



“LOL, LET’S JUST PUT THAT ALL TOGETHER!”
SOCIALLY ENGAGED HUMOR IN THE POETRY OF TOMMY PICO

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ABSTRACT

Given its serious object, socially engaged poetry is seldom associated with laid-back humor. In his four-book long epic series, queer Indigenous poet Tommy Pico (Kumeyaay) challenges this approach to violence and oppression by addressing individual and social maladies across time and space, from loneliness in the era of self-exposure to egregious homophobia, to eating disorders, to cultural erasure. While many scholars acknowledge Pico’s biting wits, there is a tendency to understand this humor as secondary to the seriousness of his themes. Conversely, I propose conceiving of it as the pillar of Pico’s potential as a socially engaged author. Vine DeLoria (Standing Rock Sioux) has claimed that “One of the best ways to understand a people is to know what makes them laugh.” While moral superiority tends to undergird most political humor, Pico strategically deploys a blend of self-deprecating comedy based on a suspicion of binaries that aims at dismantling all forms of reified stereotypes. By placing himself in the first line of humorous critiques, Pico avoids any form of glorification and invites readers to join in the self-deconstructing process. This attitude aligns with Diné scholar Ho’hesta Mo’e’hahne’s suggestion that twenty-first century queer Indigenous authors seek “alternative modes of relationality and connection across space and time.” Indeed, in contrast with what occurs in more somber approaches to such urgent themes, there is in Pico’s will to deconstruct himself and create something new from the ruins of settler colonialism a necessary belief in the possibility of change.

Keywords: neoconfessional poetry, socially engaged poetry, Tommy Pico, queerness, humor.

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For most, tackling the embodied consequences of settler colonialism, racism, and homophobia would be at odds with cracking self-deprecating jokes and coming up with low brow play on words revolving too frequently around male genitalia. Originally from the Viejas Reservation, close to what is today San Diego, California, Kumeyaay poet, screenwriter, and podcaster Tommy Pico has made of that unlikely combination his signature style.¹ Perhaps because engaged poetry is generally expected to address serious matters

¹ Pico has written many episodes of the acclaimed HBO series *Reservation Dogs* and is the co-host of the very popular podcast *Food for Thought* with Denne Michele Norris, Joseph Osmundson, and Fran Tirado.

in a grave tone, and particularly because “Native humor has traditionally been dismissed or ignored altogether” (Andrews 2011, 10), Pico’s comedic approach is often placed in a secondary tier of relevance. “America,” claims the poet, “wants its NDNs weary, slumped / over the broken horse;” instead, he brings “NDN joy NDN laughter NDN freedom” (2016, 52). Numerous scholars have shown how Pico’s poetry braves both homophobic bigotry and the malicious stereotypes configured and reproduced by settler colonialism.² In line with Joseph L. Coulombe, who maintains that comedy is perfect “to reveal injustice, protect self-esteem, heal wounds, and create bonds” (2010, 94), I argue that humor is not ancillary to Pico’s agenda but is precisely the reason behind its effectiveness in deconstructing prejudice, opposing discursive violence, and, above all, building ties beyond queer and Indigenous communities. Part of the long tradition of the Indian Trickster—“an antiheroic comic teacher and holy fool” (Lincoln, 5)—which includes sarcastic urban NDNs like Sherman Alexie (Spokane and Coeur d’Alene), Diane Burns (Anishinaabe and Chemehuevi), and artist Kent Monkman (Fisher River Cree), Pico achieves all this through the strategic deployment of a particular strain of self-deprecating humor.

Jennifer Andrews’s remark that “humor and irony are particularly effective methods of expressing the contradictions and dichotomies that shape the lives of Native populations today, as individuals and communities blend ‘tribal tradition’ and ‘contemporary experience’” (3) fits Pico like a glove. His four book-length poems—*IRL* (2016), *Nature Poem* (2017), *Junk* (2018), and *Feed* (2019)—are a stream-of-consciousness wild ride that follows the adventures of the poet’s “bratty diva” alter ego, Teebs, as he enjoys New York’s dating scene, philosophizes during lonely promotion tours, and reminisces about his childhood in the “Rez.” Through these poems, Pico explores queer identity, tackles colonial genocide and cultural erasure, challenges stereotypes attached to Native Americans, lampoons consumerism, and more. His style can be described as both torrential for its volume and electric due to the brevity of his tweet-like witty verses, which carry hefty reflections, perfunctory aesthetic judgments, and deadpan dad puns. Pico’s bubbly smooths an otherwise violently intimate encounter, given the constant sharing of Teebs’s daily deeds—from hookups to passing wind on planes, from homophobic harassment to writer’s block. In fact, peeking into Teebs’s musings on bygone lovers and current crushes, idle nightlife, and hot Cheetos feels like browsing through someone’s social

² In her urgent analysis of food colonization, Nicole Seymour mentions that the poet is “known for his biting wit” (2022, 120), but chooses to analyze how his “poetry helps readers understand how issues of food, environment, colonialism, and queerness are deeply interrelated” (121) through other means. June Scudeler notices Pico’s “deceptively simple, breezy, and humorous style” (2021, 163), but focuses on the epic; Ho’hesta Mo’e’hahne claims that Pico’s “work enacts queer Indigeneity as a mode of perception, spatiality, and decolonial critique” (2022, 316), but pays little attention to his humor, John Gamber explores the way the poem challenges hetero-normative forms of masculinity. Kyle Bladow (2020) is an exception, dedicating part of his analysis to Pico’s humor.

media feed. This resemblance highlights the inspiration his work draws from Web 2.0, evident in the use of Internet slang, shorthand, hashtags, or ampersands.

The tetralogy's larger-than-life scope calls for a platform that allows the writing to expand and grow like a ramble with little or no confines. Understandably, Pico's work has been regarded as epic, with scholars placing him rightfully among poets who either rewrite the classics "in their own idiom and in the light of their own concerns" (Hurley and O'Neill 2012, 122), such as Derek Walcott or James Joyce, or engage with the form to create their own narratives, as do, for example, Craig Santos Perez or Cathy Park Hong.³ Although the poet himself has labeled his work as epic, this categorization may overshadow the relevance of the individual in it. Indeed, there exists an unresolved tension with tradition in Pico's work.⁴ In conversation with Ruby Brunton, he states that his books are "just like epic poems" (2016d). Elsewhere, he suggests having drawn inspiration from A.R. Ammons's long works.⁵ Finally, Pico explains that after writing the books, he "realized that their origin was more in these Bird Songs I grew up hearing my whole life and less [in] Whitman or A.R. Ammons" (Pico 2019b), referencing traditional "travelogues that detail how Kumeyaay people made it to the ancestral homeland and what we passed on the way" (2019b). Yet, even if modeled after Bird Songs, Pico's poems present a capital difference: these "new Bird Songs" (emphasis added) depict "how the character left the Rez and what he passed on his way" (2019b, emphasis in original). This prominence of the individual—"I don't want to be an identity or a belief or a feedbag. I wanna b me" (2017, 33)—is significant and helps to illuminate the social potential of Pico's humor.

Interviewed by Tara Kenny, Pico nonchalantly admits that "I wasn't writing in a reparative way for Native American communities. It was purely selfish. I was just making these comparisons, making these jokes, but then also talking about genocide. LOL, let's just put that all together!" (2018b). The poet's bravado, which may come off as aloof individualism, should not be regarded negatively, as it conceals one of the driving forces behind his work: an undeniable yearning to belong to something larger while retaining a sense of selfhood. Beyond the tension between the Rez boy and the New York tech-savvy

³ Kadji Amin, Amber Jamilla Musser and Roy Pérez call Pico's work "an epic that refuses to posture as high art" (2017, 238). Will Clark claims that Pico "modernizes the form and explodes the reverentiality of the epic" (2022, 529). Scudeler, while noting that that Pico "rejects slotting himself too easily into the epic tradition" (2021, 160), claims that he "queers" and "Indigenizes it to reflect contemporary urban Indigenous experiences" (189).

⁴ In his own words: "I can't ever see / where I stand in the lineage / of art" (2016).

⁵ The author has explicitly mentioned Ammons's import in both *Junk*, an estranged heir to Ammons's 1993 *Garbage*, and *IRL*, which visually and perhaps programmatically resembles *Tape for the Turn of the Year*, a long poem where Ammons recorded random thoughts on an adding-machine tape every day for over a month and a half between 1963 and 1964.

hipster, as Gamber has noted, there is a constant struggle to balance the socially accepted forms of a queer man (“I hate gay guys so much” [2018, 16]), an Indian (“Haven’t figured out how to be NDN” [2018, 48]), and a poet (“I can’t write poems / the way they must come / to others” [2016, 79]). Jen Hedler Phillis has proposed a hybrid of epic and lyric where she places authors like Pound and Williams alongside dg nanouk okpik (Inuit-Iñupiaq), Douglas Kearney, and Hong. According to Phillis, the balance between these modes ensures that minority voices are heard, since “the victors tell the story of their triumph, and their victims lose the linear structure of narrative” (2019, 5) in favor of the fragmented polyvocality of the lyric.

If, epic-like, the tetralogy begins in media res, its first word instantly challenges the third-person narrator characteristic of the genre: “I text Girard” (2016, 7). An analysis of the lyric “I” and the Teebs persona would require an article of its own. However, to support my point on the role of the individual in Pico’s poetry, I will simply note that the doubts present in the early poems find a form of resolution halfway into the last book of the series. Right after one of the fragments discussing the Fermi Paradox—an allegory for the search for true love—Teebs muses:

The idea
is that a “true self” exists somewhere below the layers and layers of scarves—
all squishy eternity and Cèdre Atlas Atelier toilet water

and in the contour, a false self
The persona
we create to conform to society
Maison de Parfum (43–44)

At first glance, Pico is merely reproducing the trope that we all play a part on the stage of life, keeping our “real” self hidden from public view. However, his humorous literal translation of the French *eau de toilette* suggests that everyone’s “true self” is actually cheap, unfashionable, or, in any case, mockable. Thus, the key idea here is not (only) that identity is complex,⁶ but that no part of it is inherently good or bad.⁷ Immediately following this reflection, Pico quotes George Orwell’s essay “Why I Write”: “The job is to reconcile my / ingrained likes and dislikes with the essentially public, non-individual / activities that this age forces on all of us. It is not easy. It raises / problems of construction and of language, and it raises in a new way / the problem of truthfulness” (44). These lines explain much of the social potential of Pico’s poetic enterprise, which acknowledges

⁶ The Teebs persona is one of the characters the man Tommy Pico performs, as he lets on in this Whitmanian spoof: “(but there are so many people inside me)” (*Feed*, 36).

⁷ Pico has said so explicitly, claiming that “binaries like ‘right’ and ‘wrong’ or ‘good’ and ‘bad’” are “imposed on me & my body specifically by settler colonialism” (“Beauty”).

the need to sacrifice something in order to create. This concession is expressed by Pico through snarky comments, piercing comebacks, and disarming comedy.

Humor scholars agree that “laughter appears to stand in need of an echo” (Bergson, 5). In other words, humor is a social phenomenon. Arguably, the most common form of humor found in socially engaged texts is superiority-based, where in line with the Aristotelian tradition, laughter springs from a sense of moral high ground. When Rachel Trousdale explains that while “Racist laughter builds a wall between the joker and the object of the joke [...] Anti-racist laughter, by contrast, makes racism itself the object of mockery” (2021, 19-20), she overlooks the fact that this form of humor, however, is likely to be antagonizing and divisive, as its end goal is the depreciation of a set of beliefs, regardless of their being right or wrong. Henri Bergson adds an interesting nuance to Aristotle’s position, suggesting that a person who is object of derision becomes “less abstracted, more flexible, and responsive,” making them “more fully human and part of the society we live in” (Trousdale 2021, 7). Expanding the “integrating effect” (Allen 1992, 158) of humor in Native poetry, Pico’s work engages readers in two related ways. First, through the cheeky critique of activities Teebs participate in like foodie culture, dating apps, or the shallow cult of the self. Secondly, by looking at himself in the proverbial mirror, this criticism paves the way for “the potential racist—the white/male/dominant figure—to laugh at himself” (Trousdale 2021, 20) when it is their turn on the receiving end of Pico’s scathing insights. Laughter may have transformative power and, in this sense, Pico’s comedy catalogue is vast and operates differently according to whom the gibe is addressed.

An excellent entry point can be found in the Kumeyaay poet’s feigned anti-intellectualism, a form of self-deprecation which functions on two different levels. After sending the message to Girard and feeling guilty about it, Teebs parades his anti-intellectual mood in incongruously humorous fashion: “Regret is a gift / that keeps on giving I / think it was Sontag / or Sonic the Hedgehog / who said just dash dodge / weave faster than you / can think” (*JRL* 7). In line with Anishinaabe scholar Gerald Vizenor’s description of the Native trickster as essentially “postmodern” (1993, 9), Pico jumps in only eight lines from twisting a popular saying to apparently quoting philosopher Susan Sontag only to place her in some category where she shares space with a popular video game porcupine. Similarly, in *Feed*, Teebs narrates the myth told by Aristophanes in Plato’s *Symposium* about the origin of the “other half” trope. Without even giving the reader time to reflect, the lyric voice spouts: “Now before you get all / sapiosexual / on me, I don’t know this from Plato / I know this from *Hedwig and the Angry Inch*” (39).⁸ This playful ignorance is in part consequence of Pico’s admitted fondness of accessibility—“my rancor isn’t anti-intellectual I just hate it when / you never use contractions” (2018, 48)—but also a

⁸ Sapiosexuality refers to the people who are attracted to intelligence over physical appearance.

statement against what I would call the intellectualization of suffering, which also transpires in his treatment of language and the literary tradition.

All throughout the series, there is clever word play: “I’m / totally caught / off guard when Muse / texts me *don’t respond* / *don’t respond don’t* / *respond don’t spondee* / *respond don’t respond*” (2016, 14); plain silly puns: “I’ve got Swedish Fish in my bag. / Swag” (2019, 44); and the toying with language on the goofier end that conceals more than meets the eye: “Linguists say a language is dead when its only speakers are adult, that in a / hundred years 90% of the worlds languages will be kaput [...] A blue orbit suggested by echoes. / lol the word of the day on dictionary.com is diddle. / I will always be alone” (2017, 52). In this last example, the pun points to that urge to belong mentioned earlier, but the buildup, beyond the on-the-fly social commentary, places Pico as an outsider within a group to which he belongs: the poetic guild. The choice of a Germanism, “kaput,” to discuss extermination (of languages) is defiant enough,⁹ but Pico produces a meta-elegiac image, “the blue orbit,” as an example of the evocative subtlety of poetic language, only to be distracted by the double entendre of the admittedly funny word “diddle,” which suggests a discomfort with the genre’s traditional solemnity.

This struggle with lyricism runs through the tetralogy. In *IRL* Teebs “Can’t use words / like *tamp* or *tincture*, n that / makes me feel like a chump / fraud fool” (79). In *Nature Poem*, Pico comes back to the same words, but with a different attitude: “why shd I give a fuck abt “poetry”? It’s a / container for words like *whilst* and *hither* and *tamp*” (49). Eventually, in *Feed*, the respect for the gravitas of poetry is flushed down the toilet: “Candlelight is not too poetic to mention in a poem if we say the light / slicks across our faces like mud butt. / The candlelight slicked across our faces like mud butt” (35).¹⁰ This playful fiddling with his own craft opens the door for a deeper scrutiny of the fraught relationship between erasure, tradition, and language, poetic or otherwise.

This relationship is particularly problematic for Indigenous peoples, for whom, as Natalie Diaz puts it, “English [...] exists in a state of emergency” (2020). Yet even when claiming that, since his native tongue is disappearing, “there is something primordially indigenous and Kumeyaay about me that I don’t have access to any longer” (2016c), the poet manages to buffer the pain with mirth. Throughout the books, he mourns his losses as a member of “a group whose culture history language gods / cosmology calendar stories government gait was capital O / Obliterated” (2018, 66). Here, both the inclusion of the word “gait” and the delivery cushion the message. If the explicit capitalization is removed, the tone of the line becomes somber and remains a simple denouncement of a fact. However, as a craftsman and storyteller, Pico has the power to create. In *IRL*, he plays with the tension of destruction and creation when he teases the reader claiming

⁹ “Extinction wipes words from earth” (29), says Teebs in *Junk*.

¹⁰ It is worth noting that, in another twist, the words “tamp” (57) and “hither” (13) actually appear in *Feed*.

there is a Kumeyaay word akin to “in-between” (95) that means uncertainty or doubt, only to later admit he has made this up. His point is that “even if I’m lyin to you” (96), the possibility of creating the word is “breath tethering” (96). In *Feed*, a book driven by the will to learn to cook with friends as a means to compensate for the lack of traditional Kumeyaay cuisine, yet another consequence of cultural genocide, Pico scornfully blurts: “Dear reader, let’s make a culture! / Let’s make a dough. Like anyone whose culture has been scrubbed / from history, you can scrub my apple crumble” (22). The alliteration softens the criticism and what stands out is the will to build something new.

Eva Gruber explains that given their hybrid cultural history, “Native texts are often linked to canonical American literary texts, master narratives of Western civilization, and elements of American popular culture” (2008, 80). Pico does not reject his hybrid inheritance, and before this complicated relationship with the colonizer’s language and imposed tradition, instead, one must “try to find a beauty in the complication” (2016b). Of Pico’s work, Calhoun Jeanetta Mish has said that there is a conversation in it on “how to resist it, how to work within it, how to *make it new*” (2018, 182). Although Pound may not feature in Pico’s list of influences, these are numerous, ranging from Alexie to “Kandi Burruss from *Real Housewives of Atlanta*” (2017b), from Beyoncé to the aforementioned Ammons. The nods to these artists in the books can be reverential or not. Of Alexie, for example, Pico says that he “gives me permission / to leave the reservation” (2016, 46) in an obviously playful but sarcastic tone that questions his power over his creativity. Of the otherwise praised author of *Garbage*, Pico writes “A. R. Ammons is like, / *I have this feeling to write a poem but it was a bone!*” (2018, 63). As for popular culture, while the untrained eye may find in Pico’s work a general interest in pop divas, Teebbs openly states that “My safe / word is *Go to hell Katy Perry* pronounced ‘Catty’” (2018, 5), or “Taylor / Swift is an idiot” (2017, 72), ostracizing these two popstars from the category of strong, independent women who have been of inspiration to the gay community for decades.

“A lot of the humor-overlap between LGBTQIA+ stuff and Native stuff is a real sense of tragedy, of adversity” (“Meet”), explains Pico. Yet jokes that have the gay community as an object are constructed differently than the ones aimed at tackling Native American stereotypes. The tetralogy is joyfully queer, but the community is not idealized. Mostly in *Nature Poem* and *Junk*, Pico denounces the vacuousness, racism, and xenophobia of gay dating culture: “*oh, but you don’t look very Indian* is a thing ppl feel comfortable saying to / me on dates. / What rhymes with, *fuck off and die?*” (2017, 17-18). Numerous similar episodes drive Pico to conclude that “Dating is hard / bc gay men are a garbage fire” (2018, 21). Once again, by making one of his groups the object of scorn or doubt, Pico does something utterly uncommon in today’s engaged poetry: he shows them as flawed and vulnerable. While cis-hetero whites are hardly responsible for the behavior of certain gay men, these passages are a perfect example of how Pico’s books are for everyone, “Even though it might be ‘for’ you differently. Even though parts of it may be asking you to

observe or appreciate rather than participate. Idk I haven't had lunch yet" (2018c, emphasis added).

Interestingly, an inverse relation can be traced between humor and violence in Pico's work. Arturo Aldama distinguishes between discursive violence, found in narratives of fear, i.e., "fear-based discourses of otherization and pathologization of subjects whose positions are at the margins and borders of dominant political and cultural apparatuses" (2003, 5); and the material, physical violence exerted on those bodies. While the stricture of a white literary canon can be symbolically oppressive, and reductive stereotypes are at the base of biases and discrimination, they represent a less pressing threat than direct physical violence. In *IRL*, between pages 60 and 64, Teebs traces a nightmarish route of homophobic behavior that includes harassment, jeering, and spitting in public spaces like movie theaters or chain stores. The passage, however, can be read as a reminder of the importance of communal care, as Teebs admits that "W/ / a friend, you will forget / to pay attention" (62). Moreover, when walking with female friends, the perception of him as a "man-thing" enables an awkward "safety / exchange" (62). In the face of danger, what is commendable here is the realization that "There is a kind of power / in being reviled / for just *being*," something that "destabilizes some- / thing about their everyday" (62). The direct threat of physical harm, nonetheless, has Pico understandably address homophobia in a less humorous tone.

Between symbolic oppression and assault, there is Pico's treatment of death as a consequence of slow violence in its neocolonial mode. In *Nature Poem*, Teebs comments "how freakishly routine it is to hear someone / died" (2017, 33), and throughout the series numerous cases of young relatives who have passed are mentioned. Inevitably, this fear haunts the poet, who faces it in an unexpected exchange:

Is it normal to get a nose ring at 30?
Normal is defined not by what it is, but what surrounds it. Meaning it could literally be anything, and is nothing.
 Is it normal to get a nose ring at 30?
No, it's not.
 Am I just afraid of death?
Yes, probably.
 Is there nothing more normal than fearing death?
It is very natural to fear death.
 Should I get a nose ring?
It would look very cute on you. (2017, 43)

The repeated question suggests an interesting turn on the idea of uncertainty. While existential doubts are allowed leeway, context-related situations—such as the appropriateness of a certain look—demand concreteness. It is worth noting that here Teebs goes against the grain, too. Furthermore, with this juxtaposition of a somewhat vain aesthetic choice and a genuine and universal fear, Pico places death as a quotidian event that

permeates life. In the series, stars, plants and animals, and celebrities die. Once this has been established, Pico is not afraid to point fingers at the origin of some health problems that affect his community:

Then isolated reservations on stone mountains where not even a goat could live. Then the starvation. Then the Food Distribution Program on Indian Reservations. Whatever the military would throw away came canned in the backs of trucks. The commodities. The powdered milk, worms in the oatmeal, corn syrupy canned peaches. Food stripped of its nutrients. Then came the sugar blood. The sickness. The glucose meter goes up and up and up. (2019, 12)

As Pico suggests, land expropriation and thoughtless relocation are behind the food poverty affecting Native Americans. However, with his characteristic optimism and candor, Pico admits that “Resisting death for / generations, I want to make the opposite of death No excuse / for a vanilla bean tapioca ball attitude” (2017, 76). The omnipresence of junk food in the first three books of the series is replaced in the last one with the mentioned interest in healthier recipes that goes beyond self-care, signaling a will to challenge an inherited malady. After another mention of a dreadful fate—“did u not just read? My cousin died today / and he was only two years older / than me and it’s been this way my whole / life like biiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiinch” (2019, 14), Teebs tells a publisher who suggests waiting some years before releasing his next book—, Pico admits in a fitting double-edged pun, “I’m tired of being grave” (15).

Although his comedic range is wide, Pico’s most effective formula, which can be described as a caustic dialectics, functions on multilayered delayed parataxis. There is a slow burn wanton pun in *Junk* that perfectly exemplifies this. Right after commenting on a lover’s attributes, Teebs’s mention “bananas are dying and this is not a metaphor” (44), referencing the fact that due to human manipulation most banana varieties do not reproduce, and hence subtly commenting on artificial agriculture and how “settler colonialism has made traditional Indigenous foodways nearly impossible” (Seymour 2021, 130).¹¹ The seriousness of the topic makes the reader forget the puerile likening of bananas to genitalia until Pico calls them “Commercially produced yellow penis proxies” (Pico 2018, 44-45) only two lines later. A few couplets on, after another allusion to buttocks and watermelon flavored candy, Teebs surprises the reader not only once, “You expect me to tie bananas into the narrative,” but twice: “I expected my Ancestors wd b treated as human beings” (45). It is precisely through this kind of humor that Pico achieves his double social reach.

¹¹ In her superb essay on Pico’s treatment of food, Seymour notes how his “poetry helps readers understand how issues of food, environment, colonialism, and queerness are deeply interrelated” (2022, 121).

The closest to the relatability mark are those who find themselves, or their ancestors, victims of colonialism and state structured genocide. A close second tier finds readers who are otherwise oppressed. A third line is formed by engaged readers who might not identify as oppressed minorities but stand against said oppression. These reactions can be—and most typically are—elicited by works of grave and sober tone. However, the simple acknowledgment of some form of injustice or other allows readers to participate in an arguably sterile socially approved form of empathy. Anti-racist jokes, on the other hand, have the intention “to stimulate change” since they “emphasize that racism is an ideology, and can be abandoned” (Trousdale 2021, 20). The genius in Pico’s work is the fearless self-exposure to being the object of derision, which both allows him to be in control of what is to be lampooned and brings the barriers of his audience down.

Authors like Alexie, who shares with Pico “a penchant for humorous self-regard and a tendency to alternate between the melancholic and the irreverent” (Seymour 2022, 123), have been criticized, mostly by other Native authors, for their humorous treatment of the Native reality. In this line, Trousdale warns that self-joking by minorities, which could reproduce and strengthen racist stereotypes, “may happen when members of an oppressed group identify with their oppressors” (2021, 21). However, this is not the case with Pico, who moves comfortably in the oppressor’s culture and is well aware of its flaws; and, despite appearing coy, is in full command of the stage. A fragment in *IRL* confirms this when, after toying with the stereotype that presents Natives as less inclined to engage in unfiltered blathering, a misconception which, by the way, the tetralogy shatters, the poet produces a stand-up comedy scenario:

They ask what do Indians use
to treat poison oak? Mable McKay
takes a drag from her cig on-
stage *Calamine lotion* takes
a puff of history. I slap myself.
Ppl know when they’re being
condescended to. (2016, 26)

The slap serves as a reminder to Pico that jokes function as catalysts for change when aimed correctly. This does not diminish their sharpness or poignancy, but rather highlights the importance of timing and delivery, skills which Pico masters. By transforming McKay—a member of the Long Valley Cache Creek Pomo, a basket weaver, and an activist—into a sardonic 80s comedian, he skillfully offloads the weight of his own lyric voice. This comedic persona is not merely ornamental, but it connects to a broader Indigenous tradition of stand-up comedians, from Charlie Hill to the members of the comedy group 1491S.

Lawrence E. Mintz posits that stand-up represents “the purest public comic communication, performing essentially the same social and cultural roles in practically every

known society, past and present” (1985, 70). What I have described as delayed multi-layered parataxis structurally resembles the comedic actor’s delivery of incongruous humor. William O. Beeman describes its four stages:

The setup involves the presentation of the original content material and the first interpretive frame. The paradox involves the creation of the additional frame or frames. The dénouement is the point at which the initial and subsequent frames are shown to coexist, creating tension. The release is the enjoyment registered by the audience in the process of realization and the release resulting therefrom. (2001, 101)

The banana joke quoted earlier, for example, is built upon very similar foundations. Although Pico already flaunts his facetious wits in *IRL*, it is in his apophatic masterpiece, *Nature Poem*—a metaliterary tug of war where the author struggles with a self-imposed prohibition to write the kind of book which is expected of him—that this stand-up style delivery and caustic dialectics reach full form buttressed by Pico’s constant mention of his “audience.”

The book opens with a line of fragile beauty: “The stars are dying” (2017, 1), calls a sage cosmic voice, which goes on to explain how the perishing light connects us to the stars, which are so far away, “But also close, like the sea stars on the Pacific coast” (1). The message is coming through: everything is connected, we are one with the cosmos, with nature. The charade lasts only seven lines, as next to the sea, stars, and the waves, Pico presents “Anemones n shit. Sand crabs n shit” (1). Disgusted, he confesses: “Ugh / I swore to myself I would never write a nature poem” (1). The reasons for the reluctance range from the rejection of stereotypes—“bc it’s fodder for the noble savage / narrative” (6)—to the affirmation of individuality—“bc I only fuck with the city” (8). And yet, as the reader knows, he did.

To convince his audience of his hatred of nature, Pico states early on that he “wd slap a tree across the face” (2). In line with Seymour, who claims “the poem hereby invokes tree-slapping as a kind of counterpoint to tree-hugging” (2022, 120), Gamber contends that by “embodying a settler masculinity that also refuses to be kind to the other-than-human” (2022, 277) Pico problematizes the “Ecological Indian” trope. I would argue that Pico is mainly concocting a ludicrously funny image where nature become anthropomorphized—and not just anthropomorphized, but, apparently, Teeb’s partner, too: “think I’m in an abusive relationship w/nature” (26); “*My family’s experience isn’t fodder / for artwork*, says Nature in btwn make outs” (44), “*Fuck you too*, says Nature” (53), and so on. Indeed, pages later he doubles down stating that he “wd give a wedgie to a sacred mountain” (50). Yet, just as in *IRL* Pico slapped himself to keep his wits in line with his educational goal, in *Nature Poem*, the slapping should prevent himself—and the readers—from falling into the trope-trap.

Nearing the end of the book, Pico offers one of the most quoted lines in the poem: “You can’t be an NDN person in today’s world / and write a nature poem” (67). He then

maintains that “I hate nature—hate its *guts* / I say to my audience” (67), adding that “There is something smaller I say to myself: / *I don’t hate nature at all*” (67). According to Sarah Dowling, this confession signals a change “in the poem’s language, a swerve away from its normative, speech-based syntax” (2021, 126). Indeed, Pico does craft some relaxing metaphors—“Places have thoughts—hills have backs that love / being stroked by our eyes” (67)—and more anthropomorphizing—“The river gobbles down its tract as a metaphor / but also abt its day” (67), which presents the lyric voice as part of “an environment replete with entities that act, emote, and interact with him” (Dowling 2021, 126). However, Dowling omits the line that concludes the bucolic image, which impedes a satisfactory resolution: “the jellybean moon sugars at me. She flies and beams / and I breathe. / Fuck that. I recant. I slap myself” (67). Thus, by producing tranquil images of nature only to immediately renounce them, Pico denies the reader the enjoyment of a comfortable relationship with nature he himself cannot have.

The constant self-ironic wondering whether he should or should not write a nature poem produces a perfectly timed tension as the reader herself can intuit that a pun or a plot twist awaits. For sure, the nature poem is being written as one tries to catch on to Teebs’s ramblings. The reader gets it. The tension comes from the unexpected resolution of the pun, which can be incongruously funny, wordy, smart, or filled with guilt, when it catches the reader “unprepared for the truths about genocide, Indigenous erasure, and homophobia” (Scudeler 2021, 163). Hannah Burdette understands this “repeated refusal reflects the pain of loss and detachment” (2019, 131). However, I align with Bladow, who claims the goal of the explicit ambiguity “is to carry out the indeterminacy of the work, and to maintain the mutability Teebs first claims in *IRL* against the reductive tendencies” (2020, 9), which run through the whole series. Only five pages to the end of *Nature Poem*, there is another chance for redemption:

What if I really do feel connected to the land?
 What if the mountains around the valley where I was born
 What if I see them like faces when I close my eyes
 What if I said hi to them in the mornings and now all their calls go to
 voicemail
 [...]
 What if I said sorry under my breath when I sat on moss on the rock at the
 crick behind myself
 I would look like a freaking moron basket case
 I get so disappointed by stupid NDNs writing their dumb nature poems like
 grow up faggots (70)

This passage is a test crafted by the teacher and holy fool, and if readers expected a clear resolution, failing the test is on them. Just as with Dowling’s lines quoted earlier, Pico toys here with the reader’s preconceptions of what a “good NDN poet” should write. His poetry is remarkable for its pace, all-reaching scope, and wit; but also, for being doubt-

ridden, sometimes vacuous, insecure, honest, and outspoken. His commitment to irresolution warrants the possibility of creation and change.

Standing Rock Sioux Vine DeLoria's claim that "One of the best ways to understand a people is to know what makes them laugh" (2000, 39) can be read in two ways. Indeed, when laughing at jokes like Pico's, the readers "enter into a comic community based on shared values rather than shared skin color" (Trousdale 2021, 20). But failure to do so is just as significant. Cultural exchanges are prone to produce conflict when artificially held identities do the work. Not "getting" a joke implies some form of cultural ignorance and, hence, an opportunity to learn. Thus, Pico's random tomfoolery works as a bait-and-switch joke which conceals a moral lesson of sorts. There is no hesitation in the denouncement of homophobia, racism, or colonialism, but this sanction comes with an invitation to self-doubt which might open a fissure in the monolith of the normative worldview. Raymond J. Endres's suggestion that a "person who is subjected to the wit of another is strangely stripped of his humanity" (1966, 248) is partially neutralized when wit is also aimed at the laugher. After sharing some painful memories of abuse as a queer child, Pico calls them "Shavings of my will / to live lol" only to immediately add "maybe that's all / childhoods" (2016, 40). Of course, before it gets too serious, he concludes that "Ketchup must've / been a Eureka! Moment, like / the discovery of vaccines, / but the opposite" (40).

In a double interview with Kali Fajardo-Anstine, Pico wishes that "Maybe in the gulf between us and our books as facilitated by social media, as indigenous writers or marginalized writers or whatever, we can be read for craft and not autobiography. Maybe that's me being an idealist" (2019b). In this paper, I have tried to show how Pico tackles homophobia, racism, cultural erasure, and discursive violence through the strategic deployment of a particular kind of incongruous self-deprecating humor that invites all sorts of readers to deconstruct themselves and their own groups in the hopes to build communities that reach beyond one's own circles, offering relatability to some, reflection to others, and tons of joy and freedom for everyone. Against all odds, he just manages to put all that together. LOL.

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