous readers with the hard truths of colonial history, dispossession, and oppression, as well as the ongoing fact of Indigenous resistance, survival, and resurgence. While confronting settlers with these truths and facts, however, it needs also to refrain from becoming confrontational, since this risks reproducing or exacerbating the very divisions whose purpose it is to mitigate or overcome.<sup>22</sup> Gruber's presumption is that humour effectively resolves, overcomes, or reconciles this double bind, when in fact it merely displaces or redoubles it. This irresolvable incongruity or contradiction is apparent at multiple points in Gruber's text, but perhaps nowhere more clearly than in the following passage, which is worth citing at length:

The use of humor in the texts under discussion does not serve to gloss over conflicts or to downplay the impact of conquest and colonization; rather, it offers a possibility (sometimes the only possibility) to *confront* these concerns in a nondisruptive manner, as the pleasure gained from humor makes up for the transgression of established rules and paradigms. (47)

For Gruber, the value of humour lies in its ability to take up opposition, contradiction, or incongruity and bind or dissolve it. The problem here is not so much the idea of humour as both confrontation and non-disruption. It is that humour operates as a safeguard against disruptive transgression while also synthesizing antagonism in the direction of dialogue and reconciliation.<sup>23</sup> For Gruber, humour "transcends established categories and defies dichotomies

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<sup>22</sup> Does confrontational humour somehow betray Indigenous values? Is exacerbating antagonism risky socially and politically due to the vulnerable position that Indigenous peoples occupy as subjects of colonialism? Is dialogue an inherent good? Gruber never interrogates any of these presumptions though they all seem operative.

<sup>23</sup> Gruber is critical of the humour in Simon Ortiz's short story "San Francisco Indians" because it "achieves no synthesis, but remains bound up with an antagonistic viewpoint." On the same page, she lauds Richard Wagamese's *Keeper 'n Me*, which "in the end proves to be more reconciliatory" in its humorous critique of "non-Native appropriative tendencies" (188).

that are considered insurmountable by people on both sides of the racial boundary” (215). What Gruber misses is how humour inhabits dichotomies while refusing transcendence, how it confronts unities as much as differences.

Gruber’s text is problematic not simply from a theoretical perspective. What matters is how her conception of humour shapes her reading of Indigenous writers. Clearly, what is most at issue in her conception of humour is the onus it places on Indigenous writers and texts to perform the role of cross-cultural mediation and negotiation. It makes Indigenous humour responsible for “brighten[ing] up” “the tragic dimensions of cultural loss” while eschewing “preaching and accusation,” “overt provocation,” and “direct affront to a White audience” (130). What Gruber also fails to address is how antagonism in settler-Indigenous contexts is not simply an intentional feature of cross-cultural texts or interlocutors but the structural “real” of colonial dispossession. From this perspective, Gruber’s insistent refrain that offense forecloses dialogue risks becoming offensive. As numerous Indigenous critics and activists stress, part of the problem with liberal reconciliation politics is its inability to recognize the profoundly asymmetrical power relations and forms of non-reciprocity that structure the very ground of current settler-Indigenous relations. Importantly, liberalism’s blindness to these discrepancies is not simply ideological, but constitutive of the field of liberal politics as such. At a structural and historical level, then, there exists an “extra-subjective” incommensurability and even incommunicability to settler-Indigenous relations. No matter the degree of individual or intersubjective effort or good faith, it is simply not possible to wish or “laugh” these structures away.

By privileging mediation and dismissing antagonism, Gruber also risks misidentifying, marginalizing, or excluding Indigenous voices and texts that fall outside or operate in tension

with her paradigm. She begins by stressing the plurality of humorous forms that animate contemporary Indigenous literature. Over time, however, her readings of texts by different Indigenous authors become strangely homogenous and finally prescriptive. In “The Trickster Moment,” Margery Fee identifies the tendency within liberal thinking to regard as illiberal that which fails to reflect its own image (63).<sup>24</sup> For Gruber, play and resolution are definitional to the formal and social workings of humour. This essentialist view leads her to miss the more adversarial aspects of Paula Gunn Allen’s writing on Indigenous humour and the potent comic aggression of texts like Monique Mojica’s “Post-Colonial Stress Disorder.” It also informs her (admittedly gentle) critique of excessive, hyperbolic, and “extreme” humour in the work of Indigenous writers like Simon Ortiz, Louis Owens, and Vine Deloria, Jr. Gruber’s text makes use of an impressive array of Indigenous humour theorists, novelists, short story writers, playwrights, and poets. Yet it also relies inordinately on the literary and critical output of a small handful of writers: Gerard Vizenor, Drew Hayden Taylor, and especially Thomas King. In *AKA Inendagosekwe*, Annharte often foregrounds the exclusionary logics at work within “settler lit,” mainstream Native cultural industries, white feminism, literary nationalist criticism, liberal academic “Indian” expertise, Canadian Aboriginal arts councils, funding, writing groups, and more. Annharte is amenable to some of Vizenor’s comic thinking around the always-already simulacral nature of “Indian” identity. Yet she is critical of the academic and class structures that massage the reception of Vizenor’s work, the same structures that render her vulnerable when forwarding similar claims. She is much less amenable to Taylor’s *Me Funny*, cuttingly dismissing it as “what makes multicult chuckles so de rigueur or dernier mot” (163).

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<sup>24</sup> Here Fee is citing from Peter Pels, “The Trickster’s Dilemma: Ethics and the Technologies of the Anthropological Self.”

In “Comic Relief,” Hulan and Warley note that “the reception of Thomas King’s creative writing in Canada has been overwhelmingly laudatory” (127) and that “humour is what many readers find most memorable about King’s work” (135). They also note how King’s high visibility as both writer and academic “conditions the reception of his work both in popular and academic spheres” and situates him “as perhaps *the* authority on Native matters” (128-29). Echoing Gruber, “reviewers and critics alike” celebrate King for his “‘benign humour’ that represents ‘gentle resistance’ and ‘tolerant’ hope.” It is a humour that avoids “‘self-righteous finger-pointing,’ ‘diatribe,’ or ‘polemics’” and contains “‘few put-downs, no snide counter-racist jibes, no speechifying” (Hulan and Warley 127-28). In the conclusion to her book, Gruber recapitulates her view that Indigenous humour “defamiliarizes or even shatters patterns of interpretation and frames of reference,” leaving laughing readers “free to reorient themselves, to imaginatively cross boundaries otherwise considered insurmountable” (225). Canadian writer and academic Wayne Tefs reaches a similar conclusion in his review of King’s novel *Truth & Bright Water*: “By allowing [fears and anxieties] to emerge as self-reflexive fun, rather than as fury and anger, oppressed groups give themselves a chance to alter their conditions without resorting to violence and bloodshed” (87). Through humour, joking, and comic inversion, “Native people ‘laugh off’ oppression and exploitation” (Hulan and Warley 134).

In contradistinction to Gruber, Tefs, and other readers, reviewers, and critics, Annharte experiences King’s writing and humour as grisly and creepy, oppressive rather than liberatory. Annharte’s particular admixture of humour, provocation, and contrariness informs her critical writings as much as her poetry and other creative work. In “Meanwhile Lone Danger Solo Performance Outwits Tricky Tontomatic Tribulations,” she discusses King’s work in a manner highly resistant to simple overview or paraphrase. For Annharte, King’s short stories “do give a

quickie tour of forced comic speculations about First Nation and North American interactions.” But “how does the dark humour balance with the white hate hee haw guffaw?” (AKA 163). For Annharte, there is something problematic about King’s use of humour as an affective-mimetic medium for representing the horrors and violences of settler-colonialism. “What a struggle to laugh at potential genocide,” she writes, punning perhaps on the displacement of struggle from the political realm to “shoot ‘em up whoop ‘em up cinematic comedy.” In part, Annharte’s complaint concerns what she experiences as the one-dimensional or cartoonish quality of King’s Indigenous characters: “All behave ‘ass’-inine because everyone is ‘ass’-imilated!” (164). At one point, she humorously—that is, ironically and earnestly—compliments King for appropriating “Kinsella and Grey Owl formulaic writing as a vehicle to avoid authenticity and substitute elitism for ‘excellence’” (165). At the end of the short essay, Annharte conjures a nightmarish situation in which a mindimooyenh finds herself subject to the popular-academic enshrinement of King’s canonicity and legacy: “As a potentially weak and helpless elder as eminent future, the foreboding end of trail scenario might be a Native home care worker pushing a stalled scooter to join a group of Native intelligentsia who are retelling Thomas King stories” (166).<sup>25</sup> It is a moment rife with irony, incongruity, and polysemy. Yet clearly the salient joke has King’s texts replacing Indigenous oral traditions and traditional knowledge—as an (E)lder sits ignored.<sup>26</sup>

What is most salient to the present discussion, however, is Annharte’s suggestion that King uses humour to bring about “instant bonding instead of cultural misunderstanding” (166). Annharte’s preference for “misunderstanding” over “bonding” clearly marks her own humour as

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<sup>25</sup> Note Annharte’s pun on “eminent,” which folds King’s ongoing and future eminence into the imminence of the elder’s weakness, helplessness, and vulnerability. “Mindimooyenh” is an Ojibwe term of respect for an “old woman.”

<sup>26</sup> I capitalize and parenthesize (E)lder because it is implicit to the text, but also due to Annharte’s general skepticism and refusal to claim such status for herself (in awareness that not all elders are Elders).

“separatist” rather than mediational—at least according to the metrics that Gruber provides. Yet it takes on a different valence in the context of Hulan and Warley’s interrogation of the pedagogical and political implications of “nondisruptive” forms of Indigenous humour. Congruent with Gruber’s reading, Hulan and Warley note how King’s “method tends to invite rather than to alienate cultural outsiders” (131). For Hulan and Warley, however, the outcome of King’s “non-threatening, non-judgmental humour” is not so much dialogue and the possibility for recognition and reconciliation. Hulan and Warley take pains to stress that King’s stories and humour are inherently political. Yet they also hold that most non-Indigenous readers respond to humour like King’s not only with appreciation but also with a sense of relief in that such humour spares them from having “to confront their own ignorance and privilege” as settler subjects (139). For Hulan and Warley, Indigenous humour that resolves rather than foregrounds the incongruities and ambivalences of colonial relations ultimately “comforts rather than unsettles” non-Indigenous readers (132). They resist foreclosing on humour altogether as a possible vehicle of Indigenous literature and expression. Yet they clearly position humour’s bribe of easy pleasure as insufficient as a pedagogical or political tool for instantiating spaces of dialogue and cross-cultural engagement.

Yet Annharte’s “joke” about preferring misunderstanding to bonding is even more intractable. Clearly, the problem with “instant bonding” is that its effects and outcomes are transitory, untenable, and ultimately illusory. In this context, misunderstanding is better than a specious sense of connection because it occupies a position closer—rather than farther away—from the ideal of truthfulness or understanding. It is superior to false understanding because it renders visible rather than sutures over the structural incongruities and antagonisms at the material heart of settler colonialism and Indigenous dispossession. Unlike ready bonding,

dialogue, or resolution, Annharte's comic privileging of misunderstanding in settler-Indigenous relations suggests a refusal to reinscribe whiteness or settler subjectivity at the centre of the humorous encounter or exchange. It marks an instance of negativity resistant to the forms of recognition, accommodation, and synthesis that Gruber valorizes and proscribes. In the paradigm that Gruber sets out for Indigenous humour, however, Annharte's joke is legible less as refusal or resistance than as unconciliatory and illiberal, an expression of victimry or what Coulthard discusses as Indigenous resentment. Throughout her work, Gruber valorizes Indigenous humour that she views as surpassing the disabling logics of social antagonism, angry polemic, and overemphasis on territorial dispossession, all while eschewing conventional fantasies about resistance, retribution, and revenge (fictive or otherwise). As Glen Coulthard stresses, one of the effects of liberal reconciliation paradigms is to construct those who refuse such universal desiderata as dialogue, mediation, and resolution "as irrational, as physically and psychologically unhealthy, as reactionary, backward looking, and even as socially pathological" (23). With its dismissal of more overtly aggressive, confrontational, and antagonistic forms of Indigenous humour, then, Gruber's work not only misrepresents Indigenous writers like Annharte but also has the effect of discrediting, marginalizing, and effacing voices resistant to the enjoinders of so-called liberating laughter.

#### **4.4.2. Indigenous Deprecatory Humour and Teasing as Integration, Resolution, and Reconciliation: Arguments and Limitations**

Gruber titles her discussion of "in-group" Indigenous humour "Laughter as Good Medicine: Humor in Native Communities." Here she identifies what she views as the two key humorous modes "in intragroup Native relations and situations": self-deprecatory humour and teasing (197-98). Like other critics, Gruber recognizes how Native American humour often

functions as a means to negotiate, contest, and police issues surrounding Indigenous cultural authenticity, subject formation, identity, and community belonging. Yet she also insists that Indigenous “in-group” humour is almost always integrative rather than confrontational or divisive, even when its chief purpose is to discipline, correct, and control (205). “But where exactly does this integrative capacity of humor show, and how do the cohesive effects of laughter come about?” Gruber rightly asks (198). In essence, Gruber’s response to this question is the same as that which underlies her discussion of humour as mediation, negotiation, and conciliation. In many ways, Gruber predicates her entire reading of Indigenous humour upon the following proposition: “That sharing laughter unites people is a truism” (198). Since “laughter always relies on a common set of references,” humour is especially powerful in in-group situations, where it works to (re)assert and make visible identity and solidarity among people of similar background. Humour operates by mobilizing a host of background socio-cultural assumptions, values, and norms. When in-group members “get the joke,” it reassures and demonstrates that they indeed hold these norms and values in common (198).

Gruber defines Indigenous humour as “humor created by Native people that reflects and shapes aspects of Native as well as Euro-American life and culture. It arises from the resolution of playful incongruities” (39). For Gruber, Indigenous and settler humour differ primarily in their background and subject matter— “that is, on the level of motivation and content.” In terms of generic technique and structural logic, they are effectively identical (41). Along with her view of shared laughter as a tool of unification and identification, these definitions are central to Gruber’s discussion of how in-group Indigenous humour operates as an integrative rather than divisive means of social correction. In her brief overview of the fields of humour studies and theory, Gruber notes a perennial debate among advocates of incongruity-disjunction models of

humour—namely, whether or not incongruity resolution is a necessary feature of comic utterances and events (37). What is the reason, then, behind Gruber’s decision to insist upon reading humour as a mechanism for resolving incongruity, contradiction, opposition? On the surface, this question is unanswerable. Gruber nowhere provides any reason for her decision or cites any critical positions for resolution’s necessity. She simply accepts it as essential to humour as a whole and to Indigenous humour in particular. Although the author is silent on the issue, however, the critical orientation and framework of her text provides at least a couple of clues. From this perspective, perhaps the obvious answer is that incongruity resolution operates as a socio-political allegory in Gruber’s thinking about humour. Indeed, what is it if not resolution that underwrites and guarantees Gruber’s political confidence in humour as dialogue, mediation, synthesis, and reconciliation? What else is able to safeguard jokes about colonial violence, dispossession, loss of identity, and cultural genocide from slippage into disjunction, dissensus, and division? In truth, humour theory offers a remarkably wide range of thinking about the complex and ultimately non-binary relation of incongruity to congruity.<sup>27</sup> There is much more at issue than simply resolution or its opposite. By adhering rigidly and uncritically to an overly simplistic notion of humour as playful incongruity resolution, Gruber disserves the variety and complexity of humour at work in contemporary Native North American literature. She also renders her critical framework vulnerable to the logics of liberal recognition, accommodation, and reconciliation—logics that many Indigenous critics, activists, and writers find antithetical to Indigenous freedom and sovereignty (both cultural and political).

According to Gruber, what Indigenous in-group teasing and self-deprecatory humour share in common is that both constitute “means of forging social cohesiveness and strengthening

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<sup>27</sup> In “Code-Switching Humour in Aboriginal Literature,” Kristina Fagan claims that Annharte’s difficult humour in fact lacks resolution and operates from a shifting and uncertain location (40).

group identity” (198). In “Indian Humor,” the influential Standing Rock Sioux critic and activist Vine Deloria, Jr., identifies teasing as an indirect (and thus less fraught or potentially explosive) means of social control among both pre-contact and contemporary Native Americans: “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” (149). Drawing on Deloria’s work, Gruber identifies self-deprecatory humour as a type of self-teasing by which Indigenous in-group members acknowledge cultural trespasses or the criticism of others. Like teasing, self-deprecatory humour “functions as an instrument of social control that sanctions particular codes of conduct by ridiculing deviant behavior” (198). Yet it is the obverse of teasing in that its function is “to demonstrate humility” and reestablish solidarity between the transgressor and the group (200). For Gruber, what prevents teasing and self-deprecatory humour from further exacerbating conflict, difference, and antagonism is that it signals itself as playful rather than serious. Its function is critique or self-critique but by means of indirection and the bribe of humorous pleasure. As social control or self-policing, however, teasing is at once humorous and serious. It performs serious interpersonal and socio-cultural work even while mitigating the potential harshness of social censure and allowing transgressors to save face and escape embarrassment and shaming (Spielmann 110).

In “*You’re So Fat!*” *Exploring Ojibwe Discourse*, Roger Willson Spielmann recognizes teasing as a potentially risky speech act (122). Gruber recognizes it too, especially when it combines with self-deprecation to form what she describes as self-disparaging or “dark” Indigenous humour. As an example, Gruber points to controversies within Native literary criticism and writing communities over Indigenous writers who use humour as a strategy for re-

appropriating and recoding anti-Indigenous imprecations, stereotypes, and assumptions. Gruber punctuates her discussion of this mode of humour with a number of interesting and telling comments. For Gruber, endogamous Indigenous humour that takes up settler terms of insult and abuse transforms rather than simply reiterates injurious and hateful ideational content and meaning. Through in-group humour, stereotypes about “Indian time,” the Native propensity for bingo, the malapropisms of “Rez” English, and cultural ascriptions of “savageness” and “redskin” metamorphose into “a form of humorous bonding, as assurance of shared cultural membership, and a backhanded compliment” (201). Yet Gruber troubles this type of “positive” or “celebratory” reading at the same time as she asserts it. In an odd moment, she warns readers not to mistake humour “that uses distorting stereotypes” “for masochism or a symptom of self-hatred”—a warning that has the effect of suggesting just such a reading (201). Later, Gruber more transparently acknowledges that self-disparaging Indigenous humour “sometimes walks a thin line” and causes discomfort, uneasiness, and offense in Indigenous audiences as much as settler ones (201-02). As evidence, she points to critical texts by Louis Owens (Choctaw-Cherokee), Elizabeth Cook-Lynn (Crow Creek Sioux), and Gloria Bird (Spokane), each of which responds negatively to what they see as the “self-destructive and self-deprecatory” humour animating the work of Indigenous writers like Sherman Alexie (Spokane-Coeur d’Alene) and Adrian Louis (Lovelock Paiute). From a humour theoretical perspective in which audience expressions of pleasure or displeasure are axiomatic, the critical unlaughter of Owens, Cook-Lynn, and Bird is not only plausible and reasonable but not at all errant. Indeed, it is altogether unsurprising, given its immanence to the type of humour under discussion. In her response to these critics, however, Gruber chooses to admonish them for their inability to see how Alexie’s and Louis’ provocative use of humour works to “free” Indigenous texts and peoples from

“prescriptive, backwards-oriented,” and essentialist notions of Indigenous identity, the lure of “romantic idealizing,” and susceptibility to “clichés of the noble savage” (202). In essence, she charges them with not getting the joke (and the liberating laughter that follows).<sup>28</sup>

In her introduction to humour in Indigenous contexts, Gruber warns against idealizing teasing and self-deprecatory humour “by ignoring its potential to generate or exacerbate conflict” (198). Yet she proceeds to neglect this warning in her own reading of Native American literary texts. She acknowledges and addresses provocative joke content but insistently idealizes its effects and outcomes. She rightly stresses the specificity and heterogeneity of Indigenous nations and cultures and the problems this places on any attempt to speak of Native humour in the singular. Yet she goes on to claim that Native “humour today has a pan-tribally unifying and integrating capacity. It serves as a kind of ‘ethnic glue’ holding Native cultures together” (38). Many of Gruber’s claims rest on her sense that laughter unifies those who share in it. Interestingly, she cites the humour theorist James English to show how humour allows Indigenous writers to broach “anxieties and divisive subjects such as exaggerated essentialism, the internalization of imposed stereotypes or legal definitions, and the assimilation of Native people to Euro-American values and ambitions” (207). Yet she ignores English’s crucial thesis that the solidarities of laughter are always to an important degree false, illusory, fleeting, ideological. Certainly, humour is also able to give “evidence of far-reaching psychological conformity” on occasion (*Jokes and Their Relation* 203-04). But it is far from the critic’s role simply to take such an outcome on faith. Gruber holds that Owens’, Cook-Lynn’s, and Bird’s humorless readings of darkly comic Indigenous writers like Alexie and Louis risk reinscribing “clichés of the noble savage” (202). Yet what about her claim that provocative humour within

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<sup>28</sup> Less explicitly, she charges them with failing to understand the distinction between serious and humorous discourse—a move often used to discredit displeasure and unlaughter.

Indigenous contexts works towards integration rather than division? Is it not also at risk of reproducing the same oppressive clichés?<sup>29</sup> There is nothing inherently invalid about exploring mediation and integration within the framework of Indigenous literary humour in Native American or First Nations contexts. What is untenable is the idea that incongruity resolution and group laughter are sufficient to guarantee “positive” outcomes—even when potentially provocative or offensive humour is at issue.

In a chapter on “Humour, Laughter, and Teasing in Ojibwe Storytelling,” Spielmann identifies what he sees as a key difference between Anishinaabe and non-Indigenous responses to teasing. According to Spielmann, non-Native English speakers recognize teasing as humour, yet tend to respond to it seriously in order to save face. Contrarily, Anishinaabeg recognize it as both serious and unserious, but tend to respond with humour in order to make peace or maintain cordial social relations (127-28). Gruber cites Spielmann’s research in support of her own position. Yet Spielmann’s work stands better alone because it involves norms specific to certain Indigenous communities rather than essentializing ideas about how Indigenous humour operates in general.<sup>30</sup> Like Gruber, however, Spielmann is only able to arrive at his conclusion by effacing the socio-structural relations and disparities that animate humour as a site of tendentious affect and exchange.<sup>31</sup> Circumscribing issues of power, status, gender, and class is always problematic in humour analysis but especially in the context of Annharte’s work, which greatly complicates the accounts of teasing and humorous disparagement as Gruber and Spielmann present them.

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<sup>29</sup> Clearly, the responses of Owens, Cook-Lynn, and Bird demonstrate the capacity for teasing and self-disparaging humour to lead to dispute and division, at least on occasion. But Gruber solves this problem by accusing these critics of essentialist thinking about Indigenous identity and experience. It is a common move.

<sup>30</sup> There are also problems with and limits to Spielmann’s work in that it is not strictly empirical but (inevitably) smuggles in many “exogamous” truisms about humour. His position (untheorized) is also essentially reconciliation.

<sup>31</sup> This is due no doubt to the limits of conversational analysis as a discipline and research methodology.

The highly uneven field of Indigenous humour studies is rife with a variety of problematics. The residual influence of the “trickster moment” is only one such example. In relation to Annharte’s poetics, the limitations and blind spots particular to the field become especially apparent. These problematics include the tendency to idealize sites of Indigenous comic encounter, and to marginalize and even “pathologize” modes of humour that operate beyond the pale of this “positivist” register. There is also the tendency to regard humour as an ultimately “frictionless” social techne for resolving disparateness, incongruence, and contradiction, not only at the level of form but also that of the socio-symbolic and even the real. Crucially, this notion of humour as a mechanism that works by identifying, intensifying, and then (more or less) seamlessly “sublating” the “negativity” of conflictual relations finds a historical-material homologue in the liberal Hegelian dialectic—whose logics also happen to lie at the heart of the recognition model of settler-Indigenous reconciliation, especially as theorized by the influential Canadian political philosopher and social theorist Charles Taylor. In “Totem Transfer Narratives,” the Wapsewsiipi critic, scholar, and poet Dallas Hunt uses the term “hermeneutics of recognition” to describe the dominant critical paradigm currently operative within the field of (academic, settler) Indigenous studies. It is perhaps not surprising, then, to discover this paradigm also at work in Indigenous humour criticism. To examine how Annharte’s “guerrilla backchat” pressures this paradigm textually and politically, however, it helps first to take a close look at the work of Yellowknives Dene scholar Glen Coulthard and his influential critique of what he calls “the colonial politics of recognition.”

#### **4.4.3. Hegel, Coulthard, and the Dialectic of Settler Recognition and Reconciliation**

Liberal recognition politics tend to derive theoretical justification from two key Hegelian concepts: the master-slave dialectic and the end of history. In *Phenomenology of Spirit*, Hegel

allegorizes an originary moment whereby self-consciousness becomes consciousness of itself and for itself. Two bearers of consciousness meet and engage in a struggle to the death for recognition from the other. The victor accedes to the position of lord or master, subjecting the other as bondsman or slave. Over time, there transpires a dialectical reversal through which the slave achieves ascendancy over the master via her experience and knowledge of material production, upon which the master depends. In many ways, Hegel's notion of the end of history operates as a later (or last) moment of the master-slave dialectic, only here the struggle occurs between not individual subjects but peoples, societies, or nations. For Hegel, this struggle only comes to an end within the modern, democratic nation state, which realizes the coincidence of freedom and law.

As Glen Coulthard elaborates, Hegel's master-slave dialectic informs "contemporary recognition-based theories of liberal pluralism" "in at least two ways" (27). The first involves Hegel's insight that "relations of recognition" are no less than constitutive of identity and subjectivity.<sup>32</sup> The second is that these relations are only fully operative under conditions of mutuality and reciprocity (27-28). As Coulthard illustrates, this Hegelian framework is central to Charles Taylor's highly influential essay on "The Politics of Recognition," which interrogates the classical liberal notion that "society must remain neutral on the good life and restrict itself to ensuring that . . . citizens deal fairly with each other and the state deals equally with all" (Taylor 57). Drawing on Hegel, Franz Fanon, and other theorists of recognition, Taylor takes the position that since identity is primarily intersubjective and socio-cultural, any refusal of recognition entails a refusal to acknowledge the other's essential humanity. As Taylor writes,

"nonrecognition or misrecognition can inflict harm, can be a form of oppression, imprisoning

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<sup>32</sup> "Self-consciousness exists in and for itself when, and by that fact that, it so exists for another; that is, it exists only in being acknowledged" (Hegel qtd. by Coulthard 28).

someone in a false, distorted, and reduced mode of being” (25). From these premises, Taylor eventually concludes 1) that recognition is no less than a fundamental human right and 2) that liberal, democratic, and multicultural governments and polities have no rational, ethical, or political reason not to bestow this right upon subaltern or minority populations.

At base, Coulthard rejects Taylor’s communitarian thesis because it is not conducive to Indigenous resurgence and freedom. Unlike Hegel and Fanon, what Taylor neglects to acknowledge is that “the dialectical progression to reciprocity in relations of recognition” requires struggle on behalf of the slave (Coulthard 38). Disavowing the necessity of struggle and conflict, liberal recognition politics works to foreclose rather than bring about sites of decolonial emancipation. With his investments in deliberative democracy, Taylor is unable or unwilling to relinquish the liberal belief that multicultural nation-states like Canada offer the only practical framework for truth and reconciliation between settlers and Indigenous Peoples. At best, Taylor’s liberal reading of the master-slave dialectic is “affirmative” and “reformist” (Coulthard 35). From within a properly Hegelian perspective, the Indigene occupies the place of the “negative” within the context of ongoing Canadian settler-state oppression, domination, and dispossession. As Fanon recognizes, slave struggles for “equality in relations of recognition” are necessarily evental (Coulthard 31). Their goal is not affirmation or reform but to “pose a foundational ‘break’ with the background structures of colonial power as such” (39). In offering Indigenous peoples the “gift” of recognition, the state’s purpose is precisely to preempt the transformational possibility of any such decolonial rupture, break, or event. Indeed, liberal recognition dialectics not only neglects to address the ongoing structural-material conditions of capitalist-colonial dispossession and “extractivism.”<sup>33</sup> It also exposes Indigenous bodies to what

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<sup>33</sup> I borrow this last term from Leanne Betasamosake Simpson.

Coulthard calls a “double level of subjection.” The liberal master-slave dialectic cashiers the need for Indigenous “subjects of empire” to initiate “a process of strategic *desubjectification*,” which involves “purging the psycho-existential complexes” particular to colonial forms of interpellation (39). By the same token, it compels Indigenous subjects to regard settler notions of recognition, reconciliation, and justice as part of their own belief systems, when in truth they operate primarily as contemporary modes of colonial biopolitics and governmentality (156).

Coulthard’s reading of Taylor’s “liberalized appropriation of Hegel” leads to his third critique of liberal recognition politics (16). “At the heart of Hegel’s master/slave dialectic,” Coulthard writes, “is the idea that both parties engaged in the struggle for recognition are dependent on the other’s acknowledgment for their freedom and self-worth” (39). For Fanon and Coulthard, this aspect of Hegel’s thinking is precisely what disqualifies the lord or master as a theoretical-political figuration for the colonial state. Unlike the scene of Hegel’s speculative “struggle to the death,” colonialism by definition articulates a socio-political topography in which “the mutual character of dependency rarely exists” (40). In Hegel, what eventually allows the slave to seize recognition from the master is the slave’s “positive” or “non-alien” knowledge and relation to the objects of her labour. As a number of critics point out, however, the material base of settler-Indigenous relations is not so much labour exploitation as land theft, dispossession, and primitive accumulation. For Coulthard, Taylor’s approach has the potential to “alter the intensity of some of the effects of colonial-capitalist exploitation and domination,” but it is constitutively unable “to address their generative structures, in this case a capitalist economy constituted by racial and gender hierarchies and the colonial state” (35). Central to Taylor’s thesis, then, is a contradiction that no liberal dialectic is able to synthesize or resolve. This contradiction takes the form of a two-part ideological “fantasy.” 1) Multicultural settler states are

able to “recognize and accommodate a range of group-specific claims.” 2) They are able to accomplish this “without having to abandon their commitment to a core set of fundamental rights”—and by extension the institutional forms and structures that instantiate these commitments and rights (Coulthard 29). Via official recognition and accommodation, Taylor’s state works to negate the “negation” of Indigenous separateness and difference—and its desire is to manage this sublation without any excess or remainder. Citing the philosopher and social critic Richard Day, Coulthard calls for transformative political models of Indigenous self-recognition that work to alter not simply “the content of current modes of domination and exploitation, but also the forms that give rise to them” (52).<sup>34</sup> In Taylor’s model, however, the presupposition is that the liberal multicultural state form is in no significant need of alteration. For Taylor, it is precisely this historical form that allows and guarantees the more or less harmonious inclusion of otherwise disparate and heterogeneous cultural contents.<sup>35</sup>

In the specific context of the colonial settler-Indigenous relationship, Taylor’s liberal exceptionalism is more problematic still—and deeply ironic. Here the irony is that every act of state recognition in fact depends upon a prior act of misrecognition. In “The Politics of Recognition,” Taylor consistently misreads, misunderstands, and misrepresents Indigenous political orders as demands for cultural acknowledgment.<sup>36</sup> As Monika Siebert notes, the proclivity for misrecognizing Indigenous peoples as ethnic minorities is not at all particular to Taylor but inherent to the recognition paradigm. As an ideological manoeuvre, its chief purpose

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<sup>34</sup> See Richard J. F. Day. *Gramsci Is Dead: Anarchist Currents in the Newest Social Movements*.

<sup>35</sup> In simplest terms, Coulthard views these liberal forms of governmentality as colonial and racist, whereas Taylor views them as at least theoretically hospitable and affirmative safeguards, as well as responsive to such charges. For Coulthard, these background conditions are profoundly disabling. For Taylor, they are what enables the move towards decolonization.

<sup>36</sup> I borrow this notion of Indigenous bodies and collectivities as political orders from Leanne Betasamosake Simpson.

is to transform Indigenous political form into cultural content. In *Indians Playing Indian*, Siebert traces the recent history of these transformations to the reemergence of Indigenous sovereignty movements in the 1960s and 1970s, which follow upon the assimilation and termination policies of the Canadian and American governments of the postwar period (15-16). Accompanied by tactics of direct political action, the success of these movements is a large part of what ultimately leads the state to exchange explicitly racist social policies for the “softer” forms of colonial governance and biopower prevalent today. In concert with official forms of state multiculturalism, reconciliation and (mis)recognition are advantageous to the country now known as Canada for a variety of reasons. With their celebratory advocacy of cultural difference, liberal recognition platforms assist goals of national consolidation and help credentialize Canada’s self-representation as a model of Western democracy (Siebert 7). As Siebert stresses, these platforms also work to discredit “contemporary indigenous activism on behalf of political, legal, and economic self-determination,” rendering this activism largely illegible to the majority of settler-citizens (3). In this framework, Indigenous peoples no longer comprise autonomous, treaty bearing nations with their own “historical and contemporary realities” and legal relations to the colonial state (2). Conveniently, they instead come to signify as a minority population among many others, equally desirous and deserving of cultural citizenship and protection within the ever-increasing ambit of “Western incorporative universalism” (35).<sup>37</sup>

Within a liberal Hegelian understanding of settler-Indigenous history, recognition forms part of a larger dialectical movement whose endpoint includes reconciliation, resolution, and

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<sup>37</sup> The Chickasaw scholar and critic Jodi Byrd echoes Siebert’s conclusion in her important book *The Transit of Empire*, in which she excavates the settler biopolitical mechanisms that “racialize indigeneity into minority groups within the United States whose injury can and will somehow be remedied by the colonizing state’s recognition in spite of the fact that such recognitions do not end colonialism but rather enact it again and repeatedly” (172).

accommodation.<sup>38</sup> As Siebert writes, “the essential multicultural gambit” is “the coupling of recognition with reconciliation, one the guarantor of the other and vice versa” (28). More attentive to Hegelian parameters, Coulthard identifies the content particular to recognition as the very form in which reconciliation takes place (106).<sup>39</sup> As Coulthard enumerates, official forms of reconciliation conventionally include “state apologies, commissions of inquiry, truth and reconciliation commissions, individual reparations, and so forth” (22). For advocates of reconciliation, these state forms are necessary “for resolving the deleterious social impacts of intra-state violence, mass atrocity, and historical injustice” (106). In the more specific context of “settler polities like Canada,” they operate as forums and models for “individually and collectively overcoming the harmful ‘legacy’” of colonial misrecognition, abuse, and trauma (106, 22). As a moment within the liberal Hegelian dialectic, reconciliation marks the transition from the slavery of the colonial past to the full recognition and reciprocity of the democratic, multicultural present. Yet what this view of reconciliation posits as a moment of historical transcendence is patently of its own symbolic or ideological manufacture. As Coulthard notes, “settler-colonial formations are territorially acquisitive in perpetuity” (125). Reconciliation draws many of its institutional frameworks and mechanisms from the field of transitional justice. For Coulthard, the question then is how the rhetoric of transition, apology, and forgiveness is to operate in the context of the Canadian settler-state, which remains profoundly “nontransitional” in its ongoing accumulation and consolidation of First Nations’ resources and land (22).

Coulthard identifies various mechanisms through which “state-sanctioned approaches to reconciliation” attempt to manage this state of affairs. The reconciliation framework is appealing

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<sup>38</sup> Subsuming all significant difference, contradiction, and antagonism, this is the democratic, multicultural state as concrete universal and apotheosis of spiritual-material process: the end of history.

<sup>39</sup> On this point, Coulthard cites the political theorist Andrew Schaap, *Political Recognition*.

to settler nations like Canada because it “narrowly situate[s] the abuses of settler colonization firmly in the past,” “while leaving the present structure of colonial rule largely unscathed” (22). This temporal framing effectively shifts the onus of reconciliation from settler institutions and citizens to Indigenous bodies and communities. It is also a strategy for delegitimizing all present and future Indigenous direct action, pacifying less militant Indigenous political workers and activists, bureaucratizing and filibustering anti-colonial struggle, and placing a de facto moratorium on “questions of settler-coloniality as such” (108). Coeval with recognition, the function of reconciliation is to produce what Coulthard describes as “subjects of empire”—that is, Indigenous individuals who come to equate liberal forms of accommodation and conciliation with decolonization and freedom (156).<sup>40</sup>

In a crucial intervention, however, Coulthard also explores how reconciliation works to catalyze Indigenous bodies and selves as subjects of resentment. From a transitional justice perspective, Indigenous resentment in the face of reconciliation is unfavourable in that it indexes “an incapacitating inability or unwillingness to get over the past” (109). Within liberal reconciliation paradigms, Indigenous refusals to perform the work of acceptance, forgiveness, and healing signify not as signs “of moral protest and political outrage,” as Coulthard reads them. As Coulthard notes, the policy literature tends instead to view Indigenous expressions of “ugly feelings” like anger, despair, or outrage in a highly “unsympathetic light—as irrational, as physically and psychologically unhealthy, as reactionary, backward looking, and even as socially pathological” (22). Medicalizing Indigenous resistance, liberal reconciliation gaslights what it constructs as Indigenous negativity. By these means, the Canadian state displaces attention away from “the system of acculturative violence” that effectuates ongoing settler domination, re-

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<sup>40</sup> Clearly, it also works to authorize settler-citizen imaginaries and subjectivities.

routing it to Indigenous people as carriers of a painful historical burden in need of psychological repair, affirmation, and inclusion (121).<sup>41</sup> The *aufhebung* of reconciliation is a moment in which the Canadian state allocates \$350 million “for community-based healing as a first step to deal with the legacy of physical and sexual abuse at residential schools”—while asseverating before a global audience that “Canada has no history of colonialism” (121, 106).<sup>42</sup>

Importantly, Coulthard is not the only critic to confront recognition on broadly Hegelian terrain or to advocate the “negativity” of refusal as a “positive” decolonial tactic.<sup>43</sup> In her work, Siebert focuses on how state multiculturalism and recognition operate in tandem to efface political understandings of Indigeneity and Indigenous difference. In opposition to liberal shibboleths of dialogue, resolution, and closure, Siebert animates a political-theoretical topography of tension, antagonism, and conflict. For Siebert, the problem with the liberal dialectic of recognition is that its endgame is to “rewrite the colonial conquest into the nationalist narrative of progressive historical evolution and a political future as a universal democracy” (12).<sup>44</sup> In order to contain the threat of Indigenous political difference, the neo-colonial settler-state transforms it via misrecognition into cultural difference, which it then manages by

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<sup>41</sup> Coulthard here quotes from Sam McKegney, “From Trickster Poetics to Transgressive Politics: Substantiating Survivance in Tomson Highway’s *Kiss of the Fur Queen*.”

<sup>42</sup> Coulthard here cites the following sources: Jane Stewart, “Address by the Honourable Jane Stewart, Minister of Indian Affairs and Northern Development, on the Occasion of the Unveiling of Gathering Strength—Canada’s Aboriginal Action Plan,” and David Ljunggren, “Every G20 Nation Wants to Be Canada, Insists PM.”

<sup>43</sup> In *As We Have Always Done*, Simpson expresses a similar idea but within an explicitly Anishinaabe political-ethical framework: “Within Nishnaabewin, refusal is an appropriate response to oppression, and within this context, it is always generative” (33). While occupying different political positions, Jerry Fontaine (Ojibway-Anishinabe), Taiaiake Alfred (Kahnawà:ke Mohawk) and Arthur Manuel (Secwepemc) foreground the necessity of antagonism in their critical and activist work as well: “The fight for Ojibway-Anishinabe governance, sovereignty, and self-determination will remain a ‘blood struggle’ . . . and these endless apologies have to stop!” (Fontaine 180); “[R]estitution and reconciliation can only be achieved through contention and the generation of constructive conflict with the state and with the Settler society through the resurgence and demonstration of Onkwehonwe power in the social and political spheres” (Alfred, *Wasáse* 154); “Creating tension is not only unavoidable, it is necessary to bring about change” (Manuel and Derrickson 229).

<sup>44</sup> In this narrative, the trauma of colonial history only overcomes itself with the emergence of the post-conflictual, universal homogenous state. Of course, the canonical expression of this view is Frances Fukuyama’s liberal-Hegelian *The End of History and the Last Man* (1992).

submitting it to the already existing interpretive machinery of official multiculturalism.<sup>45</sup> As Siebert elaborates, the liberal dialectic of recognition has the effect of according contemporary Indigenous artists more public visibility than ever before. But it also confronts them with the double bind of how to “capitalize on the possibilities for the creative expression of indigenous specificity offered by multiculturalism while resisting national incorporation via multicultural misrecognition” (4). According to Siebert, much current, radical Indigenous cultural work pushes back against this double bind not by trying to settle, reconcile, or resolve it. Instead, it engenders political-aesthetic strategies that work to jam, forestall, and block the false sublation of Indigenous difference into identity and equivalence. Rather than resolving the tensions and impasses internal to the dialectics of (mis)recognition, it stages and sustains them as a form of refusal, interruption, intransitivity, and critique. This description is as good as any of how tendentious humour in Annharte works to frustrate liberal and “politically correct” settler and Indigenous frameworks of reception and analysis. Drawing on these insights from Coulthard, Siebert, and other critics of the recognition paradigm, the next section begins with a close examination of an especially salient punchline from Annharte’s “Squaw Guide” before branching out to other relevant textual moments (in this poem and others, as well as in Annharte’s critical writings).

#### **4.5. “So I did go excessive”: Tendentious Poetics and Textual Politics in *Indigena Awry***

##### **4.5.1. The Illiberal Humour of Annharte’s “Squaw Guide”**

The problem of . . . being a settler cannot be resolved through the language of apology and redress because it remains an ongoing contradiction, a material antagonism that unfolds as a relation of structural violence.

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<sup>45</sup> Dallas Hunt (Wapsewsiipi) usefully describes this interpretive machinery as the “hermeneutics of recognition” (84).

—Amy De’Ath, “Decolonize or Destroy”

Indigenous politics require a deep historical accounting to contextualize the processes that appear anomalous, illiberal, or illogical, and get conflated with pathology, economic desperation, and depredation.

—Audra Simpson, *Mohawk Interruptus*

The line “it’s hard to be a political correct squaw” appears in Annharte’s poem “Squaw Guide.” I find it an exemplary instance of the intransitivity that I regard as central to Annharte’s poetry, politics, and humour. As a joke or one-liner, the line is jaw-dropping in its condensation of the problematic of liberal reconciliation politics. What animates its humour and politics is the incongruous relation of political correctness to the colonial, racist, misogynist imprecation “squaw.” The line elicits and overdetermines laughter while refusing absolutely the mechanism of resolution. As humour, it invites the possibility of reconciliation while enacting its impossibility (at least under current neocolonial conditions). Humour theory provides a number of helpful questions with which to begin to think about this line, its interaction with other humorous moments within the text, and its relation to the poem’s thematic and political concerns as a whole. Why and how is the line humorous? What is its aim? Who or what is its target or butt? What enthymemes, presuppositions, or ideologemes does it mobilize? Wherein lies the joke’s plausibility-implausibility? To whom and by what routes does it circulate pleasure-displeasure?

Some of these questions are easier to answer than others. Clearly, the line registers as incongruous at least in part because political correctness and racist attributions are incommensurable as objects of predication. It is impossible and not simply “hard to be a political

correct squaw.” The subject position is logically, discursively, and socially uninhabitable.<sup>46</sup>

Hence the relation of plausibility to implausibility is in part that of difficulty to insuperability. As always, any joke that uses racist language or content potentially solicits or enables racist laughter or pleasure, regardless of context. It likewise risks offending readers for whom such language is a direct or indirect form of injurious speech. This is the basic problematic of tendentious humour. The particular identity of the speaker is never enough simply to cancel it out.

In a first pass, however, let us posit the reader or the audience member as a “progressive” Canadian settler subject amenable to a liberal politics of recognition, reconciliation, and accommodation. What happens when such a reader attempts to resolve the incongruity, consciously or otherwise? Part of what is so brilliant about the joke (and Annharte’s humour in general) is that it not only responds to but also actively solicits and organizes the conditions of its reception. Three possible responses to the humour of the line come to mind. Two of these responses are “false” or at least partial, whereas the other instead hinges on “irresolution.” Perhaps the most obvious response or outcome is to experience the line as a humorous appropriation, recoding, and claiming of an otherwise hateful speech act on the part of the speaker. Relatedly, the second is to regard the line as a travesty of racist colonial thinking or political correctness (or perhaps even both). My sense is that these two responses resolve little or nothing. They are not “incorrect” in that the line participates to some degree in parody and resignification. In the broadest sense, the butt of the joke is certainly settler colonialism, but this view not only lacks specificity. It is part of a set-up to set up liberal readerly responses.<sup>47</sup>

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<sup>46</sup> As an instance of resolution, Annharte’s joke is ultimately nonsensical within a liberal recognitive framework of reception. It gains maximal legibility within contexts of radical anti-colonial critique or Indigenous resurgence. In a real way, only actual decolonization “resolves” it, by dissolving the conditions in which it is operational as a joke.

<sup>47</sup> Succumbing to the bribe of (self-congratulatory) pleasure, part of what the liberal reader misrecognizes is his dual status as audience and butt.

In the last instance, what makes it “hard to be a political correct squaw” is that “symbolic acts of redress” (Coulthard 155) are insufficient as a means to transform the structural processes undergirding the ongoing gender and sexual violence against Indigenous women’s bodies. As the Mississauga critic, writer, and activist Leanne Betasamosake Simpson persuasively argues, these forms of violence are not at all epiphenomenal but rather foundational to (neo)colonial dispossession.<sup>48</sup> It is the state that wields this “foundational violence and dispossessing force,” but settler citizens also internalize and replicate it (51). Succumbing to the bribe of humorous pleasure, the liberal reader displaces or defers—not resolves—the very tension between his social location and his enjoyment, which the line works formally to exacerbate. In an early review article of Cree playwright Tomson Highway’s *Dry Lips Oughta Move to Kapuskasing*, Annharte worries about the possible effects of the play’s genuinely disturbing yet too easily enjoyable humour on non-Indigenous viewers.<sup>49</sup> “In *Dry Lips*,” Annharte writes, “the laughter is unavoidable. All the gags work. The bare-assed jokes are funny” (88). This laughter is both enjoyable and problematic for Annharte, given the extent that it relies on sexist and Indigenous stereotypes for its effectivity. Certainly, the play imagines itself as using provocative, offensive, and potentially hurtful humour in a critical rather than reactionary manner. Yet the play’s enjoinder to laughter fails in part because it is too readily absorbable into the settler imaginary. It is too quick to let “do-gooders and white liberals” off the hook with self-congratulatory pleasure and a spurious (at best) feeling of identity with Indigenous struggles and causes. As Annharte writes, the play’s humour “arouses my suspicion about the audience because it is not popular to

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<sup>48</sup> As Simpson forcefully argues, “heteropatriarchy is not a discrimination that has come with white supremacy and colonialism; it is a *foundational dispossession force* because it is a direct attack on Indigenous bodies as political orders, thought, agency, self-determination, and freedom” (52).

<sup>49</sup> She also expresses concern about its effect on Indigenous viewers, especially women.

attend a ‘politically incorrect’ performance that might *intentionally* endorse racism or sexism. I worry about the unintended” (89).

Annharte finds it hard to resist the humorous aspects of Highway’s play even though she often experiences them as “disturbing,” “repulsive,” and “gross.” “We all need to laugh desperately,” she concedes. “But why we are laughing and at whom has become an invalid inquiry. We just have to open our jaws and give up the heehaws” (88). These sentences are of particular interest for at least two reasons. They evidence Annharte’s critical attunement to the politics of humour: its exigencies, motivations, logics, and effects. They also suggest that her experience of Highway’s play serves as a “negative” influence on her own humour practice, which becomes especially intransitive in the poetry subsequent to her first collection, *Being on the Moon*.<sup>50</sup> Annharte finds fault with *Dry Lips* not only because it manipulates its audience with laughter but because this laughter has two undesirable effects. It configures a bogus sense of solidarity or else reinscribes stereotypes and injurious language about Indigenous people, culture, and communities.<sup>51</sup> Of course, even Annharte’s most intransitive jokes are not completely able to interrupt either of these outcomes. As many humour theorists note, part of the risk in deploying humour to political ends is that the overdetermination responsible for humour’s effectivity renders it highly susceptible to undesirable or non-doctrinaire ends. Part of what is so striking about Annharte’s “political correct squaw” joke is the high degree to which it refuses resolution and reconciliation, at least at the level of form and internal logic. Even when listeners resolve humorous utterances falsely, their laughter, pleasure, and enjoyment are real, correct, and true. Still, liberal reconciliatory or identificatory laughter at Annharte’s “political correct squaw” joke patently indexes a misreading of what is at stake in the joke. Within a colonial context, the

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<sup>50</sup> *Being on the Moon* and “Angry Enough to Spit” both appear in 1991.

<sup>51</sup> As Annharte recognizes, these two effects are far from mutually exclusive.

only “correct” liberal response is something more like nervous laughter. It is the laughter of irresolution, discomfort, and unsettledness. In *Comic Transactions*, James English writes, “Jokes occur because society is structured in contradiction; there are no jokes in paradise, or in the telos of the good society” (9).<sup>52</sup> Annharte’s joke demands resolution, but at the social-political rather than cognitive level. Indeed, this precisely is its politics: to demand a (decolonial) space and time in which the line is no longer even legible as humour.

To extract a political platform from a single line of poetry is no doubt to ask a bit much. Interestingly, however, the critic Amy De’Ath finds herself in a similar situation in her brilliant essay “Decolonize or Destroy,” which opens with a substantive analysis of the first two lines of the very same poem: “‘You Audience / Me Squaw’, begins Anishinaabe poet Marie Annharte Baker’s ‘Squaw Guide,’ and with these words Annharte (as she prefers) sets out an explicit antagonism between an audience figured as settler and the Indigenous speaker of the poem” (286). Though its main focus lies elsewhere, De’Ath’s essay offers much to a humour theoretical reading of Annharte’s work. Particularly helpful are those moments where De’Ath explicitly addresses the imbrication of humour and politics at work in these opening lines. Attending to the politics of form, De’Ath describes how “Annharte’s language and line break parody settler representations of Indigenous English-language speech patterns—which, if we were to believe white settler culture, always lack conjunctions.” She characterizes the poem’s opening lines as a

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<sup>52</sup> English’s language here strongly recalls British social anthropologist Mary Douglas’ important work on humour. In *On Humor*, the sociologist Michael Mulkey provides a concise overview of Douglas’ key contributions to the field: “The central idea [in Douglas] is that there is a direct correspondence between humour and social structure. Joking takes place because the organized patterns of social life themselves introduce contradictions, oppositions, and incongruities which find expression through the medium of humorous discourse” (153). The following is from Douglas’ essay on joking, social control, and cognition in her later text *Implicit Meanings*:

The one social condition necessary for a joke to be enjoyed is that the social group in which it is received should develop the formal characteristics of a ‘told’ joke: that is, a dominant pattern of relations is challenged by another. If there is no joke in the social structure, no other joking can appear (98) . . . I would go a step further and even suggest that the experience of a joke form in the social structure calls imperatively for an explicit joke to express it. (100)

“joke” played “on the settler,” and she explicitly articulates the humour of these lines to the structural-semantic contradictions and antagonisms that animate them. As De’Ath writes, “the terms ‘Audience’ and ‘Squaw’ imply incommunicability, a coerced performance rather than a conversation, especially because the speaker names herself through the racist and racializing language of white settler culture.” De’Ath nowhere engages humour theory or literary critical readings of humour in Annharte or Indigenous literature more generally. Nevertheless, her essay offers a convincing demonstration of the incommensurability of Annharte’s poetics, humour, and politics to literary critical conceptions of humour as dialogue, resolution, or reconciliation.

For De’Ath, the couplet “You Audience / Me Squaw” “is typical of Annharte’s work as a whole” in part because it “represents a more holistic, decolonizing sensibility that forms the basis of a politics” (286). “It is hard to be a political correct squaw” rewards close critical attention in a similar way. Still, Annharte’s poetics and humour are as discursive as they are dense and gnomic. Among other things, “Squaw Guide” comprises a complex layering of jokes, repetitions, caricatures, and other comic “bits” and “particles.”<sup>53</sup> Holistically, however, it also references and at least partially mimics performance logics particular to the comic stand-up routine.<sup>54</sup> “Aw fuckem if they can’t take a joke,” the Indigena speaker writes. “[A] stand up comic would hit hard / in a comeback routine tell off heckler” (13). The joke in question is from a slightly earlier part of the poem, in which the speaker uses a variant of the familiar Lone Ranger joke to talk back to “this drunk white hosehead” who interpellates her as a “squaw” in the public space of a school bus. With these lines, the speaker identifies the stand-up comic as offering a potential position, model, or set of tactics for rebutting, calling out, shaming, or embarrassing those who

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<sup>53</sup> Some of this language I borrow from Judith Roof, *The Comic Event* (36).

<sup>54</sup> As stand-up, Annharte’s poem riffs on a number of topics, situations, and motifs. Prominent among these are pop culture representations of “the noble savage” (Tarzan, *The Lion King*, Tonto, Jack Jacobs) and the relation of Indigeneity to feminism and academia.

wield sexist, racist, colonial, white supremacist language. Yet the comeback that the speaker *qua* stand-up offers is awry in the sense that it at once offers and refuses both cathexis and catharsis: “hey bud you lost a right to get laid / in the westend or northend by a squaw” (13).

The function of the comeback is to display superior wit, mobilize audience laughter, and discipline the harasser, thus allowing the stand-up to (re)gain the upper hand. At the most basic level, however, Annharte’s comeback is implausible and incongruous because it seems massively inadequate to the task. According to the surface logic of the joke, what leads the “heckler” to lose his “right” to sleep with Indigenous women is his racist, sexist, and colonial beliefs, evidenced by his use of the term “squaw.” For a racist settler-subject to use the word “squaw” is to disqualify himself from having sexual relations with a “squaw.” Clearly, part of the disjunction here has to do with the speaker’s repetition of the word “squaw.” Among the ideologemes operative in the background to this joke are colonial-settler constructions of Indigenous women as dirty, abject, worthless, less than. Yet the comeback appears to reinforce rather than challenge these views, which seems highly implausible coming from an Indigenous woman poet or stand-up.

These are only some of the implausibilities and incongruities operative in Annharte’s tendentious riposte to the heckler-harasser. Part of the intransitivity of the joke stems from the sheer number of social conflicts, tensions, and antagonisms that it summons or makes available to participants in this comic exchange. As humour, however, the comeback also offers readers potential sites of plausibility and conjunction. As Indigenous feminist critics like Leanne Betasamosake Simpson, Audra Simpson, and Andrea Smith demonstrate, colonial, heteropatriarchal, and racist terms like “squaw” produce Indigenous women’s bodies as dirty and

abject, but also as sexual objects readily available for the gratification of white settler men.<sup>55</sup> On the surface, settler disgust-desire for Indigenous women appears as antithetical. As Smith points out, however, it is precisely “because Indian bodies are ‘dirty’” that “they are considered sexually violable and ‘rapable’” (10). Settler degradation and sexual objectification of Indigenous women are two sides of the same colonial coin. Importantly, this contradiction and its “resolution” are immanent to Annharte’s imaginary riposte.<sup>56</sup> But neither of these is sufficient to provide the type of dialectic closure necessary to liberal forms of identification, recognition, and reconciliation (or even less complex jokes, for that matter). Part of the reason for this intransitivity has to do with the ratio of sense to signification, which is in excess of any disambiguation or resolution.

How is the comeback legible as an insult to the settler-heckler (at least from a colonial, racist, misogynistic standpoint)? It suggests that he is undesirable and unable to get sex from anyone but “squaws,” particularly those from the West End or North End of Winnipeg, which at least suggest street-level prostitution. Yet the word “right” not only means “prerogative” or “entitlement” but “privilege.” In this sense, the line functions less as an insult than as a comic inversion and appropriation of negative language and stereotypes. Whether the heckler thinks this or not, “to get laid by” an Indigenous woman is a privilege because they are “loving, caring, honest, brilliant, spectacular, empathetic, compassionate, beautiful, smart, kind, gentle, good

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<sup>55</sup> Among other places, see Leanne Betasamosake Simpson, *As We Have Always Done* (83-84), Audra Simpson, *Mohawk Interruptus* (156), and Andrea Smith’s chapter on “Sexual Violence as a Tool of Genocide,” in *Conquest* (7-33).

<sup>56</sup> Amy De’Ath notes how this type of humour in Annharte “opens up a new register of knowledge and perception, one where the colonial relation no longer gets to determine what is obvious and what is not” (286).

lovers.”<sup>57</sup> Outing himself as a racist and misogynist, the settler-heckler disqualifies himself from any such experience.

Again, this list of possible readings is far from exhaustive. Some appear more plausible than others. Most apply to settler rather than Indigenous readers or contexts. As with much of her humour, Annharte’s “guerrilla backchat” constellates multiple competing social, political, and historical incongruities, fault lines, and antagonisms. Her intransitive joking holds out possible sites of resolution, but these are never global. In poems like “Squaw Guide,” relations of humorous disjunction-connection never entirely line up, map onto each other, or cancel each other out. As poem and comic monologue, “Squaw Guide” at once enacts a number of “squaw” personas and traverses the slur as a possible locus of what De’Ath calls “transformative antagonism.” It approaches something like what Lauren Berlant and Sianne Ngai describe as “antiracist racist” humour, at least to the extent that it “collapses the difference between cathexis and catharsis, investment in the joke and the relief of release from it” (245).<sup>58</sup> In *Freedom Time*, Anthony Reed inquires into dissident poetic and citational practices that work to dis-align rather than simply mock or reject colonial, imperial, racist language, texts, and cultural forms.<sup>59</sup> With its series of “squaw” jokes, Annharte’s poem works to critique, appropriate, deconstruct, and re-code violent colonial stereotypes about Indigenous women. But it also unsettles and interrupts the formal, political, and affective forms of identification, resolution, and release that subtend the “positive” demands of liberal recognition and reconciliation.

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<sup>57</sup>This list of positive attributes of Indigenous women comes from a workshop at the Dechinta Centre for Research and Learning, Chief Drygeese Territory (Yukon). Indigenous men as well as women were involved in compiling the list (L. Simpson 84).

<sup>58</sup> Berlant and Ngai introduce this term in their discussion of a Stewart Lee comedy routine that (among other things) takes as its “object” the Taiwanese film director Ang Lee (243-46). Interestingly, the term also appears in Coulthard, although here it describes the necessary yet insufficient anti-colonial “ressentiment” of the colonized (246-47).

<sup>59</sup> I owe this reference to Reed’s work to De’Ath (286-87).

#### 4.5.2. Humour and the Politics of Indigenous Identity, Difference, and Solidarity

As with all of Annharte's writing and humour, "Squaw Guide" is a remarkably complex text that requires and rewards a high degree of critical scrutiny. The following section continues to elaborate how Annharte places humour in the service of an illiberal, decolonial politics of (mis)recognition, in "Squaw Guide" and in other writings. Whereas the above section posits a liberal settler subject as reader of Annharte's text, this section considers how Annharte's humour circulates and signifies within Indigenous reception frameworks. To an extent, Gruber's reading of Indigenous "in-group" humour as a form of communal integration is a product of the "trickster moment" of earlier decades. In their approaches to Indigenous literature, however, many critics continue to prioritize socio-textual coherence and continuity over ambivalence and disruption, especially in Indigenous-specific contexts. Indeed, this tendency is undoubtedly even greater today, a result of the various Indigenous literary nationalisms that have come to prominence over the past decade or so, many of whose onto-epistemic frameworks are at least tacitly positivist and presentist in orientation. Let us take as an example a recent monograph from Jerry Fontaine, who like Annharte identifies as Anishinabe of the Ojibway Nation.

Throughout *Our Hearts Beat as One Fire*, Fontaine details how Ojibway-Anishinabe systems of government are inherently equitable, deliberative, and consensual. By nature of their very structure, Ojibway clan, totem, or kinship networks work effectively to guarantee tribal unity while also allowing for expressions of difference, to the point that positions of leadership or relative privilege have nothing to do with politics or power.<sup>60</sup> As a former "elected *Indian Act*

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<sup>60</sup> Fontaine articulates claims to this effect frequently throughout his book. As a summary, especially helpful is the book's final chapter, in which the following citations appear: "Anishinabe sovereignty could not by its inner dynamics function in any way other than an interdependent and supportive manner. This incredible system of social order and structure was one of the original laws of creation, which came to represent life itself . . . The objective was always to speak with one voice and reach consensus when deliberating on community and nation issues" (183-84).

chief,” Fontaine is all too aware that this situation is no longer the case, and his book offers a history of sorts of the increasing fractiousness of tribal politics from “contact” to the contemporary moment (16-17). Importantly, this is a narrative to which Annharte is not necessarily antagonistic.<sup>61</sup> For Fontaine, however, what a genuinely radical, contemporary decolonial politics entails is a return to traditional tribal modes of governance, as embodied by Indigenous relations to the land, as well as in the exemplary anti-colonial political practices of three great Anishinabe war chiefs of the past: Obwandiac, Tecumtha, and Shingwauk.<sup>62</sup>

Certainly, other Indigenous critics and activists offer “traditional,” “national” visions of radical decolonization that are likely more amenable to Annharte’s perspective than is Fontaine’s. The value of using Fontaine as an example here, however, has to do with how it captures much of what Annharte finds uncomfortable about such visions. This discomfort goes beyond her dislike of “male warrior societies” and their valorization as a critical or political model by certain Indigenous writers (as is frequently the case with the Kahnawà:ke Mohawk political theorist Taiaiake Alfred, at least in his earlier work). Due to the vicissitudes of her early life and upbringing, Annharte’s identity as Anishinaabekwe is not something that she is simply able to assume, but rather something “tortuous,” “highly negotiable,” and “patchy.”<sup>63</sup> As she relates to Lally Grauer in “A Weasel Pops In and Out of Old Tunes,” “I have had to salvage and piece together sometimes opposing or contradictory ideas to meld into a cohesive personal identity” (*AKA* 104). What Annharte desires from “tribal histories,” then, is not so much

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<sup>61</sup> “Among my people,” Annharte writes, “we do not discriminate on the basis of ‘class’ or a lowly status given to others at birth.” She juxtaposes this with her experience on Coast Salish Territory in the 1960s, where “the idea of ‘class’ or aristocratic inclination predominated” (*AKA* 144-45).

<sup>62</sup> The first two of these historical figures are more commonly known as Pontiac (Odawa) and Tecumseh (Shawnee). Shingwauk was Anishinabe of the Ojibwe Nation.

<sup>63</sup> Reg Johanson patches together these three terms from two different Annharte texts in his introduction to *AKA Inendagosekwe* (xv).

culturally authentic knowledge than “stories of irreverence” and “the not-so-sacred,” which unsurprisingly are often also the stories of Indigenous women.

In her writing, Annharte is also often apprehensive or suspicious about discourses that assume direct or unproblematic access to genuine Indigenous traditions, particularly given how “[t]he creation of a canon of authentic stories is tainted by its reliance on colonial anthropology” (Johanson, Introduction xv). As both a decolonial desideratum and a colonial construct, the double bind of authenticity is only one of the many impasses that Annharte names, navigates, and exacerbates via “in-group” humour. Other double binds include how nationalist discourses by Indigenous academics, critics, and writers work at once to address but also speak in the place of poor, queer, disabled, drug-addicted, and other marginalized members of Indigenous communities, whether urban or reserve. In “Bio: Testimonial,” Annharte suggests that social stratification within Indigenous communities “must result from our perceptions as ‘colonized’ Natives,” and she names these perceptions as a form of “internalized racism” (*AKA* 145). Throughout *Indigena Awry*, Annharte wields tendentious humour as a textual, affective, and political strategy for confronting these and other “contradictions that I face as a Native woman,” including (painfully) why “I cannot expect to find immediate solidarity with other Native women or with other Native writers.” Rather than playful teasing as a spur to social correction, Annharte leverages humour that “verges on the edge of outrageousness/excessiveness,” “a polemic Bitch/rant style” that shocks “listeners into paying attention” (*AKA* 95, 99). She is more than aware of the risks involved in such an approach. *AKA Inendagosekwe* is full of instances where Annharte talks about the tensions that her “guerrilla backchat” engenders between her and other

Indigenous writers, and at times she agonizes over her status as a “pariah” and “outcast” within the broader Indigenous literary community.<sup>64</sup>

In his monograph *On Humour*, the British critical theorist Simon Critchley draws on the writings of the early-eighteenth-century philosopher Anthony Ashley Cooper, 3<sup>rd</sup> Earl of Shaftesbury, to explore how “true” or (self)critical humour works to bring about a *sensus communis*.<sup>65</sup> Pace Critchley, the humour theorist Nicolas Holm suggests that humour is most politically subversive when it operates as a vehicle of *dissensus*—that is, of opening a gap in what local social norms construe as at once common, sensical, and sensible.<sup>66</sup> The purpose of the following section is to demonstrate precisely how and why Annharte’s decolonial humour inclines significantly towards dissensus and away from consensus, while keeping in mind that the comic and political aims of poems like “Squaw Guide,” “Breed Apart,” “Better Dressed,” and others are not to produce dissensus within Indigenous communities but to index various forms of (mis)recognition that are already there.

#### 4.5.3. “what do we mean ‘we’”? “Rez” Humour without Reserve: or, Dissensus Communis

I have a few unpopular suggestions to offer.

—Annharte, “Journal: One Pariah Two Pariah”

In Leanne Betasamosake Simpson’s work, radical Indigenous resurgence of necessity involves an affirmative turning away from the gaze of the colonial nation-state and settler

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<sup>64</sup> “Lots of animosity comes from the elite writers in particular,” she tells Reg Johanson. “I was treated as a pariah in Brandon [at a writing group],” she remarks in the same interview. “My horribleness is at times accidental as I forget in my search for answers that I offend people by asking any questions at all (AKA 194-95). “Journal: One Pariah Two Pariah” is also informative in this regard.

<sup>65</sup> Interestingly, Critchley opposes true humour to reactionary humour, which he describes as operating primarily by means of recognition and to the end of reinforcing the status quo (11). For Critchley, true humour finds its ground in “a common, familiar world of shared practices, the background meanings implicit in a culture,” while also indicating “how those practices might be transformed or perfected, how things might be otherwise” (16). As a result, its procedures are quite different than those of dissensus, at least as theorized by the French philosopher Jacques Rancière, as well as the humour theorist Nicolas Holm.

<sup>66</sup> See Nicolas Holm, “The Distribution of the Nonsensical.”

subjectivity.<sup>67</sup> To refuse the liberal politics of accommodation and recognition, then, is also to refuse to maintain whiteness as the de facto horizon of meaning for all iterations of contemporary Indigenous expressive forms. In “Decolonize or Destroy,” De’Ath echoes this position, writing how Annharte’s poetry “is primarily addressed not to a settler audience, but an Indigenous community, and unfolds in relation to the history of Indigenous experience and struggle” (286). It is undoubtedly a critical error (or worse) to limit Annharte’s textual politics to explanatory “frameworks of white supremacy or capitalist imperialism” (De’Ath 286). For non-Indigenous and settler readers, the opacities of Annharte’s text are more than simple formal features and include references, implicatures, and modes of knowledge effectively internal to particular Indigenous social groups or nations. Yet De’Ath’s ascription of a specific intentionality to Annharte’s writing of “Squaw Guide” introduces limits and misrecognitions of its own. Which Indigenous community in particular is the primary audience of a text like *Indigena Awry*? Pluralizing *community* certainly offers a better index of the heterogeneity of audiences that Annharte in fact addresses and brings about by means of her writing. Yet simple pluralization too has its limits, particularly where *Indigenous community* appears to name an (impossible) social body in which a co-extension of history, experience, and struggle is the norm. From a settler, critical perspective, it makes sense to experience the lines “You audience / Me squaw” as setting “up an explicit antagonism between an audience figured as settler and the Indigenous speaker of the poem” (De’Ath 286). But is this the only way to read this set-up and antagonism? What happens to this line of interpretation in contexts that take Indigenous readers as the primary audience of the poem?

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<sup>67</sup> “what do we mean ‘we’” is the title of a poem from *Indigena Awry*. Of course, it is also a re-appropriation of the punchline from the canonical Tonto-Lone Ranger joke: “What do you mean ‘we,’ paleface?” By changing the second-person pronoun from singular to plural, Annharte’s version of the joke works to trouble assumptions about overly idealistic notions of Indigenous solidarity (among other things).

To a degree, the question here is that of interpellation. The opening lines to “Squaw Guide” are a “set-up” in part because they set up settler “presumptuousness in taking up the role of audience/viewer (which, as far as colonialist conventions are concerned, is the side of aesthetic judgement and domination)” (De’Ath 286). Yet what if this settler presumptuousness extends to assuming that settlers are part of the circuit of communication at all? Whereas the subject of the utterance “Me squaw” is relatively unambiguous, this is not the case given the variable applicability of the illocutionary statement “You audience.” Indeed, what prevents this second-person “punchline” from “hailing” Indigenous men as audience and thus also as the object or butt of the joke, especially given the explicit gendering of the racist imprecation in question?<sup>68</sup> Importantly, the indeterminateness of the *you* is not all that makes such a reading available. The poem opens in this interpretive direction at the level of narrative content as well. “Squaw Guide” explicitly addresses Indigenous figures or “characters” in three instances, two of which involve men.<sup>69</sup> “[O]n the rez,” there is the patriarchal “chief” to whose authority “the women” are always aggressively deferring, and there is the “warrior” who demands, “make tea squaw / braid my hair after” (14). In the *mise-en-scène* of the poem, “being called a squaw” by “this drunk white hosehead” is the originary moment of racist interpellation and colonial subjectivization. Yet the complicity of the chief and the warrior—and perhaps even of the “rez” women—locates Indigenous community members within the ambit of the second-person pronoun of the audience as well.<sup>70</sup> By means of pronominal ambiguity, the poem (differentially)

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<sup>68</sup> I take up this issue of Indigenous gender politics in my discussion of Annharte’s poem “Better Dressed,” below.

<sup>69</sup> These characters are separate from the various historical Indigenous persons who also appear in the poem.

<sup>70</sup> Annharte address this “complicity” in “Journal: One Pariah Two Pariah,” where she writes, “I would like more of our Native women to quit playing up to our male politicians and sacrificing our poorer more disadvantaged sisters” (AKA 181).

reactivates, redistributes, and reconfigures the illocutionary force of colonial (mis)recognition, as this operates among settler and Indigenous communities alike.

Consideration of Annharte's tendentious humour in Indigenous contexts of reception is clearly crucial to understanding the decolonial imperative and refusal of liberal recognition, reconciliation, and accommodation at work in a text like *Indigena Awry*. The following section addresses this issue directly by examining other Annharte poems that appear to speak more or less directly to Native readers and audiences while taking a humorous yet provocative approach to often volatile questions concerning Indigenous identity and community social relations. As a means to set up this section, however, it is worthwhile to have a final look at "Squaw Guide," and particularly at how forwarding an Indigenous horizon of meaning differentially inflects a (punch) line like "it's hard to be political correct squaw."

Importantly, this line opens the stanza immediately following that whose action takes place "on the rez." The lines that bring about this transition to the discursive space of the reservation are also important, but as an instance of Annharte's virtuoso, comic highjacking of Althusserian interpellation:

as i speak squaws are past tense  
used to be but nobody says that word much

hey but wait a minute  
did you just gaze at me funny  
intend just a bit  
to call me a squaw? (14)

In the first two lines, Annharte's speaker appears to follow the mandate of reconciliation by firmly situating colonial injustice in the past. Sounding the affective register typical of postcolonial confessional poetics, this couplet offers the (liberal, settler) reader a moment of respite. Of course, the brilliance of these lines lies in how they only give the illusion of allowing a temporary "safe space" for settlers to listen sensitively to Native grievances, while also alluding to the legitimate (out)rage of Indigenous women, which is "past tense" not in the sense of having come to an end, but in the sense of being beyond or more than tense, as occupying a state of maximum tension (on the threshold of exploding). In the quatrain that follows, the speaker breaks the fourth wall, explicitly addressing and calling out the reader in a manner that recalls a stand-up comedian confronting an audience member. Deceptively simple, this comic rebuke circulates and condenses the logic and language of Fanon's account of the subjectifying power of the racist, colonial gaze and of Althusser's figure of the policeman as the voice of ideological hailing ("hey...you!").<sup>71</sup> In De'Ath's reading, the antagonistic humour of "Squaw Guide" is transformative of an Indigenous register of knowing in which "the colonial relation no longer gets to determine what is obvious and what is not, and where it becomes clear that it is the settler who is, and always was, mistaken" (286). Yet is this entirely the case?

In Annharte, the settler in fact is far from the exclusive "subject of empire," to use Yellowknives Dene political theorist Glen Coulthard's designation. In *Red Skin, White Masks*, Coulthard draws on Fanon (and to a lesser extent Althusser) as a means to formalize the biopolitical processes through which liberal recognition platforms endeavour to produce "neocolonial subjectivities that coopt Indigenous people into becoming instruments of their own

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<sup>71</sup> Lest the allusions be too subtle: "Hey but wait a minute / did you just gaze at me funny" (emphases mine). As Coulthard avers in his own work, the canonical texts here are Frantz Fanon, *Black Skin, White Masks*, and Louis Althusser, "Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses."

dispossession” (156). “For Annharte,” Johanson points out, “it’s not only the colonizer who appropriates” or “who trades in the exotic” (*AKA* xii, xiv). Correlatively, her tendentious, critical humour (or “bitching”) “is directed as often to the colonized as it is to the colonizer” (v). De’Ath’s insistence that Annharte’s writing primarily address Indigenous communities rather than settler audiences is an important intervention. Among other effects, it decentres whiteness, registers the opacities of Annharte’s text as always potentially site-specific, and complements Annharte’s quip about the settler tendency to equate Indigenous humour with anger (*AKA* 8). Clearly, however, it is not only the settler who “gazes” at the speaker “funny,” intending perhaps (“just a little bit”) to “call me a squaw” (14). The provocative, explosive humour of the line depends on it.

In “Squaw Guide,” Annharte addresses the double bind of “authentic” Indigenous identity and its performance in relation to colonial frameworks like the Indian Act, Bill C-31, and Truth and Reconciliation in various ways, often via reference to filmic and other pop cultural representations of Indigeneity.<sup>72</sup> As a pun of sorts, the poem’s title also indexes Annharte’s ongoing concern with Indigenous identity and colonial internalization. As a “guide,” is the purpose of the poem to abet the identification of “squaws,” or is it to offer instruction on how to become (or act) like a “squaw?” Is the identity of the *you* in Annharte’s burlesque of Fanon-Althusser part of “what is obvious” or “what is not” as regards the poems’ humour qua transformative antagonism? As a locus and provocation of colonial (mis)recognition, is this second person a hailing to which only settler readers always already succumb?<sup>73</sup>

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<sup>72</sup> The poem references the *Tarzan* and *Lion King* film franchises in various places, as well as the Indigenous Hollywood actors Jay Silverheels (Six Nations) and Jack Jacobs (Muscogee).

<sup>73</sup> That this locution begs the question only furthers its point.

Such questions and issues come to the fore as Annharte's poem transitions from the (comic) stage of direct audience address and playful-serious confrontation to the space of "the rez," which the speaker compares to "the movies or a native production set" (14). Exploiting the categorical ambiguity of the noun adjunct, this comparison troubles discourses of cultural authenticity in relation to the "rez" by suggesting how rural, Nation-specific communities also participate in (re)producing Native identities in the image of the colonizer. Hailing Indigenous women as "squaws," Annharte's rez warrior and chief disclose their sexism but also their status as de facto subjects of settler interpellation. In reproducing the type of monosyllabic speech pattern that the poem earlier associates with the "Tarzan Jane address / in the old movies" (12), these men demonstrate their unreflective reliance on colonial filmic simulacra as touchstones of "traditional" Native masculinity. In "Straight Forward Approach," Reg Johanson notes how "Annharte is quick to call out the fakes, but she also problematizes 'authenticity'" (138). In this stanza, Annharte goes one step further, suggesting that "fake" and "authentic" expressions of Indigenous identity are two sides of the same (colonial) coin. Certainly, Annharte's purpose here is to critique the "false consciousness" of Indigenous men who exploit colonial slurs and stereotypes for their own gain or satisfaction—especially as these contribute to the ongoing oppression of Indigenous women (whether within settler or First Nations communities). At the same time, such a reading quickly runs up against its limits, especially when it overlaps or aligns too closely with liberal identity politics and the rhetoric of political correctness.

In line with Gruber's and Spielmann's discussions of in-group Indigenous "teasing," the suggestion here is that Annharte's humour is critical, yes, but primarily in the vein of social correction, and that its central aim is to enjoin reserve community members to work against "endogamous" forms of colonial repetition by internalizing more equitable discursive forms and

modes of behaviour. In the context of *Indigena Awry*, the limit of such an approach is that it neglects to address the titular position of *awryness* that Annharte's Indigena speaker irreducibly occupies.<sup>74</sup> Gruber and De'Ath write from within very different critical paradigms and political trajectories. Where their treatments of tendentious humour overlap is in their broadly "positivist" (in both senses of the term) conceptions of Indigenous collectivities or social bodies. In De'Ath, the relation among Indigenous readers and communities and Annharte's textual politics appears as one of simple solidarity. Internecine difference, struggle, conflict, and antagonism are effectively absent (or epiphenomenal to readily legible structures of colonial [mis]recognition, patently false regardless of what subjectivity inhabits them). De'Ath's claim that "the joke is on the settler . . . who is, and always was, mistaken" is not incorrect. It simply requires supplementation from Annharte's provocative because ambivalent "joke" that "Indians"—chiefs, warriors, "squaws"—are also settlers (though never vice versa. The logic is strictly unidirectional).

In Gruber, conversely, what safeguards tendentious in-group Indigenous humour from the dangerous pleasures of deprecation (self or otherwise) is the centripetal cohesiveness of Indigenous social norms and affects. The work of Indigenous teasing is to integrate outliers back into the main orbit and ethical substance of community life. Dissension exists, and it is socially healthy, but its limits are those of communal cohesiveness, unity, and identity. Of necessity, teasing "speaks" from a position of cultural authority or centrality, negotiating norms and transgressions whose ratio accords with longstanding, traditional laws and ancestral logics.

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<sup>74</sup> Discussions of Indigenous "teasing" as a strategy of social (re)integration tend to suppose that the teaser occupies a place of centrality, visibility, and belonging within a self-evident communal formation. Not all Indigenous humorists occupy—or feel comfortable in—such positions. As Annharte writes, "[i]t should not be assumed that all First Nations are 'at home' in their communities or cultural groups" (AKA 138). Annharte's position is "awry" for a number of reasons, which are "thematic" to much of her writing. I address these differences in greater detail below.

Importantly, Annharte's writing is not averse to (Indigenous) law—or *grounded normativity*, as Coulthard conceptualizes it and as Native communities continue to enact it.<sup>75</sup> What it maintains is a critical wariness of Indigenous leaders, Elders, or writers who claim to have certain access to it.

Annharte's humour elicits liberal frameworks of reading in the same instant that it troubles or disbars them. "Squaw Guide" puns on the notion of "a native production site" but without doing away with a realist, literal reading—namely, that the stanza offers an onscreen or behind-the-scenes image of a movie about or by Natives. In this realist reading, the warrior, chief, and rez women are no longer "real" Indigenous subjectivities but rather actors playing a role. Quite plausibly, they are perhaps not even Indigenous actors.<sup>76</sup> No sooner does the "native production site" cease to function as a punchline, however, than the punchline returns—now in the guise of a comic *mise-en-abyme*. Like a moebius strip, Annharte's "rez" joke describes a figure whose opposite sides also form a single continuous surface.<sup>77</sup> From a bona fide perspective, the scene critiques Hollywood for its decades of false, disparaging, colonial representations of Indigenous bodies, subjectivities, and identities. Yet the representations are also true in their status as misrecognitions, as condensations of the historical and ongoing, deeply asymmetrical relation between the Indian Act and the naturalization of what it means to act "Indian."<sup>78</sup> In her essay "Medicine Lines," Annharte jokingly acknowledges that "I do enjoy mention of culture purity" (AKA 55). She also describes "the emptiness and loneliness I

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<sup>75</sup> I derive this last claim from Leanne Betasamosake Simpson.

<sup>76</sup> Here I'm thinking of Burt Lancaster in *Apache* (1954), Audrey Hepburn in *The Unforgiven* (1960), Johnny Depp in *The Lone Ranger* (2013), Kelsey Asbille in *Wind River* (2017), and many, many other instances.

<sup>77</sup> I borrow the figure of the moebius strip from Alenka Zupančič, *The Odd One In*.

<sup>78</sup> In "Cry Not Crazy Lady" (2010), Annharte states how she finds it "impossible to copy the generic First Nation woman role," but is "truly grateful for a right to indigenous heritage through my mother's line" (AKA 206).

sometimes feel because of how true the stereotypes of natives have become. The caricatures are believed” by settler and First Peoples alike.<sup>79</sup>

The problem with reading Annharte’s “rez” humour primarily as a tool of cultural integration is that it ignores the complex play of identification, ambivalence, and difference evident within in punchline like “native production site.” For Annharte, Indigenous identities and cultural norms exist primarily as sites of struggle, contradiction, and collusion. They are not at all socio-historical givens, as Gruber’s and Spielmann’s respective theses on “endogamous” Native humour presuppose. Finally, such a reading effectively views Annharte’s illiberal humour as a de facto politics of cultural sensitivity. It transforms what Annharte describes as her “polemic Bitch/rant style” and “poetic tomahawk chop” into a playful (if provocative) form of mockery and ridicule whose purpose is to “educate” Indigenous community members who confuse colonial signifiers and behaviours for traditional Native lexicons and lifeways, either out of misrecognition, ignorance, or desire for power and status. In *As We Have Always Done*, Simpson notes how liberal, multicultural subjectivities regard it as unacceptable “to call Indigenous women ‘squaw,’” while tacitly finding it “acceptable to maintain all of the systems that target Indigenous women’s minds, bodies, and spirituality” (113).<sup>80</sup> Clearly, the eradication of anti-Indigenous hate speech is important to Simpson, as it is to Annharte. The same is true of confronting gender violence and oppression as it occurs within First Nations communities, on reserve or off. As Glen Coulthard observes, symbolic redress is not simply “liberatory” in settler-Indigenous contexts. What is important is critical attention to how strictly discursive forms of redress in Indigenous contexts often have the obverse effect of minimizing or effacing the legal,

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<sup>79</sup> The final part of this sentence paraphrases Johanson (Introduction xvii).

<sup>80</sup> As Simpson also writes, “[s]tereotypes are not attitudes that can be changed by using a different terminology” (91).

institutional, and biopolitical structures undergirding settler coloniality, or else of silencing or further marginalizing Indigenous writers, critics, and activists whose voices push the limits of what liberal equity frameworks consider reasonable, legible, or even speakable.

Of course, what also invalidates reading Annharte's travesty of political (in)correctness on the rez as an integrative form of teasing is that she continues to use the same slur as the poem progresses. Most memorably, there is "the drunken squaw" of the final page, whom Annharte describes as "aggressive best" for "reverse / squaw baiting" various men on the street (15). Most salient, however, is the speaker's wry comment about how "it's hard to be a political correct squaw," which appears immediately following the stanzas set on the rez. Above, I suggest that part of the significance of this (punch) line lies in how it enacts a refusal of recognition and reconciliation along both formal, comic and liberal, political lines. As per humour convention, the line is incongruous and invites (unconscious) disambiguation and resolution. Yet it forecloses the possibility of any such congruent outcome at the same time. There is simply no logic or space (save perhaps that of a radical decolonization yet-to-come) capable of dissolving the incommensurability immanent to any attribution of political correctness to the injurious and racist term "squaw."

Yet Annharte's placement of the line compels consideration for how this joke operates in relation to Indigenous audiences, communities, and readers. Is it the same joke? From an Indigenous purview, what is "a political correct squaw," or what does it mean to occupy this impossible subjective location? By the same token, what is "political correctness" within Indigenous in-group contexts, like the "rez" of the preceding stanzas? Are the "chief" and warrior" figures of these stanzas guilty of political incorrectness for calling "rez" women "squaws?" If not, what are they "guilty" of?

Among other things, the value of de-privileging the settler as reader and audience of Annharte's writing and joking is that it opens up how Annharte also uses humour to foreground the importance of difference (not diversity) within Indigenous communities. What Annharte's writing and humour often foreground is how settler forms of recognition not only operate as colonialism by other (pacifying) means, but also work to efface or police discrepant socio-political positions and locations as sites of contestation among divergent Indigenous subjectivities and identities. What makes liberal reconciliation imperatives so insidious is how they inform and support a particular discursive model of Indigeneity while by the same token rendering "alternative" models effectively illegible, illiberal, perhaps even criminal. Part of Annharte's project is to demonstrate how these imperatives operate not only within settler populations, but among Natives as well. To a large extent, this is the "provocation" of Annharte's poetics—much more so than the aggressive or vulgar language and imagery characteristic of many of her poems. Certainly, Annharte's textual politics threatens (re)presentations of Indigenous unity and solidarity within Indigenous communities (writerly or otherwise). For Annharte, however, this (re)presentation is at best a semblance (that perhaps has a degree pragmatic political value from time to time and in particular, provisional contexts). Worse, it operates as a disavowal of social stratification (and its attendant structural oppressions) within Indigenous social, cultural, and political groups. The following section, then, takes up the issue of political correctness as this term operates in Indigenous contexts because, as it turns out, "political correct" is precisely a figure that Annharte (re)appropriates and deploys as a critically humorous trope for interrogating "in-group" forms of Native (mis)recognition and stratification as these operate in reserve and urban Indigenous communities alike.

#### **4.5.4. Indigenous Political Correctness: Or, Recognition in "Ndn Country"**

The problematic of political correctness shows up directly or indirectly in a range of critical texts on Indigenous politics, art, and humour.<sup>81</sup> Two of the more salient examples are settler scholar Monika Siebert's critical monograph *Indians Playing Indian*, and Ojibwe writer Drew Hayden Taylor's essay "Whacking the Indigenous Funny Bone: Political Correctness Vs. Native Humour, Round One."<sup>82</sup> In Siebert, the language of political correctness comprises part of the discourse of liberal multiculturalism, which she views as providing the dominant vocabulary for thinking social relations and state policy in the United States and Canada today (180).<sup>83</sup> In its non-pejorative sense, political correctness works to identify hateful, derogatory, and invidious forms of speech and to "correct" and eradicate social usage of such forms (whether deliberate, unknowing, or unconscious). In line with other techniques of liberal, multicultural governance, its "positive" function is to frame "cultural difference as a social good" (2). Siebert concurs that, minimally, official multicultural forms of anti-racism offer "a welcome respite from the long history of assimilatory pressures on American minorities" (3), in part by granting them "access to the settler national imaginaries" (7). For Siebert, however, these forms take on a "pernicious" cast in the context of settler-Indigenous relations, since here they presuppose that settler disrespect for Indigenous culture is the primary colonial evil, and that the means of remedying it revolve around policies of inclusive language use, equitable media representation, and recognition for the distinct identities and historical contributions of North America's "First

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<sup>81</sup> I borrow the spelling of "ndn" from Annharte (AKA 95).

<sup>82</sup> Taylor's essay appears in the collection *Me Funny*, which brings together various texts on humour by Indigenous authors and which Taylor also edits.

<sup>83</sup> Siebert tracks the liberal recognition paradigm as it comes to official prominence in the 1990s and elaborates the changes that it undergoes in the face of post-9/11 backlash. Her book dates from 2016, prior to the Trump presidency and the various "atavistic" fascisms attendant to it. The virulent, public racisms of the past years at once threaten and reinforce the "multicultural mandate" of recognition, as Siebert describes it. How this particular reconfiguration looks and operates moving forward, however, is an open question.

Peoples” (2).<sup>84</sup> On the ground, identity politics, political correctness, and other “fighting creeds” of the late twentieth-century “culture wars” offer Indigenous people (and other minoritarian subjects) tools for carving out spaces for themselves under conditions of ongoing colonization, environmental racism, and white supremacy. For Seibert, however, the problem with these “creeds” once they become part of “the ideological and ethical heart of North American multiculturalism” (6) is not only that they construct Indigenous peoples as cultural minorities in need of state protection, only to occlude their historical and continuing political status as members of pre-existing, sovereign nations. With its strategic misinterpretation of Indigenous nationhood as cultural difference, the liberal mandate of diversity, equity, and inclusion is especially problematic for how it allows state actors to perpetuate “colonial coercion” while also proclaiming an end to it (7).

What Siebert’s work brings to a reading of Annharte is a sense of how the discourse of political correctness operates when appropriated by the liberal, multicultural, colonial state. As the subtitle of his essays suggests, what Drew Hayden Taylor brings is a sense of the tension that exists between political correctness and Indigenous humour. Effectively, Taylor’s argument is that Indigenous humour decentres political correctness and vice versa. They never or only rarely align with each other. Taylor accepts the familiar notion that humour in general always risks offending PC sensibilities due to its inherently tendentious nature. For Taylor, however, what defines Indigenous humour is its tendency to volatize the always already explosive potential of teasing and joking. “Native humour,” Taylor writes, “comes from five hundred years of colonization, of oppression” (69). Much of it “springs from a sense of survival. Frequently, it is a

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<sup>84</sup> Later in her introduction, Siebert shows how honorifics like *First Peoples* work at once “to extend the United States’ historical genealogy into antiquity” and to help “rewrite the colonial conquest into the nationalist narrative of progressive historical evolution and a political future as a universal democracy” (12). Although Siebert’s critique here specifically addresses the US context, it is also broadly applicable within the settler Canadian context.

reaction against the world.” At its best, political correctness exists to help institute “equality and respect among people of different races, economic groups, genders and religious backgrounds” (70). As a response to personal and collective trauma, however, Indigenous humour has the capacity to obliterate any such prerogatives. As a psychic and social defense mechanism and a mode of attack, it frequently addresses pain and at the same instant (re)activates it.

Two critics who specifically discuss political correctness in Annharte are Jennifer Andrews and Reg Johanson. In *In the Belly of a Laughing God*, Andrews offers a substantial and insightful reading of Annharte’s early poem “Coyote Columbus Cafe” (from the collection of the same name). This poem is significant for introducing Annharte’s characteristic tactic of exploiting the polysemy and contrary meanings internal to the rhetoric of colonial governance, in this instance punning on “the name of the government agency, Indian Affairs, and about the Indian Act” (AKA 7).<sup>85</sup> The following lines, however, are those which Andrews focuses on in her discussion of Annharte’s critical position towards various forms of liberal identity politics and policy:

Columbus did lack  
cultural awareness  
equity  
affirmative action

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<sup>85</sup> Annharte discusses the origins of her “jokes about ‘The Indian Act’” in an interview with the Canadian poetry scholar and critic Pauline Butling (AKA 7). The relevant stanzas from “Coyote Columbus Cafe” are as follows:

lo, the po’ Indian

Indian Act  
Tell Old Indian joke  
Like Indian Affairs

Act Indian  
Had an Indian affair lately? (*Coyote* 15)

political correctness (*Coyote* 14)

In glossing these lines, Andrews notes how “the creation of public and private sectors” such as those which Annharte names here are internal to the history of colonization (159). Moreover, they are not only products of colonialism, but they operate primarily in the interest of the colonizer. Settlers dehumanize and demean Indigenous bodies via racist acts and naming practices and then impose rigid policies for regulating language and behaviour (including that of Indigenous people) in order to “service the dominant culture’s need to feel less guilt about its long-standing oppression of Native peoples.” By means of the speaker’s ironic indexing of Columbus’ various failures as an insufficiently culturally aware, equitable, affirmative PC subject, “Columbus Coyote Cafe” flags how such policies also work to “whitewash” the specifically Indigenous history of colonization.

In his essay on Annharte’s *Exercises in Lip Pointing* (2003), Reg Johanson picks up the issue of settler guilt in his reading of “JJ Bang Bang” and “Woman Bath.” The first of these poems features police officers who attend “sweat lodges pow wows” for community engagement, education, and healing (*Exercises* 48)—a passage that Johanson reads as “exposing the absurdity and hypocrisy of the ‘cultural sensitivity’ initiatives that inevitably follow, and precede, yet another police brutality scandal” (“Straight Ahead” 142). Echoing Andrews, Johanson also notes how Annharte’s poem frames “the discourse of cultural sensitivity” both as a response to “white guilt” and as “a strategy of amelioration and containment of demands for decolonization” (143). “Woman Bath” describes a brief experience of “unity” across class and racial lines as the speaker joins her white, female co-workers for an afterwork visit to a sauna, the experience quickly dissolving as they begin to “chat about non-white hooker found dead / in a ditch this morning” (*Exercises* 32). Tellingly, the conversation goes awry not because her

coworkers are insensitive, but because they find the speaker's language offensive, not only her response to the news of the murder—"I assume she was Indian she was disposable" (32)—but also her subsequent anger at the systemic complicity "of aboriginal cops and prison guards" (Johanson 143).<sup>86</sup> Importantly, the speaker and her co-workers are social workers in a city (Winnipeg) with the highest urban Indigenous population concentration in the nation, yet they persist in seeing Annharte's "illiberal" attitude as the problem. Later in the poem, the speaker finds herself in a "scuzzy and dirty" Main Street strip club with the same (or another) group of white feminist women, who watch as "[a]n Indian woman leaned against a pillar jiggling tiny tits then slunk / back to white lovers who witness gay pride but she doesn't / like me" (31). Rather than compete with these "white lovers" for the "Indian woman," the speaker "pretended to spy on a camp / Nazi women torture on command all the slim girls dancing for / them I watch helplessly."

Clearly, "Woman Bath" addresses issues of Indigeneity, class, abjection, queer sexuality, desire, victimization, violence, shame, and fantasy with the complexity and (productive) provocation characteristic of all of Annharte's writing.<sup>87</sup> Alternately self-effacing and willful, the poem also negotiates the (liberal, progressivist) pressures particular to the speaker's experiences of social work—a profession that Annharte worked in for much of the late 1970s into the early 1980s.<sup>88</sup> As the speaker acknowledges, "I didn't resist Other circles of white guilts to get out my dirt" (31). By the end of the poem, however, she recognizes clearly and forcefully that the

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<sup>86</sup> Johanson arrives at his conclusions by reading across three poems: not only "Woman Bath" and "JJ Bang Bang" but also "Prisoner of My Poem." The connections are entirely cogent but not self-evident. Annharte's poetry is often coherent as narrative but not at all in a straightforward, linear way.

<sup>87</sup> The poem also offers plenty of humour, though it is hard to get a sense of it from the lines that I cite here.

<sup>88</sup> In the interview with Pauline Butling, Annharte briefly sketches the time she "had a job as a social worker to save Native children from the grasp of social service agencies" and the relation of these experiences to her writing (particularly her first book, *Being on the Moon*) (AKA 8 passim).

problem is not her “inappropriate” language and attitude, which she is not always able to help: “did I mean to say it like that (30). The problem is the historical and ongoing structure of settler dispossession and violence against Indigenous women, which no degree of inclusivity or empathy is able to cover over. “I found the dead girl in me,” the speaker concludes. “[S]he wasn’t killed by my words” (33).

In her critical essays and autobiographical writings, Annharte often takes up the issue of political correctness and the liberal rhetoric of inclusion, diversity, and equity in a manner more or less consistent with the readings of critics like Andrews and Johanson. In “Borrowing Enemy Language,” Annharte bristles against discursive mandates that impose the need to wield particular nomenclature and jargon when discussing Indigenous issues, particularly as these mandates take on normative status among “other Native writers or readers” (*AKA* 117). She also notes how the language of “reverse racism” works to silence Indigenous writers who publicly critique other Natives whose self-fashioning and identitarian stance risk reproducing settler tropes about First Nations’ cultures.<sup>89</sup> The essay “Gotta Be On Top” offers an anecdote in which Annharte’s anxiety over appearing homophobic prevents her from publicly criticizing a non-Indigenous lesbian artist and performer for her immoderate appropriation and use of Indigenous cultural material (*AKA* 121). Citing the influence of the Hawai’ian nationalist and political science scholar Haunani Kay-Trask, “Hard to Be Humble” concludes with the assertion “that Indigenous woman doesn’t need to overdo the ‘not being a racist’ mentality”(AKA 127)—an

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<sup>89</sup> Annharte perhaps has herself in mind here and particularly her poem “Succinct Savage Subtext,” whose references to “Chief Lie In His Face” and his “Size of head dress” register “how unhappy I was to see [former National Chief of the Assembly of First Nations] Phil Fontaine in his oversized bonnet when posing around for the apology of the residential school debacle. Another cartoon image” (*AKA* 168). “So I did go excessive,” Annharte later acknowledges, but “because so many ndns were not saying anything even on the CBC news.” “Succinct Savage Subtext” is from *Indigena Awry*. Like Annharte, Phil Fontaine is Anishinaabe, but of the Sagkeeng First Nation.

assertion that only makes (literal) sense in the context of Indigenous dissatisfaction with the rhetoric of political correctness, particularly as it works to police, contain, and silence legitimate forms of anti-colonial anger, resentment, or other such “irreconcilable” feelings.

Annharte’s comments on the politics of political correctness in settler-Indigenous contexts are crucial for understanding the logic operative in many of her most critical, provocative, and illiberal poetic (punch) lines. The same is true of the insights, elaborations, and contextualization on offer in Seibert, Taylor, Andrews, and Johanson. Upon closer examination, however, it is also fair to ask what these comments bring to a more specific understanding of how a line like “it’s hard to be a political correct squaw” signifies within exclusively Indigenous contexts of reception. These comments certainly complicate, trouble, and resist the straightforward application of political correctness to Indigenous politics, assertions of sovereignty, and modes of being. By and large, however, they all essentially accept the liberal definition, meaning, and purpose of political correctness, despite its history—if not its name—as a tool of radical political struggle (from the 1970s into the 1990s, in Siebert’s periodization). In the more recent, highly influential work of critics like Leanne Betasamosake Simpson, the prioritization of Indigenous (cultural, political) epistemologies and hermeneutics involves a necessary turning away from “state affirmation, state recognition, and the performativity of the rights-based discourse,” with a concomitant turn towards “grounding ourselves and our nations in everyday place-based practices of resurgence” (192).

Importantly, Annharte’s writing and thinking are not in necessary tension with the literary and political “nationalisms” that currently inform much critique and activism within Indigenous circles (literary and otherwise). At the same time, Annharte’s writings are much less “optimistic” about the possibility of accessing unproblematic, subsistent Indigenous cultural and

political practices and forms of life (of the variety that Simpson summons via her recurring use of the phrase, “as we have always done”). Indeed, part of what likely motivates the frequent lateral movement in Annharte’s poetics and humour is precisely the impossibility or ill-advisability (in the final instance) of clearly delineating between settler and Indigenous contexts.<sup>90</sup> Perhaps the difficulty in addressing Indigenous political correctness in Annharte is simply that there is not a properly “endogamous” context to her work.<sup>91</sup>

This reading of Annharte is entirely valid in that there is plenty of textual material to support it. But it is ultimately not the whole case, and there are important textual moments in Annharte’s writing that refute or at least complicate it. In *As We Have Always Done*, Simpson figures resurgent Indigenous aesthetics as “fugitive interventions,” “coded disruptions,” and “visible opacities” that act as “noise to colonialism’s signal.”<sup>92</sup> Such tactical aesthetics are

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<sup>90</sup> Annharte frequently despairs over this (im)possibility, which is not to suggest that she is not desirous of “find[ing] the ‘medicine lines’ that connect us”—that is, connect Indigenous Peoples to their culture and to each other (AKA 60). In the same essay, she admits, “My own fears of cultural appropriation have been lessened. The great fears I refer to are simply that each of us who tries to find a connection might make a mistake much like white people who do in fact ‘steal stories’ . . . I know that the first thought might be that I am referring to a ‘colonized’ mentality” (60). This textual moment is of note in part for how it instances Annharte’s idiosyncratic application of the term *cultural appropriation* within Indigenous-specific contexts.

<sup>91</sup> Again, Annharte is unequivocal in her self-identification as Anishinaabe (Saulteaux), which is also her “legal” identity since the passing of Bill-31 in 1985. But issues of hybridity and mixed-race identity are also important to much of her (especially earlier) writing. As she states in “Medicine Lines,” “I do enjoy the mention of cultural purity but I quickly get bored because it does not seem to have anything to do with the hodgepodge reality that makes up my world.” (AKA 55). This “hodgepodge” includes a father “of Irish, Scottish, and English crofter origins,” a Saulteaux auntie with a passion for East European cuisine, Okanogan and Winnebago granddaughters, and her own practice of Zen Buddhism and Lakota (a traditional Ojibwa enemy) spiritual practices (AKA 55, 2, 37). Indigenous nationalist critics like Jerry Fontaine (Ojibway-Anishinabe) and Craig Womack tend to include “hybrid” identities like Annharte’s as particular forms of “authentic” Indigenous identity. Annharte’s work and desires are largely consonant with this position. As she earnestly jokes in “Multicultural ‘Mixed Bag’ Métissage,” “I have a right to claim a non-liminal identity maybe even an authentic one” (AKA 142). The issue, however, is that Indigenous and tribal nationalisms rarely afford her such a space of belonging. As Annharte notes, “[o]ur circles of inclusion are exclusion for others” (AKA 54).

<sup>92</sup> Hence, a resurgent Nishnaabeg aesthetics tends to be “opaque—a visible but largely unreadable or differently read installation and experience to those outside of Nishnaabewin” (Simpson 209). Simpson elaborates these notions in the final pages of her chapter on “Embodied Resurgent Practice and Coded Disruption” (198-201) and the opening pages of her chapter “Constellations of Coresistance” (215-18). As Simpson acknowledges, these notions are not hers alone but stem from the thinking and writing of the Plains Cree and Dene artist Jarrett Martineau and from an ongoing conversation and collaboration between the two of them. See Jarrett Martineau, *Creative Combat*.

likewise frequently operative in Annharte's poetics, humour, and writing. In "Straightforward Approach," Reg Johanson usefully notes how Annharte's poetry is as "frequently ambivalent about speaking" as it is direct in its address (140).<sup>93</sup> Even while totalizing settler colonialism, Annharte continues to code differentially across divergent contexts of reception. What is indirect, opaque, or unspoken for some readers is in fact straightforward, transparent, or legible for others. Johanson also gestures to how Annharte's writing operates in Indigenous contexts of address in his discussion of Annharte's penchant for appropriating the language of colonial governance, recoding or "massacring" it for her own idiosyncratic yet political use.<sup>94</sup> In his introduction to *AKA Inendagosekwe*, Johanson identifies cultural appropriation as a key concern of Annharte's textual politics. As Johanson highlights, however, Annharte applies the term not only to settler practices but also to tendencies within Indigenous communities (writerly and otherwise). She deploys it in accordance with its conventional meaning to lambast settler artists who steal Indigenous cultural material. Yet she also wrests it from this context and repurposes it as a rubric or framework for critiquing Indigenous subjectivities that "'appropriate[]' images and ideas about themselves" from the colonial imaginary (Johanson, introduction xii-xiii). Returning to the essays in *AKA Inendagosekwe*, it becomes possible to see how Annharte migrates the notion of political correctness from its usual terrain—"exogamous" settler discourses of multicultural recognition, diversity, and inclusivity—and reworks it so that it takes on a meaning specific to an Indigenous (endogamous) environs.

Perhaps the clearest instance of Annharte's idiosyncratic application of political correctness is in her essay "An Old Indian Trick Is to Laugh." The essay begins with a fairly

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<sup>93</sup> Johanson makes this observation during a discussion of "lip pointing" in the poem of the same name.

<sup>94</sup> The salient text here is "Borrowing Enemy Language," in which Annharte states, "I 'massacre' English when I write" (*AKA* 110).

conventional enumeration of some of the traits and exigencies particular to Indigenous forms of laughter. At this point, Annharte's perspective differs little from the theorizing about Indigenous humour that appears in the work of "mainstream" settler critics like Kenneth Lincoln, Eva Gruber, and Jennifer Andrews. From here, Annharte turns to a discussion of theatrical representation and the trickster. Mid-paragraph, however, she "suddenly" shifts to a discussion of political correctness that is worth citing in full:<sup>95</sup>

It is so tempting to recite eulogies to the Trickster all the while giving evidence of actual ignorance of the subject. This is the politically correct stance which is also amusing. We are in the age (hangover of the new age) when it is fashionable to be orthodox about one's Aboriginal identity. We must appreciate the many traditional Indians who want to follow custom in an authoritative, authoritarian, and are-so-sore-and-bitter-about-it manner. (25)

There is a lot happening in this passage, including questions around the status of the "we," the generic specificity of the "eulogy," and the identity of the person(s) subject to the enjoinder to recite (on this particular topic). What is most salient to the discussion at hand, however, is the referent of the pronoun with which Annharte begins the second sentence. Syntactically, what Annharte first indexes as political correctness has something to do with "false" pretensions to authoritative or insider knowledge of Indigenous cultural forms. The sentences following the pronoun then help flesh out the content of this form, equating political correctness with traditional, orthodox, and dogmatic notions of Indigenous subjectivity, self-fashioning, and identity. In a manner that recalls French philosopher Henri Bergson's canonical description of the comic as "something mechanic encrusted on the living" (77), Annharte finds

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<sup>95</sup> I place "suddenly" in quotation marks because sudden shifts are in fact a common feature of all of Annharte's writing: critical, autobiographical, theatrical, and poetic.

something humorous about Indigenous expressions and performances of political correctness. As Annharte depicts it, political correctness appears as a type of irony or comic incongruity internal to certain forms of Indigenous identity relative to colonial ontologies. Its expression is ancestral and venerable, yet also “fashionable” and “amusing.” Paradoxically, the history that underlies authentic, traditional, and politically correct expressions of Indigenous knowledge and identity is what Annharte figures here as “the new age”—a term that summons the hippie era of the 1960s (with its investments in ahistorical fantasies of “counterculture Indians”), as well as the bourgeois new age movement of the 1980s onward (with its “plastic shamans and Astroturf sun dances”).<sup>96</sup> In her essays, Annharte uses the term *wannabe* to describe new agers of these sorts. The term is not original to Annharte and is not uncommon in texts by other Native writers—the difference being, of course, that Annharte is as likely to apply it to an Indigenous person as to a white settler.

For Annharte, the problem with political correctness on the “rez” has less to do with liberal, settler protocols around culturally sensitive behaviour and language use than with Indigenous persons authoritatively insisting on the political correctness of their performance of Indigenous identity. It also has to do with how such performances have the effect of effacing, marginalizing, or perpetuating ongoing oppression against Indigenous forms and expressions of difference, alterity, or awryness. Attending to the slippery polyvalence of Annharte’s mobilization of tropes of political correctness in her essays and poems, it becomes clearer how this term in fact operates as a type of conceptual-political sign or complex for a range of

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<sup>96</sup> I borrow this language from the Standing Rock Sioux historian and scholar Philip J. Deloria and the Native American Indian studies specialist Lisa Aldred, respectively. For fascinating elaborations of the relation between various American new age movements and simulacral, commodity forms of Indigeneity, see Deloria’s chapter “Counterculture Indians and the New Age” (from his well-known book *Playing Indian*), and Aldred’s essay “Plastic Shamans and Astroturf Sun Dances.”

discourses, practices, and behaviours whose common referent is liberal (mis)recognition as it operates on Indigenous subject formation, self-understanding, and social relations. In “Borrowing Enemy Language,” Annharte suggests that when Indigenous communities use “logos like peace pipes, feathers, and other icons” as a means to appear “politically correct,” this has the ironic effect of imposing a false sense of sameness and unity among First Nations peoples, of homogenizing difference and specificity rather than asserting it (116-17). To provide concrete examples of how Annharte’s tendentiously humorous repurposing of political correctness operates, the final section of this chapter turns to a close examination of the poems “Breed Apart” and “Better Dressed.” The section immediately to follow helps set up the “politically incorrect” humour and politics of these poems by briefly stepping back to contextualize Annharte’s work in relation to the various Indigenous nationalisms (literary, cultural, political) that currently organize much of the thinking and writing in the field of Indigenous studies today. To help focalize the readings to follow, this section identifies identity, solidarity, and internalization as key socio-textual nodes at work in these final poems. To bring to life some of the stakes involved here, it also addresses an anecdote that Annharte tells in “Guerrilla Backchat” concerning a verbal and (almost) physical confrontation between herself and an (unnamed) Indigenous writer at a literary event of some sort in Brandon, Manitoba.

#### **4.5.5. Indigena Awryness in a Time of Indigenous Nationalism**

In the central section of this chapter, I focus on Annharte’s poem “Squaw Guide” and especially its line “it is hard to be a political correct squaw,” which I regard as exemplary of how Annharte’s humour works at once to elicit and forestall (neo)colonial forms of recognition. In analyzing this poem, I broadly posit Annharte’s reader or listener as a liberal, settler subject with at least some investment in the current reconciliation paradigm. Yet clearly Annharte’s work

addresses Indigenous audiences as much as—or more than—it addresses settlers. In the final section of the chapter, then, I follow the call of many recent Indigenous critics to deprivilege whiteness and settler subjectivity as (tacit) hermeneutic frameworks for literary analysis of Native texts in order to consider how Annharte’s “bitching” and “guerrilla backchat” operate in Indigenous contexts of reception. From my position as a settler-citizen of the colonial Canadian nation-state, this consideration of Indigenous uptake is at once necessary and fraught. The primary risk is of finding myself inadvertently occupying the position of the literary anthropologist or “Indian expert,” of speaking for Indigenous people and telling them how Annharte’s textual politics and humour make them feel. Due to my lack of “insider” cultural knowledge, the risk of misrecognition and error is also higher—as are the stakes involved in misprision on my behalf. When reading instances of tendentious humour that Annharte appears to direct at Indigenous readers, I have little doubt that there are occasions where I fail to see how I am also (or especially) the butt of the joke, that the joke is on me (which it already is, but perhaps much more than I think).

In this last section, I attempt to safeguard against (or at least to minimize) the risk of reproducing a colonial hermeneutics by leaning heavily on Annharte’s essays, musings, and autobiographical fragments from her critical book *AKA Inendagosekwe*. I supplement this approach by drawing on the literary, political, and ethnographic work of other Indigenous writers (especially those who write from an Anishinaabe or Ojibwa perspective and position). Annharte endlessly complicates and politicizes identity (not out of perversity, but out of an awareness of its existing politics and complications). Yet there is nothing ambiguous about her self-identification as Anishinaabekwe. In this sense, Annharte’s work is available to Anishinaabeg literary-national frameworks, as Janice Acoose (Métis-Nehiowé) demonstrates in

*Minjimendaamowinon Anishinaabe: Reading and Righting All Our Relations in Written*

*English*.<sup>97</sup> Yet it is also important to note the difficulties that Annharte's work poses to such frameworks, whether those of "first wave" American Indian literary nationalists like Robert Allen Warrior (Osage) and Craig Womack (Creek-Cherokee), or those of more recent scholars, critics, and activists like Leanne Betasamosake Simpson (Mississauga Nishnaabeg) and Audra Simpson (Mohawk), who ground their practices explicitly within specific Indigenous ontologies and epistemes. Annharte advocates attention to tribal specificity when engaging Indigenous literatures but is against overly orthodox and "politically correct" policing of cultural borders. She is often critical of highly visible (or materially successful) Indigenous writers, politicians, and "celebrities," mostly from a class perspective.<sup>98</sup> Her writing is highly averse to the language of empowerment and uplift, viewing it as symptomatic of the healing industry and what she glosses as "the new age."<sup>99</sup> She experiences the political imperative to unity as oppressive to Indigenous subjectivities, bodies, and experiences like hers, which "fail" to meet the normative criteria of (neo)traditional culture, in which men too often dominate. In "Anishinaabeg Studies," Brock Pitiwanakwat (Anishinaabe, White River First Nation) states that "colonization is not,

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<sup>97</sup> Acoose's project in *Minjimendaamowinon Anishinaabe* is to demonstrate and elaborate "the importance of *Midewiwin* teachings and *Doodaem* relations for contemporary Anishinaabe literature" (1). In this work, she identifies Annharte's writing as "part of the Anishinaabe canon" (18), and she forwards the Anishinaabe notion of Manitoukwe (Creative Mother) as a key "critical concept for reading Annharte," especially her early poem "Bird Clan Mother" (23). In his Introduction to *AKA Inendagosekwe*, Reg Johanson draws on Acoose in his characterization of Annharte as a "Cassandra-like Bird Clan Mother [who] speaks the truth without self-pity and regardless of the consequences" (vi). Annharte addresses this characterization in her own particular way in "Guerrilla Backchat," noting how she "did get a laugh when [Acoose] said she thought I did not give a fuck about what people said. I confess I do care but don't appreciate the trashing except I probably have done that too" (*AKA* 175).

<sup>98</sup> In "Bio: Gaawiikweedaawagaag ndoonjii," she claims that the Anishinaabe writers Louise Erdrich and Gerald Vizenor experience less scrutiny about their writing and identity than she does "because they are mainstream and middle class" (*AKA* 3). In "Multicultural 'Mixed Bag' Métissage," she describes "Native American women academics" as "members of what seems to be almost a privileged caste" (139). In "Gotta Be on Top," she condemns "native lit" more generally for its failure to confront its own position of power and elitism (20). For a recent exploration of the phenomenon of Indigenous celebrity, see Jennifer Adese and Robert Alexander Innes, editors, *Indigenous Celebrity: Entanglements with Fame*.

<sup>99</sup> See "Multicultural 'Mixed Bag' Métissage: Spin Offs on Contemporary Identity Politics," among other essays.

never has been, nor ever will be the defining experience of Anishinaabeg” (367). Much recent Indigenous writing and poetry expresses a similar position. I imagine that Annharte is in agreement with Pitivanakwat’s statement, even though she is always “questioning the supposed onset of a new era. Now everything is supposed to be different for native peoples. Many Native people think that we’re already decolonized” (*AKA* 13). In part due to her experiences of exclusion and marginalization vis-à-vis culturally central sites of Anishinaabe expression, Annharte’s work always maintains a degree of critical distance and skepticism about how Indigenous nationalist politics look on the ground. Annharte desires resurgence, but her lived experience and her “awry” social positionality drive her to privilege tendentiousness and critique.

In “Straight Forward Approach,” Reg Johanson appears to suggest that Annharte’s work is unpopular among certain Indigenous community members and readers. Part of the reason for the pushback that Annharte and her writing sometimes experience has to do with her emphasis on difference, conflict, contradiction, and antagonism within Indigenous communities. In her poems, essays, and plays, Annharte frequently addresses her struggles to gain personal and social affirmation for her experience and identity not only as an Indigenous woman (Anishinaabekwe), but also as poor, queer, disabled, urban, elderly, “mad,” and “orphan.”<sup>100</sup> For Annharte, provocation (often at once aggressive, obscene, and humorous) is a critical method for exploring

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<sup>100</sup> When Annharte was nine years old, her mother disappeared. Annharte believes that she was murdered. A residential school survivor, Annharte’s mother struggled with alcoholism and psychological issues, which became worse after receiving psychiatric “treatment” at Selkirk Hospital for Mental Diseases. Among the Saulteaux of the Little Saskatchewan Nation, “those who have lost their mothers are the ‘poorest of the poor’” (*AKA* 145). Annharte’s status as “a type of ‘orphan’ or someone who lost their mother” garners her extra kindness and care from her relatives, but it also marks her rupture from “my mother’s knowledge of her culture and her history” (145). This status and rupture are crucial to understanding the complex, contradictory, and at times polemic tenor of Annharte’s position vis-à-vis Indigenous identity politics. Key texts on Annharte’s relation to her mother include “The Yellow Women Survivors Society,” “Mother Secret / Mother Scar,” “Borrowing Enemy Language,” “Bio: Testimonial,” *Journal: One Pariah Two Pariah*,” and “Cry Not Crazy Lady” (all of which appear in *AKA Inendagosekwe*).

seemingly intractable and often highly contentious issues—particularly since not to do so is to risk her own self-erasure. Three issues in particular stand out: 1) the politics and performance of identity within Indigenous communities, 2) the impasses to group solidarity, and 3) the problematic of internal colonization. Unsurprisingly, each of these issues tends to operate in relation to the others. As a means to centre Annharte's own approach these issues, however, this section substitutes the notion of Indigenous political correctness (as Annharte elaborates it in her critical writing) for the recognition platform so central to contemporary Canadian settler governmentality. In her writing, Annharte often addresses how (historical and ongoing) processes of colonial (mis)recognition work to homogenize and efface difference among and within Indigenous communities. Where she addresses this issue most forcefully is in "Guerrilla Backchat," which contains a long anecdote about how "I was attacked a few years ago by an aboriginal writer who claimed we (ndn writers) were a small community and that I had violated it because I had ridiculed him" (*AKA* 170). Annharte responds to this confrontation by telling the other writer that "I was known for making outrageous assertions and that it was my style of guerrilla backchat." The other writer then responds to Annharte by getting in her face and making threatening physical gestures, to the point that after the incident, another writer advises Annharte to "report him to the police and get a restraining order" (171). Annharte closes the anecdote with the following reflections, which are worth citing at some length:

So I figured I pissed him off. I would try harder to put any critique of ndn writing down on paper . . . I realize how hyper-sensitive our people are about getting feedback about their behaviour and writing. I am that way too . . . I did not expect to ever get attacked for my commentary on native lit but I did expect to hear disapproval. I may have been out of

line but I did learn now that I have to be much more careful in whom I confide, especially in literary circles. (171)

It is difficult to know where to begin by means of response to this troubling encounter and Annharte's depiction of it. Part of what stands out in Annharte's telling is her characteristic self-reflexivity—her ability to acknowledge her behaviour as excessive and to empathize and identify across difference. In Annharte's subsequent analysis of this violent encounter, however, what stands out most is her understanding of its cause, which she attributes to irreconcilable beliefs about how Indigenous social relations and communities operate (or need to operate). As Annharte relays it, the writer attacks her so aggressively not simply due to his "hyper-sensitivity" to feedback and criticism about his writing, or even to the tenor in which Annharte presents it. He attacks because he experiences Annharte's refusal to keep silent about her dislike of his work as a violation of the rules of solidarity and group unity that govern Indigenous (literary, cultural, national, and pan-tribal) communities. "So that writer attested to us being one big happy family," Annharte says to Johanson, "and I replied to the contrary" (171). Earlier in the interview, Johanson asks Annharte, "[H]ow do you walk the line between critique and solidarity? In other words, how do you prevent your critique of aboriginal writing from playing into the settler's 'divide and conquer' game?" (169). For Annharte, however, the injunction to Indigenous unity (national or otherwise) in the face of colonial forces of division is itself an effect of colonization. As she argues, part of the work and outcome of settler colonialism is to efface (existential, cultural, political) diversity, specificity, and difference, both within and between various Indigenous nations, communities, and social groups. As a managerial strategy, this promotion of identity over difference works to organize Indigenous textual politics and literary production as

well.<sup>101</sup> Annharte never explicitly relates what she dislikes about the writing of the author who attacks her, only that their styles and their politics (and the relation between the two) differ in irreducible ways. The immediate context in which she relates this episode, however, strongly suggests that she dislikes his work less because it is “bad” than because of its unconscious investment in settler standards of literary “excellence”—and by extension its reproduction of “the colonized Native voice.” “Bad writing is fun especially if irreverent in tone and content,” Annharte concludes. “Being a ‘good native,’ and a ‘good native writer’ is too gobbledygook to understand” (171).<sup>102</sup>

In poems like “Breed Apart” and “Better Dressed,” Annharte’s tendentiously comic dramatization of what she considers problematic about being a “good Native” comes to the fore. From a particular perspective, these poems appear to contradict each other in the sense that they seem to take Indigenous authenticity-inauthenticity as their respective comic objects or “butts.” Theoretically, however, their logic is also that of “classic” comedy, at least in relation to each other. As the humour theorist Alenka Zupančič notes, the traditional governing principle of comedy is that of identity confusion. Comedy begins by introducing two (or more) figures or

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<sup>101</sup> Annharte notes that the “upshot” of her encounter with this writer “is that I believe what Chrystos told me, that especially ndn women are not free to express their views!” (171). Chrystos is an off-reserve, two-spirit Menominee writer. Minimally, this gesture of solidarity signifies in two directions. Indirectly, it points to the masculinist and heteronormative logics often inherent in ideas of collective unity as the eminent and necessary social good. It also points out how Annharte and her work are already profoundly in community and relation with other Indigenous writers, activists, and artists, many of whom also find themselves beyond the “pale” of “official” Indigenous cultural production, with its “Canada Council events,” funding, and “awards given by literary or government arts agencies” (174). In the same interview, Annharte writes, “I struggle to participate without much fear and loathing but I think putting my work forth in such an [“official” Indigenous literary] environment has affected me to produce less than I might have. That is why I liked the association in Vancouver because of a feeling of togetherness with more poor writers” (175). Interestingly, this group includes the poet Dorothy Trujillo Lusk, whose work I turn to in the next chapter. For other groups (social and writerly) with whom Annharte feels solidarity, see AKA *Inendagosekwe* (101, 110, 167, 174, *passim*).

<sup>102</sup> Annharte offers a complex travesty of Indigenous “literary excellence” and also what she calls “bad writing” at multiple points in “Guerrilla Backchat.” She discusses what she calls “the ‘colonized Native’ voice” in “Borrowing Enemy Language” (111-12).

discourses whose relation appears patently as that of opposition, only to collapse this opposition, revealing the “impossible” contiguity that in fact obtains between the two positions.<sup>103</sup> “Breed Apart” and “Better Dressed” derive their humour (and critical force) from their collective “depiction” of how Indigenous “political correctness” operates as the common denominator of both “orthodox” and “commodity” forms of Indigenous identity. Individually, each poem takes its respective Indigenous “characters” to task for falling prey to the colonial unconscious, with its logic of misrecognition as recognition. In tandem, they articulate a comic staging in which judgements concerning the (in)validity of one position or the other are no longer possible. What they offer in their stead are a series of awry “jokes” whose (also precarious) critical, affective, and political “value” lies in how they attack the contradictions and antagonisms immanent to contemporary Indigenous identity, and how they bring these social forms (at least partially) into view, precisely by refusing to resolve or reconcile them.

#### **4.5.6. Comic, Traditional, and Commodity Forms of Indigenous Identity in “Breed Apart” and “Better Dressed”**

To what extent are Indigenous people aware they endorse institutions that would transform Native elites into masters of internalized colonization? This larger question has to be asked.

—Annharte, “Alternative Approaches to Indigenous Literary Criticism and Resistance Writing Practice”

I wonder in this world who can afford an identity. To me, it costs money and one has to succumb to some political domination.

—Annharte, “Bio: Gaawiikweedaawagaag ndoonjii”

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<sup>103</sup> Zupančič discusses the socio-formal logics of “classic” comedy at various points through *The Odd One In*, but especially in the chapter “Another Turn of the Bergsonian Screw.”

Whereas “Squaw Guide” manipulates expectations of confessional genres, “Breed Apart” travesties the “recipe” poem.<sup>104</sup> Annharte begins this poem with a (comic) promise of satisfaction to the reader who follows its directions, but only immediately to pull the rug out on the possibility of any such outcome. Generically, the poem’s lineation lacks entirely the concise sequential ordering particular to the recipe genre, and the logic of its directions is that of indirection. The poem deploys the language of cooking, baking, and food preparation. What it ostensibly sets out to teach the reader, however, is not how to prepare any food item, but rather how to achieve an authentic Indigenous identity. Much of the poem’s humour derives from Annharte’s characteristically “corny” yet incisive wordplay, much of which here revolves around the various sound associations between *bread* and *breed* (*bred*).<sup>105</sup> This wordplay in turn is what undergirds the poem’s general conceit—namely, that genuine, traditional identity is something that it is possible (even necessary) to “cook up.” As is often the case in Annharte’s work, the tendentious humour of “Breed Apart” escalates as the poem precedes. For the reader whose own Indigenous identity or “breeding” is especially unorthodox, suspect, or politically incorrect, the

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<sup>104</sup> Along with official multiculturalism, the representational politics particular to recognition and reconciliation place a number of burdens on contemporary Indigenous writing. Chief among these involve presuppositions of public testimony, witness, truth telling, self-healing, and rehabilitation. What liberal settler readers often expect from Indigenous literature are disclosures of personal trauma and suffering vis-à-vis histories of colonization, cultural genocide, and social immiseration. They also expect these personal narratives to follow the (Euro-American) conventions governing autobiographical or confessional forms of realism. With their emphasis on direct communication, emotional transparency, and the veracity of lived experience, confessional modes invite readerly empathy and identification. Importantly, Annharte recognizes that (psycho-affective and structural) decolonization necessitates a politics and poetics of disclosure. Yet she also recognizes how vulnerable Indigenous expressions of trauma and healing are to depoliticization and co-option within hegemonic truth and reconciliation frameworks. “Squaw Guide” is exemplary in part for how its particular conjunction of humour and confession works at once to invite liberal identification and to thwart it. Critics often posit Indigenous humour as a foil, safety valve, or distancing device for the truths and vulnerabilities of the confessional mode. Its indirection is what allows Indigenous writers to explore the violence, brutality, and injustice of colonialism without reproducing settler stereotypes about Native stoicism, fatalism, or victimization. Annharte certainly exploits these aspects of humour in “Squaw Guide” and other poems in *Indigena Awry* dealing with difficult content. Yet the co-implication of serious and non-bona fide communicational modes is never strictly supplemental in Annharte. Its chief effect is rather to register, pressure, and even escalate discrepancy, incongruity, and incommensurability.

<sup>105</sup> In “Decolonize or Destroy!”, Amy De’Ath reads Annharte’s “deliberately garish puns” and “‘tasteless’ rhetoric excess” in part as a strategy for discomforting or turning away the white avant-garde poetry reader (294).

poem advises, “use more Indian herbal ingredients / special dried wild stuff in cupboard for darker colour crust” (109). As humour, these lines are fairly mild and unlikely to cause genuine offense for an Indigenous audience. To this degree, they accord well with Gruber’s thesis that views in-group Indigenous teasing as socially integrative rather than disintegrative in its intention and effects. The subsequent (punch) line, however, immediately at once places this thesis—and the audience’s receptivity to serving as objects of this teasing—under considerable pressure, with its identification of “whiteman essence” as the final, crucial ingredient of the “real deal hard core indin.”

From here, the tendentious intransitivity of Annharte’s humour only intensifies. Two jokes in particular stand out. In the second stanza, the speaker lampoons a “suspect” member of an ostensibly “pure-blood” tribal family and lineage who “goes red road devotee” and visits a new age “sweat lodge special” to try to bolster her authentic status (109). In the third and final stanza, the speaker describes another scene where food serves as the means to “avoid taunts” “over personal identity issue,” here describing an “urban” Indigenous woman who “ate lard & gophers diet for weeks to boost native awareness / heal the split within while reserve relatives had similar cuisine.” The first of these jokes challenges Indigenous pretensions to purity of identity and cultural practice in much the same way as the quip about “whiteman essence.” Yet it also pushes this conflation of “pure bred” and “commodity” forms of Indigenous subjectivity in a further direction. In this stanza, Annharte gives particular attention to the conflict between “Indians & Half Breeds”—that is, between those with “full status,” those “enfranchised / with moniakwe label,” and those whose status is awry (for a variety of reasons).<sup>106</sup> Certainly, it is “the dilemma of self-identification” that informs many Indigenous performances of “political

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<sup>106</sup> *Moniakwe* (or *monias equay*) means *white woman* in Anishinaabemowin, as Annharte notes in “Bio: Testimonial” (AKA 143).

correctness.” For some Indigenous communities, clans, families, and individuals, however, what motivates such performances is the desire to gain or maintain various forms of prestige or power over “endogamous” others (as the historically “ironic” yet subjectively “earnest” behavior of the chief in “Squaw Guide” also indicates).<sup>107</sup>

Given the intimate relation of food to cultural identity, Annharte’s “joking” identification of “lard & gophers” as traditional Indigenous fare appears to risk and provoke offense, displeasure, and unlaughter to a high degree. Suffice it to note how disparaging the culinary practices of “others” features as a perennial topos of racist discourses and humour of all kinds. Within an endogamous context of reception, however, Annharte’s joke (theoretically) operates from within the group rather than from without. For many humour theorists, it is precisely this insider status that marks the crucial political difference between laughing at and laughing with. In “Whacking the Indigenous Funny Bone,” Taylor offers a similar though slightly more extensive version of this thesis, with his claim that “Native people can make fun of each other and of anyone who is better off than they are, or who has the same approximate position on the Ladder of Status” (71). Interestingly, Taylor subsequently “justifies” this claim by going ahead and relaying two “offensive” Indigenous jokes, both of which centre on the issue of food: 1) “How many Indians does it take to eat a rabbit?—Two, one to eat it, the other to watch for cars” (71); and 2) “What do you call a seven-course dinner in Lakota country?—One dog and a six pack” (72). “If a non-Native person told that joke,” Taylor continues, “there’d be some serious scalping in store.” Because Taylor and the other joke tellers are Indigenous, however, the humour registers as playful rather than hurtful, an instance of cathartic release rather than repression. Yet Taylor also troubles his own thesis on a number of fronts, both overt and covert.

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<sup>107</sup> Annharte uses the term *internal racism* to discuss this power dynamic in “Bio: Testimonial” (AKA 144-45).

Of most interest here is how he introduces an intersectional or relational “vector” into his theory of “politically incorrect” humour.<sup>108</sup> As the citation above indicates, Taylor’s “Ladder of Status” is not simply vertical, with marginal groups at the bottom, somewhat more powerful groups in the middle, and (a) dominant group(s) at the top. It also implies a “horizontal” or “lateral” dimension, a “y-axis” that helps plot relations of (relative) power across groups of similar status and (theoretically) within groups as well. Like most sociological approaches, this model of humour is still insufficient in that it reduces humour entirely to the circumstance of its appearance, as though the logics immanent to concrete instances of joking have no effectivity of their own. Yet its advantage lies in its suggestion that, yes, humour concerns relations of power, with the understanding that these relations are multiple and also operative across social scales.

As a prelude of sorts to an analysis of Annharte’s “lard & gophers” line, it is of benefit to take a closer look at the jokes around Indigeneity and food that Taylor offers in his essay. Unlike Annharte’s line, the joke about the dog and a six pack is easy to parse, with its straightforward question-and-answer form. With the set-up, the joke primes readerly expectations about types of food items that conventionally comprise a multi-course meal. The punchline subsequently short-circuits these expectations with its incongruous substitution of prospective food items like salad, roast beef, dessert, and the like for a domestic pet and alcohol. Unconsciously or otherwise, the listener resolves this incongruity via recourse to racist stereotypes about Indigeneity as these

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<sup>108</sup> Taylor also troubles the strictly vertical, broadly sociological model of humour in a number of ways. His constant joking undermines and ambiguates many of his claims and conclusions. He discloses in an aside that “I’m not sure I completely agree with the hypothesis [that humour is reducible to power relations], but I’ll save that discussion for another day” (73). He uses a play by “a Native community theatre company” as an example of Indigenous political incorrectness. The name of the play is *Those Damn Squaws*, and it is a smash hit among Indigenous audiences, save a single man whose unlaughter at the derogatory language in the title threatens the enjoyment of others with its introduction of comic dissensus (76). Finally, there is his joke about the “Native woman who had breast implants,” which acts as a comic counterweight to his earlier joke about cosmetic surgery as the apex of white cultural achievement (77-78).

intersect with alcohol abuse, indigence, and “backwardness.” Laughter (or unlaughter) ensues. In its basics, Taylor’s joke about the rabbit functions much the same way.

By almost any definition, the jokes that Taylor relays to his readers are racist, and he never attempts to claim otherwise. His position is rather that there are contexts in which Indigenous tellers and listeners are able to find pleasure and release in them. Annharte’s joke is similar in that it too solicits and activates harmful stereotypes about Indigenous food insecurity, malnutrition, and poverty. At the level of structure, intertextual reference, and historical reach, however, it is decisively more complex, polyvalent, and multi-vectorial. It distributes the binary logic of incongruity resolution across its socio-semantic terrain to the point of rendering it inoperative (at least in any totalizing sense). Whereas Taylor’s jokes essentially constitute readers as subjects of enjoyment or unenjoyment, Annharte’s offers a wider and less determinant range of positions vis-à-vis its no less offensive and racist material content. Condensing and displacing various (social, political, and affective) antagonisms immanent to contemporary Indigenous experience and existence, Annharte’s punchlines also render these positions much less intuitive or knowable than is the case in Taylor’s jokes. As instances of what Annharte calls her “polemic Bitch/rant style,” these lines are unambiguously tendentious (aggressive, obscene) but also critical and political (*AKA* 99). Unlike the standalone humour of Taylor’s examples, moreover, Annharte’s humour here finds immediate points reference in the larger texts (poem, book) of which it is a part, including the “thematic” of Indigenous “political correctness” and identity—its contradictions, double binds, and discontents.

Homing in on the language and imagery specific to Annharte's poem, the first difference to note is that "lard & gophers" has a polyvalence absent from Taylor's jokes.<sup>109</sup> In a first pass, it seems apparent that Annharte's choice of these particular "animal" referents constitutes an insult, provocation, or disparagement (self or otherwise). Yet other readings and reactions to this content are certainly possible. In fact, the joke elicits and compels them. With its reliance on shock and suddenness, humour deliberately works to bypass or overcome the defences of critical and historical reflection. Nevertheless, any "taboo" on consuming gopher meat is clearly a product of particular places and times. As Anishinaabekwe, Annharte is always writing (and joking) within an Anishinaabe (Ojibwe, Saulteaux) context (among others). As plains and forest dwelling people, "pre-contact" Saulteaux would hunt small game (including gopher) to supplement a traditional diet of wild rice, fish, venison, and berries.<sup>110</sup> From this perspective, then, Annharte's linking of a diet of gopher to "native awareness" and healing is not tendentious or offensive but rather traditionalist. Yet what about lard? Like many Anishinabek Nations, Saulteaux of the Interlake regions also subsisted on a steady diet of nooka'iiwagwaan or pemmican, a food whose constituent elements are animal proteins (meat) and fat.<sup>111</sup> Lard is also a main ingredient in bannock or "Indian frybread," whose status today is that of a near universal culinary symbol of pan-Indigenous identity, of an exemplary "Indian soul food."<sup>112</sup> With this

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<sup>109</sup> For example, "true" gophers are what are more accurately called "pocket gophers," but the term is also used to describe "ground squirrels," which include marmots, groundhogs (woodchucks), and prairie dogs. See "Gopher," *OED*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed., 1989.

<sup>110</sup> Of course, this practice also continues into the colonial period, up to the current day. In *Our Hearts Are as One Fire*, Jerry Fontaine (Ojibwe-Anishinabe) explicitly names the groundhog as one of the animals that "offered his flesh so that Anishinabeg would survive" (148).

<sup>111</sup> I source all Ojibwe terminology from the online *Ojibwe People's Dictionary*, a joint project of the University of Minnesota's Department of American Indian Studies and University Libraries, and the Minnesota Historical Society. I source information about Ojibwe foodways from Laura Peers, *The Ojibwa of Western Canada, 1780-1870* and H. V. Kuhnlein and M. M. Humphries, *Traditional Animal Foods of Indigenous Peoples of Northern North America*. See especially the entries on the pocket gopher, the groundhog, the prairie dog, and the ground squirrel.

<sup>112</sup> Bannock is "one of our basic food groups," the Wet'suwet'en chef Andrew George writes in his influential cookbook *Feast!* "You won't find a Native community in Canada where bannock is not made in one form or

knowledge in mind, a traditionalist reading of Annharte's "joke" becomes even more plausible. Indeed, it has the effect of reinforcing De'Ath's claim that part of what Annharte's poetry demonstrates is how "it is the settler who is, and always was, mistaken" (286). As humour, Annharte's "provocation" addresses cultural insiders and outsiders simultaneously, though to different ends. The joke compels the "exogamous" subject to misrecognize Annharte's "lard and gophers diet" as "distasteful" in both a gustatory and cultural sense, laying bare his ignorance of Indigenous foodways and disclosing his position as the joke's butt in the process.

Yet, unsurprisingly, the humour of this line also operates in other directions. As a game animal, the gopher is not at all "unpalatable" in Anishinaabe contexts, but it certainly lacks the high alimentary, economic, symbolic, and spiritual status of other woodland and plains fauna and flora. From a traditionalist standpoint, Annharte's choice of memookiwidoo rather than, say, manoomin is in this regard somewhat unusual (or suspect).<sup>113</sup> In traditional Anishinaabe food economies, memookiwidoo is mostly supplemental to more substantive caloric sources such as bear, moose, fish, and deer. As a result, it often functions (along with other small game animals) as a narrative signifier of starvation rations in colonial times (and likely prior to as well).

Importantly, the signifier *lard* is also subject to slippage, both historical and socio-semantic. In a

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another" (84). The phrase "Indian soul food" as a cultural descriptor for bannock appears in multiple locations on the Internet. George calls it "the Native staff of life" (18). Perhaps the most interesting description of bannock appears in the *Dictionary of American Regional English*, which cites a range of sources (from 1836 to the present) and presents "squaw bread" as a synonym.

<sup>113</sup> As the "food that grows on water," Manoomin (or wild rice) is central to Seven Fires Prophecies that inform and narrate the historical, five-hundred-year migration of the Ojibway from the Northeastern Seaboard area of present-day Canada and US to the Great Lakes region, especially the northwestern shores of Lake Superior. As the Ojibway-Anishinabe writer, activist, and Elder Edward Benton-Banai relates in *The Mishomis Book*, "[i]t was near Spirit Island that the words of the prophets were fulfilled. Here the Anishinabe found 'the food that grows on water.' Here they found Ma-no'-min (wild rice), which has always been regarded by the Ojibway as the sacred gift of their chosen ground" (101). "In the Ojibwa language," explains the Wet'suwet'en chef Andrew George, "the word man-o-min derives from Manitou (the great spirit) and meenum (delicacy) . . . Traditionally, it held sacred status among the Ojibwa," who would hold harvest ceremonies to "give thanks to the Great Spirit for this wonderful gift" (20).

strict or literal reading, *lard* refers to pig fat, particularly as a product of industrial processes of animal rendering.<sup>114</sup> With reference to pemmican, the more accurate (English) term to use is *tallow*. The politics of bannock is even more ambivalent. In “Bannock: Consuming Colonialism,” Lorilee Wastasecoot (Inninee) notes the shifting cultural meanings that bannock has undergone for Indigenous Peoples, from the early days of European contact and the fur trade, to the decades after the Indian Act (1876) and the full implementation of the reserve system by the colonial Canadian government. “Where bannock was once an easy food to make out on the land or along trap lines during fur trading,” Wastasecoot explains, “it became a necessary staple for Indigenous people to feed their families and stave off starvation.”

In “Does Bannock Have a Place in Indigenous Cuisine?,” Zoe Heaps Tennant similarly notes how “bannock occupies a conflicted territory” as a culinary symbol of Indigenous identity. For many settlers and Indigenous people alike, bannock is “considered a ‘traditional’ Aboriginal food, and sometimes even *the* Aboriginal food.” Yet there are an increasing number of Indigenous people who refuse to cook, consume, or endorse bannock as traditional fare for political, decolonial reasons. With loss of their traditional hunting, fishing, and harvesting grounds to settler incursion and appropriation, many Indigenous Nations began to depend on settler governmental rations for subsistence, often in the form of unhealthy, inexpensive fare like “salt, sugar, flour, baking soda, and lard” (Tennant).<sup>115</sup> For the Anishinaabe Ojibway critic and scholar Martin Reinhardt, “pre-colonial” food practices are at once “a form of political resistance” and a means to combat the devastating health effects (diabetes, obesity) that colonial eating habits continue to have on Indigenous bodies. While researching her article, Tennant also

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<sup>114</sup> “Lard,” *OED*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed., 1989.

<sup>115</sup> In Tennant’s article, the Oji-Cree artist KC Adams ironically designates these food items “the five gifts of the white man.”

encounters Indigenous chefs and food activists for whom bannock still speaks to Indigenous traditions and foodways, operating as a type of “comfort food,” despite its colonial provenance and connotations. In the context of “Breed Apart,” then, the question is not whether food items like “lard” signify starvation or survivance, but rather what it means for Annharte to mobilize a tendentious joke in which both—and other conflictual—significations are available.

The central incongruity at work in Annharte’s “lard & gophers” line involves the “comic” discrepancy between the speaker’s aspirational desire to “boost native awareness” and the “low” or problematic status of the culinary items through which she intends to bring about this outcome. Yet there are incongruities at work in each of these terms as well. The line achieves a degree of clarity via historical, cultural, and lexical analysis and understanding, yet not enough to assign a definitive meaning to the utterance. The speaker says that by following this diet, she is able to “heal the split within,” in part by achieving a type of correspondence between Indigenous urban and rural experience. As she tells us, her “reserve relatives had similar cuisine” (109). Is the reserve, here, a space of “authentic,” “traditional” Anishinaabe fare, for the speaker or certain readers? Or is Annharte using dark humour to highlight conditions of poverty and malnutrition on reserve lands—conditions born of historical and ongoing colonial dispossession of Indigenous hunting, fishing, and harvest grounds? “Endogamous” readers with traditional, cultural, familial, and personal knowledge are no doubt in a better position to parse these (and other) lines. As humour, however, the lines ultimately resist any frictionless stabilization or resolution. Contrary to Taylor’s jokes, their incongruity is not momentary but interminable. As a result, their effect is not that of release or catharsis but rather an intensification of “ambiguous discomfort,” an affect that Reg Johanson identifies as characteristic of Annharte poetics (“Straight Forward” 139). Throughout her writing, Annharte frequently expresses anguish over the difficulties involved in

determining “authentic” Indigeneity from its politically correct double or other. In “Breed Apart,” part of the humour’s aggressiveness derives precisely from the speaker’s sense that the cultural “insider” is in no better position to assess “genuine” from “commodity” forms of Indigeneity—and that the imposition or arrogation of traditional prerogatives only contributes to the problem.

In “Breed Apart,” “apartness” is not only thematic in that the poem’s humour at once names and exacerbates antagonism between different “lineages” of Indigenous identity, both “hi bred” and “half breed.” The poem also formalizes this sense of irreducible particularity, with various punchlines that elicit yet refuse the type of laughter, recognition, and resolution necessary to easy identification and integration. In “Better Dressed,” the humour is much more direct, perhaps because its target is not Indigenous political correctness as this operates as a marker of prestige and status, but rather a “big party aboriginal” whose sartorial, food, and lifestyle choices mark him as credulous to the most crass or kitsch forms of Indigenous identity signifiers. The poem begins with this character awaiting a financial windfall of some sort, an “income tax rebate or long / awaited residential school / compensation” or perhaps “casino / or bingo” winnings (*Indigena* 22). What follows are a series of increasingly hostile jokes, personal attacks, and disclosures, each of which use the second-person indicative form to maximum effect. “[Y]ou are the one better dressed,” with your “ndn skin colour enhancer” and “big foot moccasins” (22). Like “Kaw-liga,” “you were the poor bastard / pushed out in front of a store.” “[Y]ou sold leather bikinis wolf / tail boas.” You are “just another ndn / wearing fake turquoise beads.” “[Y]ou are just another poser hoser / ordering mooseburger with poutine” (23). What makes this tendentious attack difficult to recuperate is the sharpness of its wit, its immediacy of address, and its relentlessness. In the final stanza, the identity of the second-person gains

particularity as the poem closes with a domestic scene of sorts between the speaker and her lover or partner, who “kept me up / last night with your one beer fight” (23).<sup>116</sup> Yet the “you” is also unavoidably the reader, whom the poem marks as “Indigenous” by means of the same stereotypical and colonial signifiers that it purports to critique. Whereas “Squaw Guide” invites both Indigenous and settler identification, (mis)recognition, and disavowal by means of its second-person form of address, “Better Dressed” interpellates Indigenous subjects while decentring settler readers, but only to reposition these latter as witnesses to “endogamous” infighting and humiliation.

In *You’re So Fat!*, Native studies scholar Roger Spielmann argues that Indigenous (Algonquin, Odawa) communities and individuals frequently use humour to police tribal norms of behaviour, but that even the sharpest forms of ridicule or mockery make sure to provide “transgressors” with a means to save face and escape undue embarrassment and shaming (110).<sup>117</sup> Among other things, what claims like Spielmann’s miss is how Indigeneity—even among nation-specific groups like the Algonquin and Odawa—is not a self-identical socio-cultural, historical, or political category.<sup>118</sup> Such claims also tend to neglect the type of intersectional framework that Taylor gestures to in his essay on “political correctness vs. Native humour” (67). In “Breed Apart,” Annharte uses humour to critique status, prestige, and class in Indigenous communities and social groups. In “Better Dressed,” part of what motivates

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<sup>116</sup> Yet the poem’s disjunctive temporal markers also work against consolidating the poem’s *mise-en-scène* in this manner. Among other examples, the male character’s “braids are long enough,” but “you grew them out yesterday.” He kept the speaker “up last / night” with his partying but is also “incarcerated” (23).

<sup>117</sup> Spielmann draws on his ten-year experience researching and living among Algonquin and Odawa communities in northern Quebec. As a settler academic with Algonquin language conversancy, Spielmann’s insights are valuable, but his conclusions are limited by his largely uncritical approach to humour studies and his tendency to “romanticize” his subjects.

<sup>118</sup> Unconsciously, Spielmann’s essentialism has the effect of suggesting that the humour practices of writers like Annharte mark them as “less than” Indigenous. Such politically unconscious content is part of what Annharte’s humour is working against.

Annharte's scathing language and wit are the gender and sexual politics particular to Indigenous women's experience of "in-group" social, domestic, and erotic relations. Among other things, what this poem dramatizes is the relation between the male character's unreflective acceptance of colonial markers of Indigenous embodiment and his perpetuation of harmful stereotypes about Indigenous masculinity. As a figure of comic abuse, the poem's male character is oblivious and abject in his behaviour, yet he still manages to maintain power over the speaker. Despite her anger and critical insight, she is unable to break off her entanglement with him or to dispel the "mystery how old man incarcerated / keeps me available for next pow wow / pretend I am your lifelong snag" (23).<sup>119</sup> As the poem discloses, part of the reason for why the male character manages to keep the speaker "available" concerns her own unconscious investment in certain markers of "authentic" Indigenous, masculine, and heterosexual identity. "[W]ant you to be real," the speaker tells the man in the poem's final stanza. "[Y]our braids long enough tradish" (23). Like the jokes, the poem concludes, then, not with resolution, reconciliation, or integration but a sense of interminability and ongoing struggle.<sup>120</sup>

In "Breed Apart" and "Better Dressed," the objects of Annharte's acid humour compose a variety of Indigenous subject positions, discursive formations, and identity performances, all of which are "guilty" to some extent of what Annharte theorizes as political correctness, cultural appropriation, internal racism, and reverse racism, as these operate within Indigenous-specific contexts. What renders the "butt" in "Better Dressed" so buffoonish is that he confuses exogamous for endogamous forms of Native sartorial authenticity. The "hi-bred" identities in "Breed Apart" find themselves on the receiving end of a type of comic-social-correction-

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<sup>119</sup> Like the man's "fake turquoise beads" and other garb, here the man's commitment to the speaker is also "fake," "pretend."

<sup>120</sup> The same is true of the poem's only pastoral moment, which concludes with a comic reversal when it tells its various second persons, "admit it don't you just hate / revelations of nature change" (22).

without-integration for the readiness with which they internalize “racist” and classist notions of hierarchy and stratification within Indigenous communities, primarily in the name of social distinction, advantage, and self-interest. In his introduction to *AKA Inendagosekwe*, Reg Johanson helps make explicit the connection between Annharte’s humorous appropriation of the terminology of liberal political correctness and Glen Coulthard’s critique of colonial recognition politics. For Johanson, Coulthard’s key insight in this regard is as follows:

[T]he long-term stability of a colonial system of governance relies as much on the “internalization” of the forms of racist recognition imposed or bestowed on the Indigenous population by the colonial state and society as it does on brute force . . . The longevity of a colonial social formation depends, to a significant degree, on its capacity to transform the colonized population into subjects of imperial rule. (Coulthard 31)<sup>121</sup>

According to Johanson, “Annharte’s theory of cultural appropriation describes this sort of misrecognition and subsequent reproduction of Indigeneity” (xiii). Bringing Annharte’s critical repurposing of various liberal, progressivist shibboleths into contact with Coulthard’s trenchant analysis of reactive forms of Indigenous identity formation under conditions of a near hegemonic recognition and reconciliation biopolitical episteme—this is precisely what undergirds Johanson’s important insights into how Annharte’s writing “intervenes in this mirroring of Indigenous subjectivity.” In many ways, my position is identical to Johanson’s, with the important distinction that I view Annharte’s particular recourse to tendentious modes of humour as what is most crucial to her radical, decolonial project. For Annharte, the problem with all modalities of recognition lies in how they reinscribe or merely redistribute relations of domination. Within regimes of recognition, colonially privileged notions of Indigenous identity

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<sup>121</sup> Coulthard explicitly acknowledges his debt to Fanon in arriving at this position.

become the model and standard for settler and Native subjects alike. For Annharte, the effect of recognition is to exacerbate rather than reconcile her experience of alienation vis-à-vis “official” or readily legible sites of Indigenous sociality, political struggle, and literary production. With its critical leveraging of comic (mis)identification and (mis)recognition, what Annharte’s brilliantly idiosyncratic approach to humour affords, then, is a social, textual, and affective means to elicit, interrogate, and disrupt the interpellative power of contemporary (neo)colonial discourses and rhetorics, as these operate on Indigenous—as much as settler—minds and bodies.

## 5. The Laughter of the Ogress: Black Humour, Vulgar Marxism, and the Maternal Body in Dorothy Trujillo Lusk

### 5.1. Feminism, Humour, Avant-Garde Poetics

In both *Subversive Intent* and her later, complementary essay on “Surrealist Black Humour,” Susan Suleiman provides a set of problematics that help open a reading of humour in the work of Dorothy Trujillo Lusk. In the broadest sense, Suleiman’s purpose in both texts is twofold: 1) to unveil the anti-feminist logics undergirding various historical avant-gardes and 2) to explore the viability of placing “masculinist” avant-garde techniques in the service of a “feminist critique of dominant sexual ideologies, including those of the very same avant-gardes” (*Subversive Intent* 162). In Suleiman’s account, this “double allegiance” to both avant-garde and feminist concerns has the effect of doubly marginalizing radical women writers and their work. As adherents of avant-garde cultural practices and politics, women writers are marginal to the dominant, bourgeois sphere of artistic production, dissemination, and reception (including that of liberal or “mainstream” feminism”).<sup>1</sup> As women, however, they also occupy a marginal position within spaces of oppositional cultural production—and not simply because their male counterparts typically prefer to maintain rather than contest their phallic prerogatives. Interrogating the work of André Breton, George Batailles, and Alain Robbe-Grillet, Suleiman convincingly demonstrates how the avant-garde historically constructs aesthetic transgression as masculine, or at least as “the enemy of the feminine” (“Black Humour” 4).<sup>2</sup> Despite the overwhelming evidence of misogyny as a structural feature of the avant-garde project, however,

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<sup>1</sup> Elizabeth A. Frost identifies this latter as a third sphere of marginalization in *The Feminist Avant-Garde in American Poetry*. See especially Frost’s introductory chapter. Of course, it is always possible (and advisable) to multiply such spheres.

<sup>2</sup> For Suleiman, Surrealism in particular emerges under the sign of woman’s body, which it subsequently occludes. This absent presence thereafter becomes the space of avant-garde male transgression. See especially her chapter “A Double Margin: Women Writers and the Avant-Garde in France.”

Suleiman maintains an investment in “the formal experiments and some of the cultural aspirations” of writers like Bataille, Breton, and Robbe-Grillet (*Subversive Intent* xvii). For Suleiman, the constitutive masculinity particular to avant-garde subjectivity is not grounds for dismissing radical textual politics as incompatible with feminist concerns. Neither is the double marginality of the feminist avant-garde writer entirely absent of potential and advantage, at least for women able to appropriate it as a site of antagonism and production (16-17).

The notion of double marginalization is relevant to discussions of Lusk’s work not least because it emerges within the (post)avant-garde context of Vancouver’s Kootenay School of Writing (KSW). Lusk’s most active period as a writer cuts across three major moments within the aesthetic, political, and institutional history of the KSW: the class politics and Language poetics of the late 1980s, the corrective feminism of the early 1990s, and the Marxist-anarchist turn leading into the early 2000s.<sup>3</sup> In “Feminist Poetics as Avant-Garde Poetics,” Alessandra Capperdoni addresses the work of a number of feminist writers affiliated with the KSW, dedicating significant time and space to Lusk’s writing. In this essay, Capperdoni stresses the need to address Lusk’s poetry within an intersectional critical framework attentive to the operations of sex-gender within social processes of class oppression (and vice versa). She also echoes Suleiman when she notes how the term avant-garde—as a de facto synonym for male writing—typically works to subsume and re-contain “women’s experimental poetics,” pushing them “to the margin” and effacing their central position within “different vanguardistic fields of cultural production” (33). Yet what recommends Suleiman’s work in this context even more are two specific nodes of inquiry that emerge as a result of her interrogation of gender politics and avant-garde aesthetics. The first concerns the status and viability of tendentious modes of

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<sup>3</sup> I derive this periodization from Pauline Butling and Donato Mancini respectively, who offer it as a provisional heuristic in the collective text “By the Collective, For the Collective, On the Collective” (123-28).

feminist avant-garde humour, while the second focuses on the figure of the laughing mother and the maternal body as possible sites of non-phallic play, rebellion, and transgression.<sup>4</sup>

Suleiman's essay "Surrealist Black Humour" is among the few texts to address the issue of tendentious humour in the work of women writers—and among the even fewer to address humour in the work of the feminist avant-garde. This fact alone makes this essay an important reference for understanding how humour operates in writing as highly disjunctive and anti-systematic as Lusk's. Suleiman's interrogation of the oppositional tendency that André Breton famously designates as *black humour* follows the same logic as her earlier investigation of the (im)possibility of oppositional feminist writing within the intensely homosocial space of the Surrealist *phratric*.<sup>5</sup> Breton's *Anthology of Black Humour* collects what it presents as exemplary work from forty-five different writers, only two of whom are women: Leonora Carrington and Gisèle Prassinos. In his preface to the collection, Breton tropes black humour as "virile: chivalric and warlike" (Suleiman 3). As such, it is "the mortal enemy" of sentiment, romance, and fantasy, which Breton figures as old coquettes long past the age of sexual desirability (3-4). "Is black humour male?" Suleiman asks, echoing the work of French scholar Mireille Rosello (1).<sup>6</sup> Are there any Surrealist women practitioners? What is black humour from a feminist perspective?

Examining the work of Carrington and Prassinos in particular, Suleiman arrives at two conclusions regarding black humour in the work of women Surrealists. According to Suleiman, Carrington's and Prassinos' contributions to Breton's anthology differ little from texts from male writers in their gender politics. The humour is inventively transgressive, but it attacks

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<sup>4</sup> Critics who discuss Language poetics from a feminist and gender perspective include Ann Vickery, *Leaving Lines of Gender: A Feminist Genealogy of Language Writing*, and Peter Middleton, "When L=A: Language, Authorship, and Equality in L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E Magazine."

<sup>5</sup> Suleiman takes this term from the work of Luce Irigaray.

<sup>6</sup> Mireille Rosello, *L'humour noir selon André Breton*.

conventional targets of avant-garde aggression, such as the figure of the (bourgeois, patriarchal) mother (6). Suleiman's desire is for feminist texts that place tendentious humour in the service of a critique of the gender politics of the avant-garde coterie. In Suleiman's analysis, this feminist mode of humour appears in the practice of other avant-garde women artists like Nelly Kaplan, as well as in other texts by Carrington and Prassinis. Carrington's and Prassinis' contributions to the *Anthology of Black Humour* are assimilative because they effectively reproduce the anti-feminist logic of "the Surrealist 'men's club'" (7). Yet their later work often uses aggressive and ambivalent forms of parody and comic mimicry as strategies for foregrounding gender and contesting masculinist avant-garde prerogatives.

As Suleiman notes, merely a handful of female figures and archetypes haunt the masculine avant-garde imaginary. That which receives most sanction is the beautiful, precocious, mad, young woman or girl in her role as object of (heterosexist) *amour fou*. Beyond doubt, that which receives most scorn is the figure of the mother. The relation of the maternal body to avant-garde transgression is thematic to Suleiman's work in *Subversive Intent*, and it takes centre stage in her chapter on "Feminine Textuality and the Laugh of the Mother." For Suleiman, "the emblematic subject of male avant-garde practice is . . . a transgressive son who may . . . 'play with the body of his mother' but who never imagines (let alone gives voice to) his mother playing" (145).<sup>7</sup> As Benjamin Péret and Paul Eluard admonish in *152 Proverbes mis au gout du jour*, "Il faut batter sa mère pendent qu'elle est jeune" (qtd. in Suleiman 147).<sup>8</sup> In "Hands Off Love," Max Ernst extends this anti-maternal vitriol to a broader social field of feminine nurture and nature, extolling against "those bitches who become, in every country, the *good* mothers,

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<sup>7</sup> The language in single quotation is from Roland Barthes, *Le Plaisir du texte*. As elsewhere, the English translation is Suleiman's own.

<sup>8</sup> Benjamin Péret, *Oeuvres complètes*, vol. 4.

*good* sisters, *good* wives, those plagues, those parasites of every sentiment and every love” (qtd. in Suleiman 165).<sup>9</sup> As Suleiman observes, however, such animosity towards the mother operates as a constitutive feature of much radical feminist textuality as well. In Carrington’s “La debutante,” black humour derives predominantly from the protagonist’s scandalous ill treatment of her mother, who here stands in for all things bourgeois, sentimental, and domestic (“Black Humor” 4-5) In works like *Les guérillères* and *Virgile, non*, Monique Wittig insistently maintains a “distinction between Amazons and mothers—the latter functioning as upholders of the father’s law and therefore enemies of the former” (*Subversive Intent* 165). For Suleiman, avant-garde aggression towards the mother finds its canonical expression in Julia Kristeva’s *Revolution in Poetic Language*. In Kristeva’s reading, truly transgressive and innovative art involves a negation of paternal legitimation, which the (necessarily) male avant-garde subject survives by perversely appropriating the mother’s body as a site of both maternal consolation and sadistic enjoyment. Of course, Kristeva is an interesting case given her importance as a theorist of *écriture féminine* and her important position within French feminism. Even as late as the early 1970s, most avant-garde practitioners (male or female) regard it as impossible for a woman to “be a mother and outside the father’s law at the same time: whether as alienated victim or as self-righteous accomplice, the mother appears necessarily on the side of patriarchy” (*Subversive Intent* 166). In Suleiman’s reading, the anti-feminist trope of the patriarchal mother is part of what compels Hélène Cixous and Luce Irigaray to elaborate “the ‘maternal metaphor’ for women’s writing and women’s cultural politics.” Following feminist critics like Domna Stanton, Suleiman acknowledges that the French feminist figure of the maternal body as a site and source

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<sup>9</sup> For Ernst and his thirty-two male co-signatories, these sisters and wives are guilty because their existence derives solely from the “manufacture of brats.” For the complete letter in the original French, see Maurice Nadeau, *Histoire du Surréalisme*. As Suleiman points out, the actual target of this vitriolic letter is Oona O’Neill, the (fourth) wife of Surrealist hero Charlie Chaplin (165).

of gendered writing practices has its limits and problematics.<sup>10</sup> Yet she upholds the importance of this figure precisely because it allows “women writers to imagine a feminist avant-garde practice” that retains “the historical avant-gardes’ subversive/parodic energy”—but that also subjects their symbolic abjection of the mother to necessary revision and critique (167).

For Suleiman, Cixous’ famous essay “The Laugh of the Medusa” is doubly important in this regard. Via its titular figure, Cixous’ essay not only recuperates the “monstrous” (castrating, pro-creative) female body but also identifies it as a powerful site of insurgent laughter (167). In Suleiman’s reading, the laughter of Medusa operates as a feminist correlative to avant-garde black humour. As such, it is no less relevant and available to the contemporary moment than it was at the time of Cixous’ writing. Indeed, Suleiman ultimately holds that few feminist avant-garde texts of the late 1970s and early 1980s manage fully to recognize and exploit the subversive power that Cixous’ Medusa makes available. Certainly, many feminist texts of this period are radical in their recuperation of the maternal body. But few if any are tendentiously humorous, parodic, or comic to any substantial degree (168). Suleiman calls for radical modes of textuality in which the mother’s body no longer operates primarily as an “object of apparently endless inventions in the perverse games of transgressive sons” (xvi).<sup>11</sup> Yet she also calls for images of the playful, transgressive, and blackly humorous mother as an alternate archetype, trope, or mytheme of avant-garde practice. To her chagrin, she is unable to find this image among the prominent maternal metaphors of writers like Chantal Chawaf or Annie Leclerc (to name only two writers whose work she addresses). Suleiman finds promise in the work of a new generation of women writers whose approaches to transgression, humour, and the maternal body

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<sup>10</sup> See Domna Stanton, “Difference on Trial: A Critique of the Maternal Metaphor in Cixous, Irigaray, and Kristeva.”

<sup>11</sup> She is equally unhappy with repudiations or idealizations of the mother at the hands of “rebellious daughters” (xvi).

operate more specifically under the sign of the postmodern.<sup>12</sup> Yet this turn to the postmodern is not an end, but “in lieu of an ending” (181). In Suleiman’s work, the problematic of “the laughing mother” remains, and remains central to the elaboration of any contemporary feminist avant-garde practice.<sup>13</sup>

## 5.2. The *Mater Risus* as Single Mother on Welfare

dotty-mouthed social self

emergent, rampant

In my dotage erupts from an hard-won

Sense that I need no longer

Present as Genteel. BAD archaic element.

Thus it ever was. AR! AR! AR!

—Dorothy Lusk, “Rumplestiltskin’s Dotter”

Critics are quick to identify (tendentious) humour as central to Lusk’s poetics. Fellow KSW alumnus Colin Smith discusses Lusk in his contribution to the *Why Are You Laughing?* issue of *Open Letter*, and Ryan Fitzpatrick and Jonathon Ball include poems from *Ogress Oblige* in *Why Poetry Sucks: An Anthology of Humorous Experimental Canadian Poetry*. In “Against Stratification,” Roger Farr identifies “[a]ntagonistic mockery” (15) and “the sagging maternal ‘body’” (14) as both central to what he describes as Lusk’s “poetics of class recomposition” (3).

The mother also features in Alessandra Capperdoni’s important essay “Feminist Poetics as

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<sup>12</sup> Jeanette Winterson is one such author whose work Suleiman discusses at length. She also mentions Kathy Acker and Angela Carter, among others.

<sup>13</sup> “There will be no genuine renewal, either in a theory of the avant-garde or in its practices, as long as every drama, whether textual or sexual, continues to be envisaged . . . in terms of a confrontation between an all-powerful father and a traumatized son, a confrontation staged across and over the body of the mother” (87).

Avant-Garde Poetics,” which discusses Lusk’s work at significant length. In these regards, Suleiman appears to offer a clear framework in which to engage Lusk’s poetics. To the extent that it enacts the mother as a locus of avant-garde humour, Lusk’s work also appears exemplary of the type of writing that Suleiman not only theorizes but also desires and seeks out.

Like the maternal metaphor, however, the interpretive coordinates that Suleiman presents also have their limits, particularly vis-à-vis texts like Lusk’s *Redactive* and *Ogress Oblige*. At different moments, Suleiman expresses reservations about Monique Wittig’s writing as a model for feminist avant-garde practice, not only for its representation of the mother but also for its particular mode of humour. “Wittig’s comedy,” Suleiman writes, “is not funny but by turns sarcastic, angry, lyrical, vituperative, sorrowful” (166). Elsewhere, she describes Wittig’s work as “parodic—but also grimly polemical” (133). In its humour, it is not so much playful as violent and conflictual (133-34).<sup>14</sup> Lusk’s textual politics little resemble Wittig’s. Yet her humour is similarly more antagonistic than funny, more tendentious than playful.<sup>15</sup>

Privileging Freud’s late essay “Humour” over the more canonical *Jokes and Their Relation to the Unconscious*, Suleiman articulates her ideal of *mater risus* as also *mater ludens*. To “imagine the mother playing and laughing,” Suleiman argues, “is to recognize her most fully as a subject—as autonomous and free . . . able to take the risk of ‘infinite expansion’ that goes with creativity” (179). Yet it is not only Suleiman’s uncritical advocacy of humorous play as autonomous free activity that raises questions about the applicability of her work to Lusk’s writing. As Suleiman’s language here suggests, the decision to supplement *risus* with *ludens* is in

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<sup>14</sup> As with feminist humour theory more generally, *playful* is a bit of a desideratum for Suleiman’s ideal of the feminist avant-garde *mater ludens*. Suleiman acknowledges that Wittig’s more tendentious approach was necessary given the state of the feminist movement in the 1970s, while suggesting that it is a dead-end road for feminist writers today.

<sup>15</sup> Lusk’s is a “monstrous and witty assault,” as fellow KSW poet Kevin Davies describes it in a blurb to *Ogress Oblige*. It is a humour of “voluble comic interruptances,” Bruce Andrews writes on the back jacket of *Redactive*.

many ways a classic liberal gesture within humour criticism, for this gesture marks an inclination away from tendentiousness and towards the “unpurposive” as the key site of humour as a liberatory politics.

In Suleiman, this gesture also has the effect of disclosing the extent to which the ideal, avant-garde, laughing mother is unavailable to further predication. Part of what lies behind Suleiman’s discomfort with the blackly humorous “violence” that “Wittig does to traditional (male?) syntax and vocabulary” is its correlation to Wittig’s lesbian feminism and radical gender separatism (134).<sup>16</sup> In the face of lesbian refusals of the maternal and heterosexist social reproduction, the trope of the laughing mother clearly meets its limit. It also meets its limit vis-à-vis Lusk’s tendentious poetics, though here it is not sexuality but the intersection of class and gender that operates as the key locus of social, political, and aesthetic differentiation.

In “Avant-Sword,” Colin Smith proffers “the single mother on welfare” as an alternate figure through which to construe the syntactic “pulverations” and “Baroque Latinate send-ups” of poems like “Why Do I Have a Phony British Accent” and “SCLEBISCITE” (among others) (57). In “Feminist Poetics as Avant-Garde Poetics,” Capperdoni rightly asserts that the material grounds of Lusk’s textual politics are neither class nor gender but rather their co-implication. “In highlighting her position of social vulnerability as a working-class woman,” Capperdoni elaborates, “Lusk’s poetry recontextualizes questions of class opposition and stratification within a sex-gender politics” (38). Capperdoni begins her essay by invoking Suleiman’s thesis on the double marginalization of feminist avant-garde writing. Her reading of Lusk effectively supplements this thesis, demonstrating the need for a more dynamic, material, and intersectional understanding of the multiple margins from which many radical women writers do in fact write.

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<sup>16</sup> To her credit, Suleiman acknowledges as much: “There may be a heterosexual bias on my part, or even a kind of fear—the heterosexual woman’s fear of being ‘contaminated’ by lesbianism” (133).

Suleiman's work on feminist avant-garde humour suffers from an inattention to social position beyond that of gender and a surprising, last-minute unease with more aggressive forms of comic technique, expression, and strategy. Contrary to Lusk's writing, its primary areas of exploration are narrative, canonical French theory, and humorous modes like parody and mimicry. Its lack of familiarity with feminist activity within emergent avant-garde formations (including Language writing) hinders the scope and depth of its analysis as well. Yet the disparity or uneasy fit between Suleiman's and Lusk's orientations to feminism, the avant-garde, and black humour is more productive than limiting precisely because it compels the specificity of Lusk's tendentious poetics into greater relief. In this regard, what Suleiman offers Lusk's work is not so much an interpretative framework as a set of problematics whose content exists in a relation of tension yet also contact and overlap. In *Ogress Oblige*, Lusk places the non-narrative joke, the disjunctive punchline, and the gendered and classed pun in the service of a literally "vulgar" Marxist-feminist poetics. In a number of poems, Lusk uses these techniques to show how "the flows of Capital and bohemia converge" in their need to silence, exploit, and abjectify the embattled yet still "active mother" (*Ogress* 32). In others, she uses them more generally to deride the ideological production of woman qua (reproductive) object of nature. In some ways, the laughter of Lusk's titular "Ogress" resembles that of Cixous' "Medusa" (and thus also Suleiman's "laughing mother"). For Lusk, however, the (figure of the) maternal body is not a metaphor for writing but a site of (resistance to) gender and class stratification. In her poetry, linguistic play is a mark of the gendered and classed subject under and against erasure, not a moment of libidinal eruption, feminine jouissance, or essentializing lyricism.

### **5.3. Ogressive Humour: Class and Gender Determinant and Indeterminant**

At the level of textual surface, Lusk's writing is insistently rebarbative, mordacious, astringent. "Demolitional," "rife with niches," and "severely outside" is how Language poet Bruce Andrews describes it in a back-jacket blurb to *Redactive*. Accounting for the paucity of its critical uptake, Alessandra Capperdoni describes how "Lusk writes poetry that is inherently 'difficult' and unrecognizable," not simply within conventional and academic contexts of reception, but within sites of feminist and avant-garde literary production as well (36).<sup>17</sup> Perhaps unsurprising, Lusk's humour is as equally challenging to parse. Even more so than Annharte, her one-liners are resistant to resolution, and her jokes are often more micrological than those that help (dis)organize Andrews' *I Don't Have Any Paper*.<sup>18</sup> In "Surrealist Black Humour," Suleiman identifies parody and mimicry as the two main comic strategies historically used by feminist avant-garde writers to contest and critique their double (or multiple) marginalization. Parody and mimicry are operative in Lusk but at a much smaller scale than in the texts that Suleiman examines. They are also less immediately visible due to the concerted non-linear and non-narrative impulse of Lusk's work.<sup>19</sup> Nevertheless, perhaps the place to start is where these comic modes feature most obviously—namely, with the title and titular figure that presides over Lusk's text.

Via the condensation and displacement that homophony affords, *Ogress Oblige* "begins" with an especially felicitous travesty of the *ancient régime* moral code of *noblesse oblige*. Whether laughter accompanies it or not, the resolution of a pun (or joke) tends either to displace

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<sup>17</sup> Of course, none of this is to say that Lusk's work is without significant readership or is not influential in certain circles, as Capperdoni aptly acknowledges.

<sup>18</sup> In *Why Poetry Sucks*, editors Fitzpatrick and Ball note how Lusk's humour often "comes out in the text's smaller movements," in "the micropoetics of her work" (208).

<sup>19</sup> I use non-narrative here in the sense given to it by Jerome McGann: embodying in itself "some form of cultural difference" (630). From within McGann's rubric, Lusk's work is also anti-narrative. It is "contrary" rather than "negative" (in the broadly Hegelian sense). McGann elaborates these terms and their relationship to narrative in "Contemporary Poetry, Alternate Routes," an essay that focuses to a large extent on Language writing.

the issue of meaning or bestow a sense that its meaning is obvious. From the purview of linguistic humour theory, Lusk's titular pun is paradigmatic (or metaphoric) in that it operates by substituting the distinctive phonemes of one word (*noblesse*) for another (*ogress*). Via this substitution, the title mocks the ethos and rhetoric of *noblesse oblige* simply by bringing the "monstrous" and the "low" (*ogress*) into the socio-discursive space of the "civil" and the "high" (*nobleness*, *obligation*). Semantically, the words share no relation, but sonically and perhaps phono-symbolically they do, which further brings the "higher" term into disrepute by suggesting a hitherto "hidden" association or "secret" affiliation. What this analysis suggests, then, is that the pun works to disclose monstrosity, voraciousness, and brute strength (all characteristics of the folkloric ogre) as the unconscious or ideological truth of the irreducibly classist notion of noble obligation.

For readers of a leftist bent, this analysis likely satisfies—in no small part because it affords them the self-congratulatory pleasure of articulating their laughter or comic enjoyment to political dicta with which they concur. As is often the case with Lusk's humour, however, leftist satisfaction of this sort necessarily entails the displacement or erasure of certain elements within the manifest content of the joke-work. In this instance, what a class reading of Lusk most obviously neglects to take into account is the question of the necessity at work in the gender identity of Lusk's titular monster. As the *OED* elaborates, what the term *ogress* signifies is not only "a female ogre" but also, colloquially, "a cruel and terrifying woman." In this second sense, it is more or less synonymous within other anti-feminist terms such as *termagant*, *harridan*, or *virago*.<sup>20</sup> At multiple points in her essay, Capperdoni counters the critical tendency to read Lusk's work primarily or exclusively from a Marxist perspective, insisting that sex-gender is

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<sup>20</sup> In this sense, Lusk's use of the *ogress* is relatively on par with the *Medusa* and other instances of feminist re-appropriation.

central to class stratification and analysis, “not an addendum, a coda” (41).<sup>21</sup> For Capperdoni, Lusk’s treatment of gender-class is irreducibly intersectional, never simply supplemental.<sup>22</sup> Part of the brilliance of Lusk’s title is how it effectively signals this socio-subjective irreducibility from the outset.

Nevertheless, identifying the centrality of gender to Lusk’s comic short-circuiting of noblesse oblige is not the same as understanding it—as politics but also as humour. The formal necessity of the ogress in the title is patent. The lemma or masculine-universal form of *ogre* lacks the requisite phonemes to constitute an instance of humour that in turn summons the ideology of aristocratic obligation as a potential target or butt. Yet the relation of (phonemic) form to political necessity is less immediately clear. On the surface, noblesse oblige is primarily a class signifier. This ostensive or actual class primacy thus raises the issue of how precisely gender difference operates here, as well as in Lusk’s homonymic critique of it. As a remainder of sorts, this is an issue that neither leftist laughter nor incongruity resolution is able to take properly into account. In a first analysis, the monstrous ogress brings low the ethos of class obligation but without specifying the necessary political role played by gender difference in this instance of comic reversal.

At this point, perhaps the most obvious move is to identify the ogress with Lusk, as a persona, or as a stand-in for the writing subject. This move is not without warrant, but it offers no real insight regarding the class dimension of the ogress qua “cruel and terrifying woman.”<sup>23</sup>

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<sup>21</sup> Here Capperdoni is addressing Roger Farr’s “Against Stratification,” but also Andrew Klobucar and Michael Barnholden’s long introduction to their KSW anthology, *Writing Class*, which (as its title makes clear) focuses on class almost to the exclusion of any other social identity.

<sup>22</sup> Gender qualitatively affects class experience and vice versa.

<sup>23</sup> The anti-feminist epithet *ogress* is applicable to women of any class. In relation to the pun on noblesse oblige, it is arbitrary rather than necessary, strictly speaking. Their final syllables are proximate as phonemes but not as sememes.

More importantly, it offers little insight into the poetic, comic, and political functioning of the other term operative in Lusk's title—namely, the notion of obligation. Whether aristocratic or bourgeois, the basic tenet of noblesse oblige is that privilege, power, and high social status entail proper conduct, right action, and social responsibility. Formally, Lusk's titular joke transforms the first term while leaving the second in place (as the pun clearly requires). It transforms a particular expression of obligation without doing away with the notion of obligation altogether. What is of interest about this semantic remainder are the questions that it raises and the directions for interpretation that it provides. Parodic or otherwise, is *ogress oblige* a (counter)notion operative within Lusk's text? What are the obligations particular to the position or person of the ogress (or the cruel and terrifying woman)? What are the duties, responsibilities, or entailments, and who or what gets to decide or define them? At the moment, these are open questions whose further elucidation lies within the poems comprising the book. My sense, however, is that the joke-work of the title institutes a comic figuration that Lusk deploys as a means to navigate, disclose, and critique the forms of class-gender marginalization at work not only within late capitalist society as a whole, but also within the coterie spaces of avant-garde cultural opposition and production.

#### **5.4. The Ogress and Her Figures: Social, Economic, and Cultural Meanings of (Re)production**

Who or what exactly is the ogress, then? What is its particular meaning, at least as Lusk represents it? This figure receives no treatment in any extant critical writing on Lusk's text, which perhaps is not surprising in that the ogress makes no obvious appearances in any of the individual poems.<sup>24</sup> In two different interviews, however, Lusk addresses the figure at some

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<sup>24</sup> Save in the title of the poem "Ogress Oblige."

length, with the second interview both refining and extending what she says in the first. In “Write a Poem / Make It Weirder,” Donato Mancini begins by asking Lusk whether “the noisy figure of the ogress” operates as an emblem of sorts for the—often non-literary, dissonant, and affective—vocal forms operative in many of her poems. It is an astute observation that accords well with the sonic texture of much of Lusk’s writing. Lusk’s response, however, provides an alternate genealogy for the emergence of the ogress. It also touches on the issues of obligation and humour and so is worth citing at length:

I initially saw the figure of the ogress as being mean women I didn’t like, but then I decided to take it on again . . . But “ogress” was originally applied to women I was pissed off at. So in *Ogress Oblige* I took on myself the expectation of the ogress, what ogresses must do etc. For me it’s the scorned mother figure, the scorned female. In an earlier essay I called it “the mother as a site of surplus values.” It’s its own nexus for a lot of goofy shit.

Lusk begins by projecting the ogress as a figure of antagonism within relations among women, but then comes to identify with it herself via an act of obligation. Notably, she describes this transformation as an act of appropriation, taking back an image with anti-feminist valences and taking it up “as a term of pejorative rage”—but also as a nexus of (not only) tendentious humour: “goofy shit.” As the interview continues, the ogress undergoes further elaboration. Responding to Mancini’s inquiry whether the ogress is “an anti-mother figure,” Lusk answers, “No, not really, it comes from having people cease to see you as sexually desirable.” In this instance, the *you* refers specifically to pregnant women, with the ogress again signifying “this sort of fuck-you raging thing.” At a certain level of generality, what stands out about this exchange is how it echoes some of the framework that Suleiman identifies in her work on

feminism, humour, and the historical avant-garde. Like Carrington and Passinos, Lusk begins by placing an anti-feminist trope in the service of disparaging other women (for reasons of class or socio-aesthetic difference, perhaps), only later to recompose it humorously as a vehicle of feminist affect and critique. With its misprision about the ogress as “an anti-mother figure,” Mancini’s question recalls the history of avant-garde aversion to maternity that informs the writing of both male and female Surrealist writers. The shifting definitions of the ogress imply a polyvalent figure whose referents, motivations, and exigencies nevertheless emerge within a specific field of experience (single motherhood, gender relations, sexual politics, class conflict, erotic marginalization). As Lusk suggests, this social field configures the ogress less as a poetic mask or persona than as a socio-subjective nexus: of classed and gendered structures of feeling and the writing practice that comprises them.

In a more recent interview with Vancouver poet Danielle Lafrance, Lusk offers another definition of the ogress. It appears as part of an exchange in which Lusk and Lafrance discuss the relation of writing to depression, anger, and mental illness: “The ogress was always a figure of the anguished mother, desexualized and ostracized, relegated to a reproductive role of surplus labour, who has to fight for their kid, for territory on the street, to maintain their place on the street, because we don’t get to be flâneurs” (28). This depiction reiterates many of the key features of the ogress that appear in the Mancini interview. Of additional significance, however, is the appearance of the counter-figure of the flâneur, who by association also operates as a stand-in for the male artist, bohemian, or avant-garde poet. Via the work of the negative, Lusk thus provides another answer as to the identity of her titular protagonist. As a socio-subjective location, the *flâneur* names the space free from the labours that Lusk delineates here. Part of what characterizes the flâneur is precisely his freedom from obligation. Lusk’s ogress names that

subjectivity which is definitionally unable to access the experience of *la flânerie*. It also names the subject whose disavowed labour props it up.

Of the various definitions and inflections that Lusk gives to the ogress, that which receives most critical attention is “the mother as a site of surplus values.” In “Against Stratification,” Roger Farr describes *Ogress Oblige* as wielding a dense, aggressive, and viscerally derisive class poetics whose chief effects are to lay bare, accelerate, and combat the discursive regimes of capitalist exploitation (2-3). According to Farr, part of Lusk’s textual project is to challenge the socio-discursive mechanisms through which class stratification at once duplicates and dehistoricizes itself over time. In particular, Farr focuses on the poem “We’re All Friends Here—A Fiction of Unspeakable Horror,” which he describes as “uncharacteristically transparent” in its recording of how “members of the same social class *arrange themselves* in such a way as to reproduce their lot” (13). Rhetorically (and punningly) inquiring into which forms of labour provide the vehicle for the reproduction of the working class, Farr turns to the figure of the mother that appears on the poem’s first page:

Tooling,

around in a Chevy II, cheaper parts. Half a sack and half a tank.

This’s the accurate medical term for doughnuts.

The chassis of the mother embodying

the central contradictions

between means and relations of

production &/or sag of surplus value. (29)<sup>25</sup>

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<sup>25</sup> Of some interest is how Lusk’s deployment of the masculinist trope of the car as woman’s body compares with E. E. Cummings’ poem “she being Brand,” whose central conceit compares “the deflowering of a virgin” to

These lines give a good sense of Lusk's proclivity for juxtaposing and interpolating different discursive registers. Evoking the "glory days" of the American automotive industry, the stanza begins with a "scene" of cheap cars and cheaper working class pleasures—before abruptly shifting to the "high" theoretical language of Marxist critique and capitalist profit.<sup>26</sup> How it accomplishes this discursive cut is via the "hinge" of the chassis, whose literal meaning of "load bearing structure" comes to limn the maternal body as that which is obliged to bear the invisible (unwaged) labour of holding up the capitalist socius:

The engines of production and surplus value can only function if the mother provides the hidden frame—or, more accurately, the sagging maternal "body"—upon which the whole structure rests. This invisible "chassis" of production is in fact the *reproductive labour*, largely performed by women, which is needed to maintain a functional working class: shopping, cooking, cleaning and caring for the family so they can get back to work. Not only is this work of reproduction *required* to keep the cost of productive (waged) labour power as low as possible, it is unpaid and therefore represents to capital pure profit. (Farr 14-15)

In "Feminist Poetics as Avant-Garde Poetics," Capperdoni takes up Farr's essay and describes it as "illuminating" (37). Yet she also points out how Farr's prioritizing of Lusk's class position echoes a certain tendency within the avant-garde(s) to re-contain "the imbrication of class stratification with the sex-gender system." Like Farr, Capperdoni discusses the mother largely within the context of "We're All Friends Here," paying particular attention to textual

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"breaking in a new car" (Schroeder 475). In "Cummings' Erotic Humour," William Solomon uses Freud to argue that the poem is best understood as a joke within a joke, that the "apparent equivalence between sexual conquest and automotive testing" is but a comic ruse, and that the poem is actually about "the use of another mechanical device"—namely, (and here's the critical punchline) "a typewriter" (44).

<sup>26</sup> For Farr, the Chevy II also exemplifies "the 1970's labour crisis" (14). The pun on "labour" though perhaps unintentional is nonetheless apt.

moments whose gender negotiations take place “within the social dynamics of social housing and its attendant collective meetings” (40). Immediately following the trope of the mother as chassis of capital, these textual moments or “scenes” form a sequence of sorts.<sup>27</sup> Of the six verse paragraphs that comprise the middle section of the poem, the first and third situate the (single) mother qua writer within a domestic space whose salient features are a lack of privacy and time, along with an omnipresence of household chores.<sup>28</sup> In the second and sixth verse paragraphs, the “action” shifts from the private to the public sphere. “At the Building Maintenance Committee meeting,” the poet jokes about “the public perception that our neighbourhood is an Urbane Theme Park” (30). “Later,” another parent calls Lusk’s capability as a mother into question by denouncing her daughter’s “barely predictable, entirely self-directed nap patterning” (31). In Capperdoni’s reading, what “We’re All Friends Here” unravels are the forms and experiences of interpellation and abjection responsible for constructing the classed maternal body as *the bad mother*. The effects of such instances of class-gender interpellation are real, as both Capperdoni and the poem’s speaker make clear. As structural critique, however, the poem also makes clear that the “bad” mother is not a “positive” identity but rather a “(distorting) narcissistic mirror for the formation” of the “good” mother—whose primary function is to “sustain and reproduce the gendered social relations necessary to the functioning of the capitalist system” (Capperdoni 40).<sup>29</sup>

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<sup>27</sup> The shift to “social realism” also involves a shift from untethered, irregular stanza forms to verse paragraphs mostly in prose.

<sup>28</sup> Somewhat surprisingly, neither Farr nor Capperdoni note the figure of the mother-writer in this section of the poem.

<sup>29</sup> Capperdoni’s reading is entirely cogent, yet there is an element that risks reproducing avant-garde disdain for the (bourgeois) mother. Plus, part of the speaker’s anguish over her gender-class “obligation” involves her own implication within processes of maternal, working-class subjectivization.

Farr and Capperdoni both offer critically important readings of Lusk's work. With their almost exclusive focus on the (prole) mother as agent of social reproduction, however, they miss or minimize the many instances in which the mother's struggle equally concerns the tools of cultural production. Farr acutely notes how a poem like "We're All Friends Here" collocates "the ephemeral of everyday domestic life," in part to disclose "how these social facts . . . condition the act of writing itself" (16-17). Yet Farr's focus is largely elsewhere, on both the "custodial" and Lusk's "antagonistic mockery" thereof (15). As its title indicates, Capperdoni's essay directly addresses the relation of feminist to avant-garde textual production. In her opening paragraphs, she specifically elaborates the various double binds that confront women's experimental writing in a manner that immediately recalls Susan Suleiman's work on the maternal body as a figure of radical poesis. Yet her subsequent (and fairly substantial) discussion of gender, sex, and class in *Ogress Oblige* largely passes over this issue. What makes this absence particularly striking is that "We're All Friends Here" is as equally transparent about the figure of the mother as writer as it is about the mother as "chassis" of reproductive capitalist futurity—and more in this poem than anywhere else in the book. "Much of the idiocy I embody could be ascribed to introspective drudgery, a slip-shod mop-up," Lusk writes in a conflation of the cultural scripts for domestic and intellectual work (30). "Seems hardly worth the bother to write in the dark & strain a back out of locution, so to speak." "Find only myself typing the personal 'I' as numeric one (1)," she wryly jokes later on the same page. Of the section upon which both Farr and Capperdoni base most of their analysis, however, the passage that most stands out is that which registers the biggest gap between the domestic and the public sphere:

Any weariness there  
is categorically different from that

of my former boon companions, carbon  
monoxide wallahs all, with their  
basiliskoptic glance of rheumy weltschmerz. (31)

With atypical clarity, the opening clause asserts an essential difference between the psychic and somatic exhaustion of the single mother-poet and the “world-pain” of her once but no longer jovial friends. The stanza stands out in part due to the “goofy” discrepancy of its lexical register, which yokes together British slang, nonce, and German Romantic portmanteau as ostensibly sufficient personal qualities or descriptors. What also stands out is the sudden appearance of these “former boon companions,” who clearly articulate a *Lebenswelt* external to that of the household economy. Perhaps the use of the term “carbon / monoxide” connects the stanza back to the “Chevy II” of the poem’s opening and thus the now world-weary “wallahs” to old drinking buddies.

The following page, however, contains the mother qua poet’s most explicit appearance outside of the domestic sphere. Suggesting an altogether different reading of the poet’s “former boon companions,” two passages in particular deserve full citation:

The flows of Capital and bohemia converge in these vincula of  
disgust. *e.g.* the pejoratif term “breeder” coursing across divers artoid  
subcultures, so called.

An ahistorical avant-garde verges on apoplexy at the approach of an  
active mother—RRRRRRR—. One’s “condition of being” as recipient  
of another’s motive, rendering one mute or

mum. (32)<sup>30</sup>

These passages are crucial for the interpretive shifts that they bring to the poem. Most immediately, they resituate the maternal body qua “chassis” of social reproduction within a space of cultural production. Within this new configuration, the mother no longer struggles to find time and space to write but rather butts up against the same avant-garde anti-maternal prejudice that Suleiman details in her work on women Surrealist writers. The abstruse punning and shifts in register are similar to those of the earlier domestic scenes. Yet here the humour is even more tendentious, the affect intensifying from pathos to anger over silencing and exclusion.<sup>31</sup> In a general way, Lusk’s invocation of “bohemia” retroactively offers another socio-cultural location for her “former boon companions,” now burnt out from too much skepticism, drinking, and romantic black bile. Yet Lusk’s tendentious use of the postpositive adjective “so called” also gestures to a more specific site and mode of literary production—namely, Language poetry and perhaps even the Kootenay School of Writing.<sup>32</sup> “We’re All Friends Here” is not the only poem in which the politics of literary production and community come to the fore. Nowhere are they as explicit as they are in the above passage. Yet such appear often enough to identify writing’s social conditions as a central thematic of sorts in *Ogress Oblige*. In “Sitting in a Bar on Commercial Drive,” the critic Clint Burnham arrives at a similar conclusion when he names “dialogue with other local writers,” opposition to “patriarchal influence,” and “attempts to construct alternative literary communities” as central to Lusk’s poetic practice.<sup>33</sup>

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<sup>30</sup> Here, the avant-garde coterie is a site of gender-class conflict, tension, antagonism as much as the space of domestic social reproduction is.

<sup>31</sup> The trope of silencing is central to Lusk’s book *Redactive* also, especially in the poem “Oral Tragedy,” one of whose verse paragraphs concludes, “So I do worse than shut up. I remain to be seen” (13).

<sup>32</sup> *So-called* is a key shibboleth in the sociolect of (so-called) Language writing.

<sup>33</sup> Burnham emphasizes the relation between Lusk, Gerald Creede, Peter Culley, and Kevin Davies, who all (mostly) knew each other and were writing years before the KSW came on the scene.

Characteristically, Lusk's own views on these subjects are more ambivalent and complex, as is clear from various comments that she makes in interviews and talks. In a 2009 interview with Kate Eichhorn, Lusk indirectly gestures to the tendentious humour at work in "We're All Friends Here," a poem whose subtitle is "A Fiction of Unspeakable Horror." In response to a question on the relation between poetics and mental health, Lusk names social anxiety as a central exigency motivating her writing. In Lusk's experience, literary communities are less frequently spaces of friendship and solidarity than they are sites of endless contention, division, and even enmity. In a review essay, Jeff Derksen describes Lusk's *Redactive* as "a montage of utterances" in which competing ideologies and "signifying practices are set in motion against each other" (49). In her interview with Eichhorn, Lusk concurs with Derksen's evaluation while also describing her penchant for writing at night, with the evening's arguments and antagonisms still fresh in mind, in order to try to work through them. "So *Redactive* is all that stuff swirling around in your head when you arrive home from a social event?" Eichhorn inquires. "Yeah," Lusk responds. "But I'm not that quick on the uptake. Sometimes it takes months before I realize I was deeply offended or how offensive I may have been. People come out and say the most preposterous things, and I just fold them in" (298; emphasis mine). Internecine conflict clearly motivates Lusk's writing, but it also forms part of its content.<sup>34</sup>

In other interviews, Lusk similarly addresses the social conditions of writing, but with more emphasis on the gender and class politics of the literary scene. Like many young women writers, Lusk's earliest experiences of literary "community" involved a form of double

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<sup>34</sup> Of course, cultural-political struggle is so central in Lusk due to the immense importance that literary community holds for her. This is evident from her writing and her interviews and talks. In addition to "first-generation" KSW writers like Gerald Creed, Peter Culley, Kevin Davies, Jeff Derksen, and Colin Smith, Lusk has especially strong relations with many of the poets from the period beginning in the early 2000s, particularly Roger Farr, Reg Johanson, and Aaron Vidaver.

marginalization that made her at once invisible and an object of sexual (and sexist) attention. “I remember being quite hurt, when I was a younger woman, that I was cast as this undifferentiated younger female,” she relates to Lafrance. “You didn’t have an identity unless you were somebody’s grad student or had slept with them” (“See You” 28). In this context, the most transformative outcome of publishing her first book was that “I now had an identity not appended to father, husband, boyfriend or gay male best friend” (“12 or 20 Questions”). Prior to publication, “I had been one of those disposable young women of weak social and class position that are there on sufferance and are casually punted off the field.” The literary scene that Lusk describes here and elsewhere strongly resembles the “old boys’ club” or *phratric* criticized by Suleiman, Irigaray, and countless other feminist critics.<sup>35</sup> Like the women writers whose work Suleiman examines in her analysis of the feminist avant-garde, Lusk’s response to this situation is not simply to renounce all affiliation with the *phratric* but rather to make it an object of her tendentious poetic humour and textual politics.<sup>36</sup> Yet her experience of marginalization, exclusion, and silencing is not something that she “transcends” upon achieving a degree of social individuation as a writer. Neither is it exclusive to sites of cultural production where “masculinist” aesthetics tend to predominate. In “See You Next Tuesday,” Lafrance asks, “Could you talk a bit about how collectives, maybe the KSW in particular, have shaped or unshaped your writing, your sense of identity?” (32). Lusk’s response is interesting as much for its directness as for its indirectness, as it leaps of its own accord from the general (collectives, KSW) to the particular: “I wasn’t a part of the heyday of the feminist writing of KSW; I actually

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<sup>35</sup> Of course, this “literary scene” is never singular but rather plural. Aesthetic and political divisions abound but often coalesce socially, interpersonally, and at public events like readings, book launches, talks, and the like. This is especially true of Vancouver’s “avant-garde” cultural, literary, and political scene, which is remarkably intergenerational (to its credit).

<sup>36</sup> In the McLennan interview, Lusk names “exclusion and politically biased gatekeeping strategies” as part of what motivates the gender-class politics of her writing.

felt excluded from it. I didn't feel like I was entirely welcome."<sup>37</sup> Lusk goes on to name Vancouver Women's Research Group, About a Bicycle, and Red Queen as the collectives most important to her. Since Lusk's longest and closest affiliation is with the KSW, it is hard not to read Lusk's reply as a critique of sorts. In "Sitting in a Bar on Commercial Drive," Burnham notes how not only "the mainstream literary culture of Vancouver and Canada," but also "the older postmodern avant-garde of TISH, Coach House, and Talonbooks" continue to marginalize KSW writers like Lusk.<sup>38</sup> What Lusk's response to Lafrance suggests, however, is that even politically radical collectives like the KSW are subject to their own gatekeeping strategies and exclusionary logics. Importantly, it also suggests that the KSW as a site of contention is part of the raw material from which poems like "We're All Friends Here—A Fiction of Unspeakable Horror" derive.

In "Minutes Over Monuments," Jason Wiens characterizes the KSW poem as equal parts "enigma and local contextual reference" (74). In her interview with Mancini, Lusk states that "mostly I'm writing around people who have been mean to me."<sup>39</sup> Importantly, Lusk's writing in *Ogress Oblige* also frequently returns to the socio-subjective conditions of literary production, particularly as they relate to issues of community formation, the single mother as avant-garde poet, and gender-class politics. Of the twelve poems that comprise *Ogress Oblige*, eight have dedications to other Vancouver poets.<sup>40</sup> Seven of these poets have some sort of affiliation with the KSW. This is a mundane enough observation to the extent that dedicating poems to other

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<sup>37</sup> Lusk also blames herself for this feeling of exclusion: "But at that time I was fragile and probably just being paranoid . . . It's my own problem, really, that stems from insecurities" (32). This sense of blame is part of the matrix comprising the obligation particular to the "ogress" (the single mother on welfare qua avant-garde poet).

<sup>38</sup> In "See You Next Tuesday," Lusk relates how "[t]hose pulp press guys especially would say 'You have nothing to say' and 'you can't write because you have nothing to say.'" Here the reference is to Pulp Press, an independent small literary press that later merges to form Arsenal Pulp Press.

<sup>39</sup> The potential pun on *around* is salient here.

<sup>40</sup> The layout of *Ogress Oblige* makes it appear that there are seventeen poems in total. But the table of contents shows "Oops Upside Your Head" as a long poem comprising six separate sections, each with its own title.

poets is something of a poetic convention. In this instance, however, what makes them important is their status as a mark of relation, affiliation, solidarity, and friendship at a particular historical moment and place. Lusk first encounters the KSW in 1985, at which point she had already been writing in earnest for several years (“12 or 20 Questions”). She subsequently appears as a key figure in the collective at two different moments in its thirty-two year history: the “new poetics” moment of 1987-1991 and the “Marxist/anarchist turn” of 1995-2000 (“By the Collective” 124).<sup>41</sup> In *The Only Poetry That Matters*, Clint Burnham notes that to approach a properly dialectical history of a non-canonical writing scene like the KSW, it is necessary to supplement archival research via recourse “to the aesthetic record” (182).<sup>42</sup> Extending Burnham’s insights, Wiens advocates approaching “the poetry emerging from KSW . . . both as an archive and a repertoire of embodied memory, at multiple scales: of the social subject; of a literary scene; of a community, literary or otherwise; of a global situation” (74). For Wiens, opaque, disjunctive, and non-referential poetic forms are only part of what defines the KSW. Equally important are the (ephemeral, non-institutional) social spaces of their production, circulation, and uptake. In *Ogress Oblige*, such spaces are as important as the domestic space of socio-cultural

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<sup>41</sup> Indirectly citing Derksen, Mancini describes 1987-1991 as the era of the “Rigorous Bar Scene” (By the Collective” 127). For Mancini, what characterizes this era is generational shift, the ascendancy of Language writing, and “hard-core collectivism.” Butling characterizes the period between 1995-2000 as involving “a decidedly more Marxist/anarchist turn” (“By the Collective” 125). Whether greatly exaggerated or not, the “death” of the KSW dates to around 2016. Its elegy is Lisa Robertson’s essay “The Collective.” In the absence of a body, the following lines take the place of a death certificate: “[G]rants tapering off, no longer able to afford to rent a meeting space, its library in storage, its archive shunted off to the university special collections, it dwindled and fizzled. I recently heard in an email from a longtime member that the collective is now defunct. Defunct was his word” (Robertson 25). Not long after the publication of Robertson’s essay, the prestigious Banff Centre for the Arts obtained the KSW library: another nail in the symbolic coffin.

<sup>42</sup> In “Sitting in a Bar,” Burnham sketches out some of the other issues at play in historicizing the KSW: For a literary history to be rigorously historical—especially of the recent past—it is essential to understand that history is not merely a matter of what happened in the past, but what happened to what happened, or what happens to our knowledge of the past. History is about those gaps in knowledge, and how they come to exist. Even in such a minor area as the history of radical poetics in Vancouver, social and political and ideological effects warp and distort narrative.

(re)production, as context but also as content. At certain moments, they even appear to lurk in the background as “setting” or *mise-en-scène* for particular poems.

The (tendentious or black) humour of a title like ““We’re All Friends Here””—A Fiction of Unspeakable Horror” appears fairly obvious. But is it? Burnham observes that Lusk’s poetry appears to make use of “a lot of found text or overheard conversations” (“Sitting in a Bar”). The embedded inverted commas in ““We’re All Friends Here”” clearly denote reported speech, at least by convention. There is nothing unusual about the expression as well. As a type of empty speech, its ubiquity renders it so familiar that its (re)iteration appears to lack all trace of a prior place of utterance. As a speech act, however, the expression is less a proposition than a perlocution. As a means of suturing over (class, gender) difference or antagonism in the name of some ostensive pre-existing unity, it is clearly ideological in its application and function. To a degree, the title also takes the form of a type of joke. In the “set-up,” the poem introduces this ideologeme only to burst it via the humour of the subtitle. The citation is “fiction” because its truth content is unable to withstand critical scrutiny. More complex is the comic hyperbole of the genitive, which introduces an intersubjective oscillation characteristic of much of Lusk’s humour (and the figure of the ogress as well). From the perspective of the poem, the unilateral assertion of friendship and fellow feeling is “horrific” as a seemingly innocuous yet in fact violent imposition of non-consensual consensus. Relative to the utterance, this horror is “unspeakable” because to name it is to transgress norms of social conduct. Such a transgression not only risks social censure but also marks the speaker’s “otherness” to the space of inclusion. In refusing to identify with the first-person plural pronoun, the speaker’s titular joke makes visible the displacements internal to even the smallest universalizing gesture. Yet it also at once unveils and produces the speaker as illiberal, obscene, even monstrous—at least for those for whom it causes

unlaughter or displeasure. From a certain perspective, the utterance “we’re all friends here” is a type of *noblesse oblige*. To contest it thus becomes the obligation of the ogress.

Of course, it is not entirely true that the reported speech of the title bears no trace of any particular context. As an object of parodic appropriation, it takes on additional meaning via the transformative logics of re-contextualization—and in relation to the socio-semantic field of the poem of which it now forms a part. Vacillating across contexts, however, is the issue of deictic reference or indexicality. Who is the *we* that the utterance is attempting to constitute or consolidate? Who is it that speaks it? Where is the *here* in which it takes place? The deliberate lack of semic redundancy or isotopic consistency in Lusk’s writing makes it difficult to arrive at definite conclusions with regard to such questions. Yet the poem offers clues nevertheless.

On the penultimate page of “‘We’re All Friends Here,’” the single mother as poet exchanges the domestic space of the home for the cultural space of the “so-called” literary vanguard. Her entrance into this space is rich in tendentious humour. The hyper-visibility of her maternal body is as confrontational as is her subsequent demand:

The Mummy’s archaic corporeality is a remaindered sight of surplus value or conceivably, post-surplus ballyhoo.

I’ve decided to become an equal, just like you.

Here is my money, Now where’s my mouth? (32)

Bereft of sexual capital, the postpartum mother-poet-ogress is an unwelcome and unnerving sight in the “artoid” subcultural space of the “ahistorical avant-garde,” which configures men as radical artists, bohemians, or flâneurs—and women as supplements to the masculine ego. Although not atypical, this passage offers a tour-de-force demonstration Lusk’s capacity for

placing disjunctive humour, fractal punchlines, and multiplicitous wordplay in the service of Marxist-feminist ideology critique. The primary comic techniques that Lusk deploys here are homophony, paronymy, and a complex form of syntagmatic reversal.<sup>43</sup> The first line alone contains at least four instances of vertical punning.<sup>44</sup> Moreover, the phonemic pun “Mummy-mommy” activates at least four chains of association. It figures the maternal body as monstrous and identifies it as a type of symbolic destitution.<sup>45</sup> It also sets up subsequent comic lexemes (“archaic corporeality,” “remaindered”) while echoing the prominent trope linking motherhood to silence (“mum”). Other puns include “sight-site” (linking the maternal body qua site of social reproduction to the scopic economy that desexualizes and ostracizes this body) and “conceivably” (suggesting the in fact etymological relation of conceptualization to conception).

Perhaps the most interesting pun, however, is “remaindered,” which Lusk here uses as an adjective to modify “sight” (itself a pun). Of course, the past participle form of “remainder” is only applicable or grammatically correct in the specific context of commerce, where it denotes the practice of retailing unsold products at significantly lower price. Yet Lusk’s apparently comic use of the term (whether malapropism, speech error, or parapraxis) has the effect of conjuring other possible terms. “Remainder,” “remaining,” and “remembered” are among the more probable substitutions or displacements—in terms of both semantic relevance and phonemic proximity.<sup>46</sup> Yet the pun has broader “biographical” significance as well. Infamously, Lusk’s

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<sup>43</sup> The notion of syntagmatic reversal is from G. B. Milner, “Homo Ridens” (18-19). See also Salvatore Attardo’s “A Taxonomy of the Taxonomies” in *Linguistic Theories of Humor* (112-27).

<sup>44</sup> That is, puns that operate along the *metaphoric* or *paradigmatic* axis of language and whose logic is primarily that of substitution. See Attardo, *Linguistic Theories* (114-19).

<sup>45</sup> I borrow this term from Slavoj Žižek, who uses it to describe situations in which the subject persists at the bodily level while having effectively died at the level of the symbolic. The figure of Antigone is the canonical instance of this experience of being-between-two-deaths for psychoanalysis. This focus on Antigone clearly locates *subjective destitution* within the domain of the tragic. In *The Ethics of Psychoanalysis*, however, Lacan describes “the zone between-two-deaths” as an at once “apt and somewhat humorous phrase” (320). For this interesting tension between the tragic and the comic as they relate to psychoanalysis, see Simon Critchley, “Comedy and Finitude.”

<sup>46</sup> For a discussion of phonemic distance in puns, see Attardo, *Linguistic Theories* (120-28).

first trade book *Redactive* is remaindered and ultimately pulped by its publisher Talonbooks only five years after releasing it.<sup>47</sup> By means of the passage's complex homonymy, then, Lusk marks both the erotic and cultural devaluation that the poet-mother experiences upon entering the masculinist space of vanguard literary production. By the same token, however, this passage (and others like it) also enacts the maternal body as both a figure and site of feminist "black" humour and transgressive, avant-garde writing. In this sense, it exemplifies precisely the type of poetics and textual politics that Suleiman advocates in her work on Surrealist women writers. Yet it diverges from Suleiman's model not only in its class inflection but also in its aggressiveness. Whereas Suleiman valorizes playful, ambivalent humour, Lusk's wordplay registers frustration, antagonism, and struggle. It more often attacks than parodies or mimics its discursive objects.

"I've decided to become an equal, just like you," Lusk's "active mother" declares to the "ahistorical avant-garde." "Here is my money. Now where is my mouth?" Like many of Lusk's tendentious rejoinders, these lines approximate the logic of the joke form—but with a punchline much more oblique and fractal than most instances of comic incongruity. Among other things, the mouth is an organ of speech, and "an equal" indicates a free participant within a *sensus communis*. The first line in this "couplet" registers as a challenge to the *phratry* and as an assertion of the poet-mother's rights—and thus also as evidence of her agency. It is a line that broadly fits in with notions of feminist writing as a site of female uplift and empowerment. Yet it also serves as a "set up" of sorts to the line that follows, which tendentially skews the familiar idiomatic expression "To put your money where your mouth is." The idiom takes the form of an imperative and demands of an interlocutor to mean what they say or to prove a claim by acting on it. In this sense, the lines are fairly easy to paraphrase. Someone disingenuously asserts that

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<sup>47</sup> See Colin Smith, "Versus" (118 n19).

“We’re All Friends Here,” so the poet invites them to make good on this claim, which here tacitly includes addressing the hard (social, political, intersubjective) questions about what is necessary to establishing genuine sociality or common cause. Yet the poet-mother responds not with the familiar idiom but with a tendentiously humorous variation thereof. The variation contains the critical force of the original while producing different meanings, outcomes, and effects.

In a first reading, the punchline suggests that equality within the avant-garde or bohemian writing community requires “money” of some sort—whether financial, erotic, symbolic, or cultural capital. The latter two are the sense in which Lusk most feels the need to prove that she belongs (as her interviews make especially clear).<sup>48</sup> Here are my credentials (publications, readings, collaborations), the poet seems to say. But “where is my mouth?” If “we’re all friends here,” why have I not a voice? Why is it such a struggle to speak and be heard? Why is my experience still predominantly that of marginalization and silencing? As humour, these lines lay bare the sexist, classist, and anti-maternal politics of friendship at work within the avant-garde space of cultural production. Yet the poet-mother’s struggles against these exclusionary politics result not only in tendentious anger but also anguish and despair.

In the final verse paragraph, the “motives” that render the poet “mute” because “mum” follow her home. Attempting to “make do with the tyrants as best I can,” she sits down at the typewriter to work through the evening’s raw social material, as is her usual practice. But “nothing occurs to me // at any length, yet // I am no complaint” (33). These passages contain many of the comic techniques (ambiguity, substitution, malapropism) that animate the earlier ripostes against the “tyrants”. Yet here they primarily operate as a means to register melancholy,

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<sup>48</sup> In all of the interview texts, Lusk returns to the issue of gender-class and its relation to the cultural politics of publication, recognition, inclusion, and position.

exhaustion, and self-disparagement. Across socio-cultural spaces of (re)production, the poet-mother-ogress indexes and embodies and hosts of legitimate grievances, resentments, and dissatisfactions. At the end of day, however, she is unable to write and work through the evening's material. With its grimly comic predication of "complaint," the poem concludes with a concomitant gesture of social surrender approaching subjective negation.

### 5.5. The Joke-Work to Come: Politics, Friendship, and the Social Scene of Writing

In the literary text the contradictions of community will take the form of a joke.

—James F. English, *Comic Transactions*

Now they  
understand—we're the punchlines.

—Kevin Davies, *Pause Button*

From a certain perspective, "For D. M. Fraser" is an odd poem with which to open *Ogress Oblige*. While alluding to Fraser's "refractory wit," it gives little forewarning of Lusk's. Neither the titular ogress nor the mother-poet appears to appear. As a tribute and elegy of sorts, the poem stands askance in tenor and orientation to most of the writing that follows it. Yet "For D. M. Fraser" also performs the work of introducing a number of issues central to the collection as a whole. Class, penury, and marginalization are perhaps the most readily apparent of these thematics. Subjectively and generically, the poem is "about" Lusk's friendship and memory of Fraser—the "legendary" author of *Class Warfare*, who dies in 1985, around the same time that Lusk begins her association with the KSW. For Fraser, the spaces and conditions of writing and writing community often involved drinking, after-hours conviviality, a dingy DTES bar.<sup>49</sup> They are what Lusk gestures to as Fraser's "uttered element; integrating an invention, a story, a /

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<sup>49</sup> See Stephen Osbourne's introduction to *Class Warfare*, the third edition.

drink, *supernaculum*” (7). However obliquely, part of what this introductory poem also gestures to, then, is Lusk’s abiding concern with the material sites and social relations that ground particular instances of textual-political production.<sup>50</sup>

“For D. M. Fraser” contains at least three references to alcohol: “hammered patricians”; “a / drink / *supernaculum*”; “Follow exigency with beer” (7). The second poem in *Ogress Oblige* contains a reference to alcohol in its very first stanza. This makes for four references in less than two pages of writing and sets up a number of echoes across the book. “[C]hat a munch drunk party faithful,” begins “Pity. The Greatest Aphrodisiac”: “colossal warfare / saturation bumming / scab bands of happenstance” (9). Clearly, lines like these signify in excess of any possible interpretation or reading. As a semantic constellation, however, the first four words at least index a social gathering of some kind, while much of the language that follows is legible as further qualifying (by association if not hyponymy) the specific character of this social scene or setting. Via the sexually despairing humour of the title, the figure of the ogress perhaps makes its first appearance, while the figure of the mother syllabically haunts the “mummified / cardamom pods” of the third stanza. Like most of Lusk’s poems, “Pity. The Greatest Aphrodisiac” is non-representational in that it meticulously evades semic redundancy beyond the level of the phrase. Yet its language nevertheless often appears to take place against a busy social, cultural, even geographical backdrop—the ambulatory poet alone or in the company of others, a flâneur (at least) of sorts: “I am usually absent. I perceive the drift-by / shootings. I wander near your house” (9). “[A] day off class,” the poet subsequently quips to no one in particular (10). Is this a school holiday of some sort, or a utopic space, instance, or experience free of class subjectivities

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<sup>50</sup> More oblique still are the allusions to Wordsworth, Shelley, and Arnold in the poem’s final lines, as well as the cryptic engagement with Pound that haunts a number of Lusk’s poems, including this one. Yet these are also part of Lusk’s consistent engagement with writing and its socio-political conditionings.

and relations? “Lose yon coprophagous rictus,” the ogress admonishes someone, settling into her socially obligatory role as vulgar Marxist, feminist killjoy, or what she here describes as “the grumpy dwarf” (10). The poem concludes with a tendentious “comic” “scene” whose oblique excoriation of assumptions of solidarity recapitulates (or adumbrates) that of “We’re All Friends Here” and other poems:

Escaping the main conspiracies, I am set adrift.

There may be shunting, there may be unity, there may be elves.

—The beautiful music has stopped.

The nets entangled in the rail-ties. The level crossing—a labial gesture and none the less fatuous, for all that. (10)

Both *shunting* and *level crossing* are railway terms. The first is functionally synonymous with *articulation*. The second describes a topography in which orthogonal vectors or routes (a rail line and a roadway) safely transect across a common plane. The poet’s willing suspension of disbelief in elves is clearly ironic. Her lack of credulousness to the ideology of group cohesion allows her to escape it but also leaves her socially “adrift.” The beautiful music of harmony, cadence, and resolution comes to end with the disclosure that it is but a fatuous labial gesture: mere talk, empty speech, an effect of interpellation rather than a structural condition. Unlike “the older buddies” whose sense of solidarity finds its ground in “the conspiracy of us,” then, the poet qua working class single mother remains “undergrounded in realities” (10).<sup>51</sup> On its own, such a reading of “Pity” appears highly speculative at best given the granular focus and degree of

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<sup>51</sup> I borrow “the conspiracy of us” from an essay of the same name by the Language poet Charles Bernstein.

explication that it requires. Yet it becomes “isotopic” in light of its responsiveness to other equally disjunctive moments in the text as a whole.

The third and by far longest poem in *Ogress Oblige* is “Oops Upside Your Head.” In “Feminist Poetics as Avant-Garde Poetics,” Capperdoni cites and elaborates the second section of this poem at some length, reading it both as an articulation of “the mutually constitutive positions of class, gender, and sex” and as a disarticulation of “the effects of their force as speech acts” (39). Capperdoni’s reading is also helpful in suggesting how the exigencies (obligations) particular to gender-class oppression lead the poet-mother to take up “the position of rage” as she shifts from object of scorn to scorner (ogress) (39).<sup>52</sup> According to Capperdoni, the socio-discursive exigencies against which the poem’s writing subject chiefly struggles are sexist paradigms of female frailty, nervousness, hysteria, material want, and lack of socio-cultural capital. At multiple instances, Capperdoni identifies humour as a tactic through which the poem pushes back against these oppressive conditions. Importantly, she also registers how the poet remains vulnerable to these conditions even while resisting them. Part of what leads Capperdoni to focus on the mother as a site of “female reproduction” is her decision to attend exclusively to the second section of the poem “Lumpen Prole by Choice.” As Capperdoni usefully notes, the Latin etymology of the term “prole” refers explicitly to “the production of offspring.” In this capacity, its function is to mark the irreducibility of gender-class as the primary nexus of labour exploitation, expropriation, and oppression.

Capperdoni uses such terms as mockery, parody, ironic inversion, and invective to describe the humour of “Lumpen Prole by Choice.” As evidence of how this text calls upon

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<sup>52</sup> Capperdoni identifies these exigencies (“social determinants”) via reference to three lines from the “Lumpen Prole by Choice” section of “Oops Upside Your Head”: “Lacking bread and brothers”; “As I lack breeding and gravitas and degrees within the operation / of the menial forefront”; “e n s qualour ance” (14-15).

readers “as active participants within the poetic process” (40), she cites Lusk’s gruffly comic disclosure, “I tend not to cite my source material, / so just do your homework and get back at me” (*Ogress* 23). Productively, each of these remarks leads to interpretive options in addition to those which Capperdoni proposes. As a (sub)title, “Lumpen Prole by Choice” delineates a determinate field of political content—but also provocation and antagonism. Capperdoni reads the voluntarism of the title (“by choice”) as slanting “the discourse of vertical social hierarchies . . . towards horizontal relationality” (39). Yet its form is also that of a political joke. As Capperdoni suggests, it condenses an antinomy central to political liberalism and radical critiques thereof: that between the autonomy of the individual citizen-subject (choice) and the material determinations of economic and historical structures (social class). From a Marxist-feminist perspective, then, the utterance is clearly implausible.<sup>53</sup> Yet it derives plausibility from the (near) hegemony of late capitalist ideological apparatuses, which strive to code social injury as primarily the outcome of poor personal lifestyle decisions.

The “joke” resonates in other directions as well. Against Freud, Luce Irigaray argues that motherhood is not a means by which a woman compensates for lack of the phallus—and thus access to the domains of writing, representation, and cultural participation and production (125).<sup>54</sup> For Irigaray, what the woman-mother engenders is not only the child but also the possibility for radically alternate, non-phallic discursive modes. In “The Laugh of the Medusa,” Hélène Cixous similarly resists the masculinist view of childbirth as evidence of woman’s deep socio-biological complicity with bourgeois and patriarchal norms, while also asserting the

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<sup>53</sup> Part of the humour here clearly concerns the sheer impossibility of choosing one’s class position, as if it were a lifestyle decision of sorts.

<sup>54</sup> Here I cite *Speculum of the Other Woman* though clearly both of these ideas appear throughout Irigaray’s work.

maternal body as positive ground for radical, feminist writing.<sup>55</sup> Along with similar comments from Suleiman, Cixous' and Irigaray's insistence on the emancipatory politics of "being a mother by choice" (Irigaray, *This Sex* 84) provides another context in which to place Lusk's "Lumpen Prole by Choice." Whereas French feminism tends (expressly or otherwise) to write from the position of "a universal woman subject," Lusk's ogress is (literally) unable to afford the fervent lyricism typical of much *écriture féminine*. In the conditions of patriarchal capitalism in which Lusk writes, the simultaneous desire for a child and refusal of the name of the father is effectively to "choose" (lumpen)proletarianization: "a / Belligerent and proactive / e n s qualour ance" that leaves the speaker "Beholden to any Pothead that / trots down the pike" (15, 17).

The humour of Lusk's "Lumpen Prole by Choice" echoes that of Marie Annharte Baker's "Political Correct Squaw" in that it confronts necessity rather than simple empowerment or agency. The freedom to choose either position clearly involves a false or impossible choice.<sup>56</sup> In the Eichhorn interview, Lusk affirms that she is comfortable with readings of her work that place it within a Marxist framework. Yet her writing at times registers suspicion or unease with leftist political designations.<sup>57</sup> Among other things, "Sleek Vinyl Drill" is a poem that confronts phallic aggression, domestication, and social reproduction (childbearing). "I chirp / & am left, bereft / & fecund," Lusk writes, noting how "speaking out" often subjects her to various forms of abandonment (36). These lines offer yet another example of how Lusk uses humour to articulate intersectional forms of gender-class experience. They also form part of a comic motif that runs through much of Lusk's writing—a motif that links those of the political left (Marxist, anarchist,

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<sup>55</sup> Interestingly, Cixous' essay in fact makes reference to ogresses, identifying them in passing as phallic (grand)mothers, "servants to their fathers-sons" (890).

<sup>56</sup> Does this make "Lumpen Prole by Choice" a joke on Irigaray and other French feminists? The similar syntax of each locution is rather striking.

<sup>57</sup> The lumpenproletariat, recall, is largely a category of social disdain in Marxism. Lusk comically adopts it, along with the (equally though differently) "abject" Marxist notion of (theoretical, political) vulgarity.

feminist) to that which is left over, left out, or left behind. “Lumpen Prole by Choice” is a Marxist joke, but the joke is also on Marxism.

The comic motif that underwrites this joke finds its origin in the titular poem of Lusk’s first book, *Oral Tragedy*. The “set-up” to the joke runs as follows:

You are left with what you get and  
Your love is dross  
Well you remain whose world is none of mine  
I who lov’st well remain left. (11)<sup>58</sup>

Of course, these lines travesty Ezra Pound’s canto LXXXI rather than anything in Marx. In their introduction to *Writing Class: The Kootenay School of Writing Anthology*, Andrew Klobucar and Michael Barnholden read this passage along two lines: 1) as a critique of the “heroisms and ethical imperatives” animating Pound’s triumphal, masculinist, and fascistic modernism; and 2) as evidence of Lusk’s own experience of loss, disempowerment, and leftist melancholy (37). Klobucar and Barnholden’s comments are helpful in that they open onto Lusk’s at once earnest and parodic Marxism, her proclivity for both using and abusing the conceptual vocabulary of historical materialism, class struggle, and ideology critique. They also foreground how Lusk’s is a poetics of political bitterness, agony, and despair as much as it is of irony, wit, and provocation. Lusk’s “hostile parody” of Pound rebuts his verse-heroic asseveration of a will-to-power sufficient to guarantee its own future satisfaction: “What thou lov’st well shall not be reft from thee” (535). Conversely, Lusk’s writing subject is not the author but rather the object of her fate: “You are left with what you get” (11). A verse paragraph later, Lusk puns syntactically on this parodic Poundian line, inverting it so that it reads “You get what you are left.” At once

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<sup>58</sup> I cite the poem as it appears in Lusk’s *Redactive*, for convenience. It is more difficult to find the now rare *Oral Tragedy* chapbook.

recalling and (retroactively) travesty the platitude “you get what you deserve,” this syntactic inversion instances Lusk’s anti-capitalist textual politics and her excoriation of resource distribution under neoliberalism. A few pages later, these political concerns resurface as Lusk takes on another “platitude” whose content also has to do with the issue of economic deserts: Marx’s well-known slogan, “from each according to his ability, to each according to his need.” Rather than simply subscribe to Marxism’s own particular brand of heroism, romanticism, and masculinity, Lusk sardonically reboots this passage from *Critique of the Gotha Programme* as “[e]ach according to needs means more than you got” (15).

In *Writing Class*, Klobucar and Barnholden claim that “Lusk specifically connects this quality of loss with ideological leftism: she who has loved, who has experienced cultural passion, seems *condemned* to a life on the political margins” (37; emphasis mine). This reading is compelling but invites supplementation in light of the frequency with which Marxist jokes appear in Lusk’s work. With its adjectival use of the past participle, Klobucar and Barnholden’s third claim also allows for a seemingly obvious question: What is it precisely that condemns Lusk “to a life on the political margins”? The bleak humour of “Lumpen Prole by Choice” is that Lusk in fact has little choice in deciding upon which class-gender positions to occupy. What kind of freedom is it to choose a subaltern identity? Such a choice is clearly no choice at all. In a real way, however, it is equally true that Lusk’s leftist affiliations are not simply a matter of personal preference or choice. Clearly, what predominantly informs Lusk’s identification as Marxist-feminist and lumpenproletariat is her experience of political marginalization. This lack of choice is at least part of what the “lumpen prole” joke suggests. Yet the same is also true in reverse in that the need of any such identification is itself a sign of marginalization (cultural, social, or political). Those who are lumpen prole by choice are only those who are already lumpen prole.

The barb at the heart of Lusk's endless punning on loss, remainders, and abandonment expresses a similarly ideological melancholy or fatalism. Those who get what they are left are too often those who are already (of the, on the) left.

### 5.6. Every Ogress in Her Humour: Class, Comedy, Affect

Mirth is the Mail of Anguish.

—Emily Dickinson, “A *Wounded* Deer—leaps highest”

Dark humor flickers from intensely compacted abject scenarios.

—Lytle Shaw, review of *Ogress Oblige*

Clearly, it is a mistake to read Lusk's tendentious joking simply as a blunt, socio-aesthetic weapon for lashing out at sexist-classist coterie prerogatives, exclusionary logics, and gatekeeping functions. Lusk's humour is in fact often highly ambivalent—but less towards its object than at the level of affect, subjectivity, and agency. In “See You Next Tuesday,” Lafrance says to Lusk, “a lot of the jokes in your work people don't seem to get, myself included” (30). “Most of them are not jokes, as such,” Lusk offers. “So what am I writing? Stand-up comedy? The stuff is so anguished.” Throughout *Ogress Oblige*, Lusk's humour endlessly vacillates between stridency and despair, anger and agony, critique and self-deprecation. More accurately, it is itself this vacillation. Furthermore, it is “black” not only in the Surrealist sense but also in the sense of “mirthless”: a joking that laughs “at that which is unhappy” (Beckett 48).<sup>59</sup>

Class-gender antagonism affirms but also oppresses, beats down, wears out. A socio-subjective mechanism of political action, it is also a heavy burden to bear. In “Against Stratification,” Roger Farr identifies the tendentiousness of Lusk's writing in *Ogress Oblige* with

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<sup>59</sup> See Samuel Beckett in *Watt* for this discussion of mirthless laughter, which Beckett's narrator elaborates as “the laugh of laughs, the *risus purus*, the laugh laughing at the laugh, the beholding, the saluting of the highest joke” (48). Simon Critchley draws on this passage for the epigraph to *On Humour*.

its “aggressive in-your-face addressivity” and “visceral trash-talk” (10). Importantly, he is also attentive to the “negative” affect of a poem like “‘We’re All Friends Here’”: the ambivalent cynicism of its relation to the possibility of collective agency “under Later-Than-We-Think Capital” (Lusk, *Ogress Oblige* 31); or the “confession of resignation” that closes the confrontation between the poet qua single-mother-on-welfare and the (“good,” “patriarchal”) mothers who populate the same social housing complex in which Lusk and her daughter Anna live (Farr 16-17).<sup>60</sup> Without addressing the issue directly, Farr’s analysis suggests that this oscillation between class agency and despair has to do with the double bind particular to Lusk’s textual project: how to “facilitate class identification” while also working to “decompose” (denaturalize, undo) “the ‘fact’ of class stratification” (17).<sup>61</sup>

What Farr helps identify here, then, is the sense in which Marxist-feminist anger and anguish constellate the double bind that is the ogress under obligation. In patriarchal-capitalist society, Lusk always already occupies the position of the “ogress.” Via humour, Lusk takes up and re-signifies this term in its function as a misogynist-classist slur, shifting the parameters of its capacity to offend and redirecting it as a linguistic weapon against gender-class oppression. This act of resignification is what marks Lusk’s ogress as a figure of defiance, affirmation,

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<sup>60</sup> The relevant verse passage of “We All Friends Here”—with its amazing concluding (punch) line—is as follows:

Certainly I present  
 within the public sphere completely wacked out & obsessive. I’m  
 hoping I don’t sound quite so bloody smug and self-congratulatory,  
 but  
 I’ll bet do, I do  
 & I’ll wager I’ll witlessly antagonize umpteem other parents with  
 everything I say, do or display on the person of my child. What a  
 goof. I wish I was rich. (31)

<sup>61</sup> It is more accurate to say that Lusk’s work grapples with *multiple* (structural) contradictions and double binds. Clearly, gender plays a role here, complicating the above situation even further. Like Andrews and Annharte, Lusk’s writing subject is largely critical of conventional representational techniques as necessary to emancipatory politics. Hence Lusk’s non-representational approach to social identity offers itself as another vector of askance political “obligation”—but also humour—in her work.

agency, and possibility. As Lusk recognizes, however, the ogress is also an obligatory figure in that it is not simply of her choosing and that it obliges the performance of certain stereotypes and gender-class requirements. In *Ogress Oblige*, this performance is patently tendentious and only parodically mimetic. As a double reversal of sorts, however, it also has the effect of confirming what the discourse of noblesse oblige already expects of her. No amount of comic distance (or over-proximity) guarantees classist-sexist readers or listeners against laughing *at* the poet-mother qua ogress (rather than *with* her). Humorous (re)appropriations of hateful stereotypes are able to serve as protective barriers of sorts against hostile environments. Even as ironic self-designation, however, such stereotypes still possess the capacity to (re)tramatize and injure. In her reading of “Lumpen Prole by Choice,” Capperdoni is right to foreground how Lusk uses angry mockery to turn the tables on various social agents of oppression. What she misses is how such outbursts are also already obligations particular to the ogress, whose very “positivity” stems from classist and anti-feminist stereotypes about the “monstrosity” of the ungrateful, incontinent, and insolent lower-class woman.<sup>62</sup> Lusk’s (literally) “vulgar Marxism” is as much *ressentiment* as righteousness, and Lusk’s refusal (or inability) to sidestep this double movement is part of what is so remarkable about her textual politics.<sup>63</sup>

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<sup>62</sup> The Anishinaabe poet Marie Annharte Baker speaks directly to the issue of obligation in a 2005 interview with the critic Pauline Butling about her book *Exercises in Lip Pointing*. Annharte’s comments also broadly apply to Lusk’s situation as regards obligation and aggressive class humour and so are worth quoting here: “This book has a lot of very tough-hitting poems. It almost seems like it’s obligatory, but then I thought if I felt these things so strongly and this did influence what I wanted to write about, then this is what I have. It’s not like I chose it. It comes from real reactions that I had to events around me” (AKA 24). In Lusk, the impossible choice (of the lumpen prole) is the obligation of the ogress, which necessarily inclines generically on the side of comedy (unlike, say, the pastoral of former KSW poet Lisa Robertson’s highly renown feminist travesty of epic-bucolic gender erotics and tropes in works like *Xeclogue*). This is an important (class) schism within critical discussions of (postmodern) feminism, mimicry, and parody (Suleiman included).

<sup>63</sup> Dene Yellowknives critic and scholar Glen Coulthard’s recuperation of this Nietzschean term applies here as well. See *Red Skin, White Masks*, as well as my Annharte chapter, which discusses Coulthard’s “revaluation” of this term in some detail.

The double bind(s) particular to Lusk's ogress also exposes the limitations of Suleiman's thinking on the possibilities for feminist, avant-garde tendentious humour. For Suleiman, these possibilities include assimilation, hostile parody, or mimicry (ambivalence), with this third as the ideal. For both Farr and Capperdoni, the titles of poems like "Lumpen Prole by Choice" and "Vulgar Marxism" alone sufficiently evidence that assimilation is simply not an option in Lusk.<sup>64</sup> By the same token, they also go some way toward demonstrating why hostility and aggressiveness are less strategic than unavoidable. Suleiman ultimately privileges the ambivalence particular to mimicry for what she sees as its superior subtilization and complexity. As a feminist figure of radical textuality, Suleiman's laughing mother shifts further away from tendentious black humour, substituting the parodic aggression of Carrington and Prassinis for the ludic ebullience of Cixous' "Medusa." Subject to the (over)determinations of gender-class, however, Lusk's ogress occupies a position of multiple, overlapping margins. As fellow KSW poet Kevin Davies observes, "Trujillo Lusk's monstrous and witty verbal assault on history and society" pivots on "the various stigmata of single-parenthood, poverty, and institutional negotiation."<sup>65</sup> As a figure of playful, transgressive writing, Suleiman's maternal body has trouble accommodating the aggressiveness of Lusk's humour—but even more so the stigma (despair, shame, pessimism, deprecation) that is its obverse. As per Freud's late essay, Suleiman construes "gallows" humour as an instance of triumph by the ego or *I* over the reality principle.

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<sup>64</sup> "The poem is not," Farr argues, "as some critics might have it, a request for a 'share of the discursive territory' owned by the rich. If we missed the irony of the title of the book, the title of this poem makes Lusk's intentions clear: 'Lumpen Prole by Choice'—the speaker, addressing her 'Class Mates,' 'smirks' at the possibility that she might be assimilable: 'This will do nicely'" (13). Capperdoni similarly insists that even the title "'Lumpen Prole by Choice' emphasizes . . . the poet's refusal to engage with gender and class politics in terms of assimilation" (39). Farr's first citation is from Pauline Butling and Susan Rudy, *Writing in Our Time: Canada's Radical Poetries in English*. The point here is not simply that the lure of assimilation is not there, but that it is impossible. See also Lusk's comic interrogation of the Olsonian "polis" in "Oops," another poem from *Ogress Oblige*.

<sup>65</sup> This citation is from the back cover of *Ogress Oblige*.

In Lusk's work, however, such humour instances the impossibility (and ideology) of precisely any such overcoming.

According to Friedrich Schelling, comedy transpires when freedom finds itself on the side of the object, necessity on the side of the subject.<sup>66</sup> Nothing is further from the idea of *Galgenhumor* as victory of the comic spirit over the human condition.<sup>67</sup> In her studies on Surrealism, Suleiman inquires into the conditions in which radical women writers are able to access tendentious or "black" humour as a socio-aesthetic strategy. Working within the imbrication of gender and class oppression, however, Lusk's work suggests that hostile, obscene, and darkly self-deprecatory forms of comic expression are always (too) readily available to lumpen prole women. For non-bona fide subjects, what is more "natural" than recourse to non-bona fide speech acts? From Aristotle to contemporary humour theorists like Alexander Kozintsev, there is a long (class-gender) history of associating humour with the "ugly," the "low," the "ignorant," and the "inferior."<sup>68</sup> "The higher the slavery, the more exquisite the buffoonery," writes Anthony Ashley-Cooper, Third Earl of Shaftesbury, in 1709 (20).<sup>69</sup> "The

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<sup>66</sup> See the section "On the Essence of Comedy" from Schelling's *Philosophy of Art*, in which he writes, "The reversal of [the tragic] relationship must thus yield that form in which necessity or identity is rather the *subject*, freedom or difference the object; this is indeed the relationship within *comedy* (263).

<sup>67</sup> In Lusk, gallows humour is less a coping mechanism than a mechanism for expurgating the impossibility of coping.

<sup>68</sup> "Comedy is, as we have said, an imitation of characters of a lower type," Aristotle writes in the *Poetics*. "It consists in some defect or ugliness which is not painful or destructive" (59). In *The Mirror of Laughter*, Kozintsev elaborates this point: "The main narrative strategy of humorous texts is the use of strategies that are not those of the authors/speakers, but those of the intermediate implied author—the 'inferior people'" (14). For Kozintsev, these strategies revolve around what he describes as "plebeian proclivities" (21) and "the inherent pleasure in the bad" (22). Unsurprisingly, Kozintsev also goes on to relate comedy to animality and cultural "primitivism."

<sup>69</sup> In his essay "Sensus Communis," Shaftesbury famously advocates for "the Freedom of Wit and Humour"—but only within the confines of aristocratic, gentlemanly, and liberal good taste.

talent of humor,” adds John Witherspoon nearly a century later, “is often possessed in a very high degree by persons of the meanest rank, who are themselves ignorant of it” (294).<sup>70</sup>

Beginning with early modern humoral theory, cultural historian Daniel Wickberg traces the historical (and ideological) movements through which humour transforms from a quality immanent to particular objects and bodies to a subjective mode of perception and cognition. For Wickberg, this transformation is most intense in the middle years of the eighteenth century and is coeval with “the newer understandings of personhood emerging in bourgeois culture” (8). By the second half of the twentieth century, the historically bourgeois, liberal, individualist notion of “the sense of humour” figures not merely as an (Anglo-American) cultural dominant but as a de facto universal human characteristic. Yet the non-universality of Shaftesbury’s and Witherspoon’s comic objects remains, as Wickberg recognizes. It marks the cultural, political incongruity of humour antipathetic to the “ideological positivism” characteristic of the dominant sense of humour. Conversely, it also marks socially marginal subjectivities as always already subject to (humorous) objectification. By definition, gallows humour transforms the subject (or self) into the abject comic object. The broader question concerns what precisely this transformation allows or signifies.

In Lusk, blackly comic self-deprecation is more Schellingian than Freudian in its logic. In *The Philosophy of Art*, Schelling defines the tragic “as an actual and objective conflict between freedom in the subject on the one hand, and necessity on the other” (251). He gives a similar definition to the comic in that it too “occurs where a universal contrast between freedom and necessity obtains” (264). But here the form of the conflict is the inverse, with freedom (agency,

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<sup>70</sup> John Witherspoon was an influential US philosopher, rhetorician, Presbyterian minister, and Founding Father. His remarks on humour appear in his “Lectures on Eloquence.” Perhaps of interest in relation to Shaftesbury’s above comment is Witherspoon’s concomitant status as a slaveholder and anti-abolitionist.

transcendence) on the side of the object and necessity (determination, obligation) on the side of the subject. In a number of places, Lusk appears to confirm Schelling's definitions—while filling them out with the class-gender content that they presuppose:<sup>71</sup> “Not usually called tragedy, so never looked well / as heard disquieting items known better. As bereft of physical conditions” (11); “Yet not exactly happy. (Please / find enclosed my dumb joke)” (12); “I fail to inter memory or inter-face dick. Most recently / called ‘indigence’” (13); “Push / passion from touchiness (distant from MY liver), more likely called humour” (16); “Unlike a flawless tragedy, the elegance of which structure is lost upon those suffer- / ing in it, the perfect geometry of ‘Dotti Trujillo’ was only invisible from the air” (18).<sup>72</sup>

Classically, comedy is the space for representing the experience of the low, the abject, the lesser-than. It is the only generic frame in which this experience is legible, at least within contexts of inequality, servitude, and oppression. Pace Suleiman, women on the margins need not turn to black, tendentious, or gallows humour. This is the position towards which class-gender stratification already ushers them. As per Suleiman's framework, Lusk's writing marks an aggressive ambivalence vis-à-vis masculinist vanguard poetics and scenes of writing. Yet this ambivalence also extends to all idealizations of gender-class humour (not only Suleiman's laughing mother and Cixous' Medusa but also the Bakhtinian carnivalesque). Lusk often uses the term “jokes” while discussing her poetics, and she describes her comic appropriation of the ogress as “its own nexus for a lot of goofy shit” (“Write a Poem”). Yet she equally denigrates

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<sup>71</sup> In this regard, Lusk's humour is also Hegelian in that its form of alienation involves not so much the subject than the subject as substance. On this Hegelian dimension of humour, see Zupančič, pp. 28.

<sup>72</sup> These lines are all from “Oral Tragedy,” save for the last, which is from “The Worst.” The pagination for these poems is from *Redactive*. Note how the last line uncannily appears to echo and respond to Witherspoon on intuitive humour and the “ignorant” comic subject. The gender-class tragedy of the ogress is only legible or visible as comedy, precisely because it lacks the transcendence particular to tragic heroism.

this recourse to humour, qualifying it endlessly as “dumb,” “stupid,” “doggerel,” and the like.<sup>73</sup>

In the Eichhorn interview, Lusk evidences a strong dislike for readings of her work that focus inordinately on its humorous aspects, noting their tendency to minimize or efface socio-subjective conflicts and agonies. She nowhere comes close to expressing the surety that marks many feminist accounts of women’s humour.

### 5.7. Tendentious Comedy: The Joke of Citation

Those who forget their history are doomed to research it.

—Gerald Creede, qtd. in *Oral Tragedy*

I tend not to cite my source material,  
so just do your homework and get back at me.

—Dorothy Trujillo Lusk, “Let My Voice Thud Throughout the Land”

The subtitle to “Lumpen Prole by Choice” is “A Novel in Arias.” A sparse, four-page poem, it contains three lines with italics: “Art thou troubled? Music will calm thee” (15); “Art thou weary? Grace shall be thine” (17); and “You know I don’t understand your attitude at all.” Capperdoni correctly describes the first of these lines as mock-Victorian. However, she neglects to note their provenance in W. G. Rothary’s popular Edwardian song of the same name, which rewrites the aria “Dove sei, amato bene” from Handel’s 1725 opera seria, *Rodelinda*. The second line is also a direct citation of Rothary. The third, however, is from a decidedly non-Victorian source: Gertrude Stein’s first novel, *Q. E. D.* (1903).

Although oblique, the Stein citation is interesting for at least two reasons. As a (queer, modernist) bildungsroman, *Q. E. D.* explores identity and writing and the struggle to form alternative forms of community. Largely autobiographical, the book focuses on Adele (a young,

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<sup>73</sup> This language appears in Lusk’s interviews but also throughout the poems.

Jewish, upper-class lesbian) and her semi-clandestine erotic relationship with Helen (an older woman of more experience, literary and sexual). Stein wrote it under the working title of *The Making of an Author: Being a History of One Woman Among Others*. The scene from which the quotes stems is one of many in which the two lovers attempt endlessly to navigate a seemingly intractable but mostly invisible obstacle to their relationship. As it turns out, what Helen especially is unwilling or unable to name are the socio-economic straits that make her and her burgeoning literary career dependent on another woman lover (Sophie) for support. Although different in so many regards, Lusk's and Stein's texts share two key interests in common, as Lusk's citation suggests: the status and relations of women within literary circles, and class as that which most sets these relations at risk.<sup>74</sup>

Lusk signifies the genericity and sociality of writing in various other places in *Ogress Oblige* as well. In total, the poem sequence "Oops Upside Your Head" comprises six sections, each with their own title. Including "Lumpen Prole by Choice," three of these titles make reference to different genres of writing: "a Novel in Arias," "an Outré biografib," and "an Apocryphal Memoir."<sup>75</sup> These references are incongruous, lampooning the very generic and readerly expectations that they summon. At the same time, they also index the scene of writing, especially the latter two.

"Oops Upside Your Head" is the title of a 1979 funk anthem by The Gap Band. As with much up-tempo funk, R&B, and soul music, part of its social function is to bring people together on the dancefloor (whether in a club or more informal setting). The poem's dedication is to Maxine Gadd, a poet who begins writing as part of the Vancouver Downtown poetry scene of the

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<sup>74</sup> Strikingly, it is social class more than same-sex desire that Stein's novel finds unspeakable.

<sup>75</sup> Recall that "'We're All Friends Here'" has the subtitle "A Fiction of Unspeakable Horror." Another poem is "Rumplestiltskin's Dotter—a Meaningful Poem."

1960s and who occupies a similar position to Lusk as an avant-garde woman poet and mother within a largely masculinist cultural landscape.<sup>76</sup> In concert, both the title and the dedication suggest a utopian impulse of sorts: of a particular socio-cultural body, group, or gathering, across generations, and between women.

As an insult or threat of violence, however, the phrase “upside your head” also registers as the antithesis to group or intersubjective solidarity or coherence.<sup>77</sup> From this perspective, the interjection “oops” has the effect of making the title doubly incongruous. Echoing “We’re All Friends Here,” what the poem sequence conveys as a whole is the “unspeakable horror” of the class-gender relation, at least as the ogress experiences it. At the level of socio-semantic content, then, it is hard not to read the “good times” promise of the Gap Band reference as anything but grimly comic (and ironic).

Although the ogress appears nowhere by name in the poem, Lusk supplies a small cast of other “characters” whose names place them firmly upon the stage as “mechanicals” within the working-class comedy or opera buffa with which the sequence concludes.<sup>78</sup> Along with the first person of the poem, these characters populate the lumpen prole beer hall that provides the “setting” for the poems “Funny in a Bonnet” and “Oops.” As per comic convention, their names are not proper nouns but rather generic abstractions of social position or personality: The Beer Girl, the Troll, the Lout.<sup>79</sup>

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<sup>76</sup> Notably, Lusk brings up Gadd in all three of her published interviews (with Mancini, McLennan, and Lafrance).

<sup>77</sup> The idiomatic expression in full is “smack upside your head.”

<sup>78</sup> *Mechanicals* is the term that an older Shakespearean criticism often uses to describe those lower-class characters in the Bard’s plays whose dramatic function is primarily that of “comic relief.”

<sup>79</sup> In *The Odd One In*, Alenka Zupančič provides as an example of this generic “law” the characters that populate Chaplin’s oeuvre: most famously “The Tramp” but also comic figures like the “Lone Prospector” and the “Worker” (37). In Western drama, the proper name marks the properly tragic subject and narrative: *Oedipus Rex*, *Hamlet*, *King Lear*. The comic narrative, however, almost invariably involves the travails of a generic or universal subject or name: *The Frogs*, *The Taming of the Shrew*, *The Merchant of Venice*.

“Funny in a Bonnet” begins with three characteristically oblique lines, which are nevertheless legible as a type of stage direction: “Passive voice (no suggestion), therefore incomprehensible / To that which could be my ultimate justification, sic love to / Demos, characteristic of an otherwise analytical mass” (21). In the brief tableau that follows, “the slimy troll under the bridge” features as the object of low humour (for the audience) and as the repulsive yet all-too-familiar phallic *oblige* (for the female wait staff). The Victorian language with which he attempts to “woo” the Beer Girl is comically incongruous to the surrounding discursive context and (at least on the surface) rhetorically at odds with the sexual aggressiveness of his underlying intentions.<sup>80</sup> In “Oops,” the “drama” of the beer hall continues, as the equally predatory figure of the Lout achieves apotheosis on the dance floor, the lyrics to the Gap Band’s 1979 hit single on his lips. Yet it is the poet (or perhaps the Beer Girl) who brings both the “comedy” and the poem sequence to a close, in an “epilogue” whose effect is analogous to that moment after last call when the bar lights suddenly come on, painfully bright with what they reveal. “Carouse with ambient lives // My heart makes me think,” the speaker ruminates ambivalently, then bitterly. “Tepid phenomena all about us // Shitty old revenants, by starlight” (22).

Like ““We’re All Friends Here,”” “Oops Upside Your Head” is a text deeply suspicious of any performative declaration of comradeship, unity, or solidarity. The socio-discursive space of “Funny in a Bonnet” and “Oops” is not that of literary production or poetic coterie. Nor is the “Beer Girl” ever entirely credulous to the forms of (masculinist) sociability that this space instances. In relation to the single mother as avant-garde poet, however, what moments of raw

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<sup>80</sup> As almost always with Lusk, other readings are available. Perhaps the words are (also) the poets, the fantasy of violent retribution, or the reality of self-defence: “[H]e condescends so / prettily to / an industrialized diffidence, a feint then an upper thrust to the diaphragm” (21). But perhaps the feint is the Troll’s language, and the upper thrust is phallic assault.

economic and gender alienation and antagonism provide is a socio-subjective milieu of sorts to the various scenes of writing that populate *Ogress Oblige*, as well as to the ideological fantasies that animate them. In a not at all obvious manner, the form of “Oops Upside Your Head” is broadly diurnal. The “events” of the final two poems take place after dark, late at night, among “shitty old revenants, by starlight.” Conversely, the opening verses of the titular poem contain lexemes and partial images suggestive of daybreak—even of the optimism and sense of possibility that at times attend it.<sup>81</sup> Unsurprisingly, this sense of a new day and new beginning begins quickly to break down and to register as something more approaching parody. Indeed, this “optimism” is never really there—only a subtle effect of semic associations, phonetic clusters, sub-lexical lyricism. Nevertheless, these opening verses do open out onto a fantasy of sorts—one that explicitly concerns the possibility of non-exploitative social relations among poets and within spaces of cultural production: “Wonderful to hours—beldams merry mutiny ark’s / an idea of Polis become an emergent feasible” (11). Of course, the key word here is *polis*, the term used by Charles Olson to signify an ideal creative and mutualist community of poets, artists, and other makers.<sup>82</sup> For a moment, it appears as if the speaker is about to succumb to the desideratum and fantasy (Olsonian or otherwise) of mutualism without remainder. But then she (comically, darkly) reminds us that this too was (likely) never in fact the case:

Beams

as within facial experience

of eyelash intra Novelist’s natal muddle like threatening to thump out

my giblets. *Pay Attention!* (11)

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<sup>81</sup> Most evidently, it accomplishes this with the locution “early to rise,” which opens the poem.

<sup>82</sup> Olson is a major figure within the history of Vancouver avant-garde poetry and poetics. His influence is especially prominent among male avant-garde poets of the generation antecedent to the KSW.

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