

## Laughing in the Dark: Weird Survivance in the Works of Bunky Echo-Hawk and Daniel McCoy Jr.<sup>1</sup>

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“We are locked in darkness with wicked words. ...

Listen, ha ha ha haaaa.”

Gerald Vizenor, *Bearheart: The Heirship Chronicles* [1978; 1990], vii-viii

### 1 And the Trickster Keeps Shifting: Introduction

In *The Trickster Shift* (1999) Canadian scholar Allan J. Ryan created a comprehensive framework to conceptualize humour and irony in North American Indigenous art. In dialog with Indigenous artists and writers, art historians, actors, scholars, and elders, Ryan identified the many layers of “a distinct comic and communal attitude ... that can be legitimately labelled ‘Native humour’” (xii): “Emerging from these conversations was the conviction on my part that there was indeed a sensibility, a spirit, at work and at play in the practice of many of the artists, grounded in a fundamentally comic world view and embodied in the traditional Native North American trickster” (xii). Drawing on Anishinaabe artist Carl Beam’s comment on a “trickster shift” (3) in Indigenous art—a transformation of the tricky character from oral stories into contemporary artistic practice—Ryan shows that trickster humour ranges from subtle to biting and bitterly ironic. In their works, artists such as Beam, Gerald McMaster (Cree), James Luna (Luiseño), Edward Poitras (Métis), Shelley Niro (Kanien’kehá:ka), and Lawrence Paul Yuxweluptun (Coast Salish/Okanagan descent) humorously subvert stereotypical representations of Natives, which engages viewers in the long overdue conversations about misconceptions of Native realities. Even though the term is not mentioned in *The Trickster Shift*, the humorous elements Ryan discusses effect *survivance*, Gerald Vizenor’s (Anishinaabe) now well-known neologism for active Native survival through creative resistance, humour, and irony.

Two decades after the publication of *The Trickster Shift*, subversive humour continues to be a significant component of the works of many Native artists who draw on new and different material—from new media to different pop cultural elements—thus widening the representational range of trickster humour in the visual arts. This paper is concerned with the

humorous effect of outrageous and grotesque elements in the works of Bunky Echo-Hawk (Yakama/Pawnee) and Daniel McCoy Jr. (Potawatomi/Muscogee Creek). Echo-Hawk’s *Gas Masks as Medicine* series or McCoy’s *Insulin Holocaust* (2011) seem to offer pessimistic visions of the end of our worlds in toxic waste. However, rather than proclaiming total catastrophe and the futility of resistance, these paintings effect *weird survivance*—a term that I will explain in this article—through dark humour. Ryan’s 1999 work already hints at a link between survivance and disturbing, non-cathartic representations of violence, war, depression, illness, and death: in *The Trickster Shift*, Ryan reads the “black humour” (98) of Native artists such as McMaster or Poitras as strategic resistance to their representational disenfranchisement, arguing that elements which are both disturbing and funny serve “not so much to *undercut* seriousness ... but to *intensify* it graphically” (98). Turning to *weird survivance* means acknowledging this link and thus explicitly including the more macabre pieces of Native art in the Vizenorian paradigm of survivance: McCoy’s and Echo-Hawk’s art effects survivance through dark humour without mitigating the horrors of reality.

## 2 The Art of the Inescapable: Pushing for Weird Survivance

Gerald Vizenor introduced the term *survivance* as part of a terminology that has come to be known as “Vizenorese” (Blaeser 71). As the term for creative resistance through trickster humour, survivance is both the core and the effect of Vizenorese. However, Vizenor’s use of the term is more complex than that. With reference to postmodern theory in general and Jacques Derrida’s poststructuralist semiotics in particular, Vizenor suggests that survivance is the transformational experience effected by *trickster discourse*, a narrative strategy that draws on postmodern collage, Native storytelling, and humour and irony to reveal the colonial stereotype of the *indian* as a simulation, an empty, colonial sign without referent (‘essence’/‘meaning’/‘truth’) in reality. Like Derrida’s *différance*, survivance oscillates between the fixed meanings of its constituents (‘survival’ and ‘resistance’). It plays on both while ultimately signifying neither entirely. Vizenor explains that *survivance* means “an active sense of presence” (Vizenor, “Aesthetics,” 1) of Native voices in the absence of traceable, that is, textual, evidence which removes both storyteller/writer and readers/audiences into a textual universe in which meaning can never be absolute and the representation of Native people is always already defunct, or incomplete. The reader, then, perceives the world as constantly shifting. *Survivance* ultimately defies clear definition: “The shadows of tribal memories are the active silence, trace, and *différance* in the literature of

survivance” (*Manifest* 71). Vizenor’s terminology echoes a postmodern suspicion with the idea of authenticity, while refusing to discard the possibility of culturally-specific representation.

An element of violence is innate in the mechanics of survivance. After all, as Derrida has frequently suggested, shifting the gaze to the level of textual/visual signifiers always involves the idea of dangerous movement and violent erasure. As Derrida states in *Writing and Difference*, “Death strolls between letters” (*Writing* 87). Once meaning is perceived as constantly shifting, rather than fixed, readers and viewers are thrown into a world of insecurity. Nevertheless, violence on the level of representation seems incompatible with the spirit of survivance: gruesome, vulgar, and inexplicable elements are usually neglected in discussions of the term even though the stories Vizenor has referred to as “the literature of survivance” (*Manifest* 63)—featuring, for instance, Vizenor’s own works—contain disturbing elements, such as graphic scenes of violence. Vizenor’s debut novel *Darkness in Saint Louis: Bearheart* (1978) serves as a case in point: the titular ‘darkness’ can be associated with the different characters’ violent experiences which are intermixed with scenes of “wild humor” (Owens 247).<sup>2</sup>

Drawing on Vizenor’s notion that “[s]ome upsetting is necessary” (Coltelli 172), Louis Owens (Cherokee/Choctaw descent) consequently identifies “surprise, shock, outrage” (248) as major elements of Vizenor’s trickster spirit (248): “Whether in traditional mythology or Vizenor’s fiction, the trickster challenges us in profoundly disturbing ways to reimagine moment by moment the world we inhabit” (248). Nevertheless, academic discussions rarely focus on this core aspect of survivance. Scholarly contributions frequently reproduce the commonly accepted notion that survivance consists in the subversion of tragedy and victimhood through a humorous and positive story about Native presence. Vizenor himself, in “The Aesthetics of Survivance: Literary Theory and Practice,” the core essay of the 2008 collection *Survivance: Narratives of Native Presence*, seems to have moved away from the notion of survivance as something that is itself hollow and can never give essence—a play on shadows and simulations that dissolves static and clichéd representations of Native people in wild laughter. Instead, Vizenor stresses the spirit of resistance, a belief in democratic values, and positive animal metaphors. *Survivance*, then, is an ever-shifting concept that has become a household term in Indigenous studies and returning to its margins might be worthwhile—to the dark alleys of Native humour and bizarre scenes of resistance in Native painting for

which the term *survivance* as it is commonly understood in current academic discourse might seem, at a first glance, entirely inappropriate.

Survivance works, among other aspects, through what Ryan termed the “varying strengths” (Ryan 168) of “toxic humour” (168)—“a form of humour based on toxicity” (Farmer qtd. in Ryan 168), meaning that “[y]ou have to laugh because there is nothing else to do but laugh at [the situation] in order to face the reality of it, in order to get past it” (Farmer qtd. in Ryan 168). As various scholars have pointed out, laughter at the grotesque and the bizarre is an integral part of humour’s subversive and liberating effect. Blake Hobby, for instance, stresses that darkness in general is a key element of comedy: “All humor involves negations, absurdities, and dark truths about our lives, including our inability to defeat death and the conflicted way we cope with this darkest of all dark realities” (57). This darkness finds expression in the “dry, sardonic wit” (Ryan 267) of Native artwork addressing war and genocide. Métis artist Jim Logan, for instance, calls the joke in his piece *Unreasonable History* (1992) on Natives in World War II “sadistic” (qtd. in Ryan 254), a “relief of anger, I guess, frustration” (254). Logan discusses the fantastic scene in his painting that depicts the violent conquest of Rome by a Native American army: “Ah, it wasn’t even a joke ... to kill somebody is sick ... but [it’s] the thought behind it. If you lighten anything up in these times of trauma and despair, then you laugh about stuff like that because it’s reflecting on the reality of the situation” (qtd. in Ryan 254). The laughter, then, does not result from the sight of a gruesome image or idea, but from the artist’s “bizarre, off-the-wall sense of humour” (qtd. in Ryan 267) that is “a little strange to live with,” to adapt Maxine Bedyne’s words to our purpose here (qtd. in Ryan 267). While Native humour has been described as “a positive, compassionate act of survival” (Vizenor qtd. in Ryan 4), the comic worldview of an Indigenous-centred universe nevertheless subsumes horrible realities that must be confronted, understood, and even processed in the communal spirit of creative resistance and dark laughter.

The *OED* does not know the term *dark humour*, but defines “black humour” as “[c]omedy, satire, etc., that presents tragic, distressing, or morbid situations in humorous terms; humour that is ironic, cynical, or dry; gallows humour.” *Merriam-Webster* defines “black humor” as “humor marked by the use of usually morbid, ironic, grotesquely comic episodes.” According to these dictionary definitions the comic might be said to *subsume* the tragic; black or dark humour emerges as a product of the artistic arrangement of gruesome elements. It is the ‘thought behind it’ that makes representations of illness, death, or violence

appear humorous: while the gruesome elements alone would not provoke laughter, it is the artistic arrangement that does.

In order to acknowledge that survivance can involve dark humour and bleak imagery one might consider worthwhile the introduction of a new term that directs the scholarly gaze to the artistic handling of the grotesque and bizarre elements. During the 2016 International Conference for the Fantastic in the Arts (ICFA) roundtable discussion on survivance, Stina Attebery suggested the term *weird survivance* as descriptor for Yakama/Pawnee artist Bunky Echo-Hawk's *Gas Masks as Medicine* series. Echo-Hawk's scenes might at first strike viewers as bizarre: they feature people and animals wearing gas masks in neon-colored landscapes. Positive animal metaphors are a core feature of Vizenorian survivance, which is why some might consider it a definitional leap to locate Echo-Hawk's representations within this tradition. His animals appear unsettling: the blue and neon-green horses in such paintings as *Tribal Law* (2003) or *In the Pursuit of Justice* (2010) can be understood as metaphors for a poisoned environment. The qualifier 'positive' is therefore not what first comes to mind when faced with their empty eyesockets and irradiated hair. Some of Daniel McCoy Jr.'s (Potawatomi/Muscogee Creek) paintings might similarly be called disturbing, from the very titles such as *Insulin Holocaust* to the artistic compositions constituted by a wild melee of images, from skulls and whiskey bottles to internal organs.

Echo-Hawk's and McCoy's works challenge fixed expectations about Native people and Native art through a mode that might be termed *weird survivance*. This mode includes, for instance, the artists' use of the grotesque, meaning, their integration of "figures that may distort the natural into absurdity, ugliness, or caricature," and which appear unpleasant or frightening ("grotesque"). Echo-Hawk's and McCoy's compositions furthermore integrate elements of the absurd ("abandoning logical form" [Baldick 1] to express a human perception of the universe as chaotic and life as futile), and the uncanny (a depiction of quasi-human or quasi-animal figures that causes unease, repulsion, or fear). With the help of these techniques, the artists create bleak images, giving a face to such dark realities as environmental catastrophe, the toxicity of Western societies, human diseases, and the lingering persistence of human crimes like corruption, murder, and rape. Some of their artworks might outrage viewers and make them sick to their stomachs.

Considering Echo-Hawk's and McCoy's artworks in the context of weird survivance means acknowledging the importance of shock—the 'upsetting' Vizenor suggested in *Winged Words*—as well as the fact that a confrontation with dark realities might not immediately be

deemed positive and liberating by all viewers. *Weird survivance* asks viewers to accept the strangeness, complexity, and surrealism of the portrayed scenes: in the works of Echo-Hawk and McCoy Jr., for instance, their symbolism cannot be entirely deciphered but might ultimately be understood as an expression of an inherent weirdness in the viewers’ own world.<sup>3</sup> The artists thereby raise awareness for political issues—such as Native and human rights—and impending threats to individuals and society, from diabetes to climate change.

*Weird survivance* describes a mechanics of the grotesque, surreal, outrageous, and darkly humorous in Indigenous visual art that renounces what Vizenor terms *tragic wisdom*, a firm belief in the allegedly innate victimhood and backwardness of Native cultures. The discomfort these images cause in their viewers can provoke dark laughter. *Weird survivance*, then, is to be taken with a grain of salt: the technical term blends a feeling of strangeness and unease with the Vizenorian paradigm of survivance; it speaks to the recognition that, as an artistic technique affirming Native presence and cultural resurgence, survivance can become a little weird. In other words, it can become impolite, unexpected, or even disgusting—as in Jeff Barnaby’s (Mi’gMaq) short film *The Colony* (2007), where a man severs his leg with a chainsaw; in Stephen Graham Jones’s (Blackfeet descent) novel *The Fast Red Road: A Plainsong* (2000), where the Native protagonist participates in the hilarious/horrifying rape scenes of an underground porn film that re-enacts the history of colonization; or in Wendy Red Star’s (Crow) photograph *The Last Thanks* (2006), where a group of plastic skeletons with colourful paper headdresses participate in a bizarre Thanksgiving meal alongside the artist, a darkly comic scene that addresses mainstream culture’s perverted fascination with Native death. The art of weird survivance makes viewers question what they perceive as weird and why, thus drawing their attention to the inherent weirdness—the unnaturalness—of a colonial world. It highlights affective responses to a reality that is always slightly off, from joyful mirth to the darkness of an oppressed mood and the hollow emptiness of depression. In the following analyses, I will single out dark humour as a distinctive trait of weird survivance and thereby highlight the mechanics of outrage, puzzlement, disgust, resistance, and renewal in the works of Bunky Echo-Hawk and Daniel McCoy Jr.

### **3 Laughing in the Dark: Toxicity and Healing in the Works of Bunky Echo-Hawk**

The humour in Bunky Echo-Hawk’s acrylic-on-canvas paintings ranges from cutting to subtle and dark, the latter especially in stark contrast to the bright colors, the blue, purple, neon pink, yellow, and green, that have been described as “blocks of blinding color” (Froyd).

*Down and Out* (2011) shows a Native man decorated with eagle feathers and sporting a mohawk who is resting his head in his palm and holding a sign that says “HOMELESS VETERAN NEED RIDE TO INDIAN TERRITORY.” *If Yoda Was an Indian He’d Be Chief* (2004) features the character Yoda from the *Star Wars* franchise universe wearing a headdress, gaze lost in the starry sky. Echo-Hawk’s most famous piece entitled *Triple Threat* (2011) shows an athlete with a firm grip on his basketball, eyes narrowed in determination and ready to dribble, pass, or shoot.<sup>4</sup> These pieces comment on aspects of contemporary Native North American lives. As Echo-Hawk says in his artist’s statement, “It is my goal to truly exemplify the current state of Native America through art” (bunkeyehawk.com). The bright colors of the compositions break with realism: *Triple Threat* and *If Yoda Was an Indian*, for instance, appear as dreamscapes. The vibrant reds and blues of such works as *Down and Out* or *War-whooping with Cope’s* (2013) are reminiscent of 1950s and 1960s advertising—colors also familiar from Pop Art—and in stark contrast to the subject-matter alluded to in the images, such as poverty, homelessness, and mindless consumerism. Echo-Hawk’s compositions criticize the commodification of Indigeneity while celebrating aspects of Indigenous popular culture, from Cope’s Dried Sweet Corn to *Star Wars*, basketball, and name-brand sneakers. As Olena McLaughlin puts it, “By merging American pop culture with Native experiences,” such artists as “Echo-Hawk and [Steven Paul] Judd encourage their audiences to reconsider Native American history and position Indigenous peoples as active participants in the present. . . . In the process of subversion, images of popular culture the artists use become props for Native discourse” (31).

Bunky Echo-Hawk is an Oklahoma-based artist whose work has been called Native Pop and Hip Hop. He attended the Institute of American Indian Arts in Santa Fe, New Mexico, and works as an artist, writer, photographer, and art instructor. His works have been showcased in exhibitions across the United States as well as overseas. Echo-Hawk has also done murals, skateboards, clothing, and digital collages. He cofounded NVision, a nonprofit organization for Native artists “who focus on Native American youth empowerment through multimedia arts” (bunkeyehawk.com). In interviews, Echo-Hawk frequently stresses the importance of activism to dispel oppressive myths about Native people for the sake of creating better futures. Echo-Hawk is a member of the Confederated Tribes and Bands of the Yakama Nation and a traditional singer and dancer for the Pawnee Nation of Oklahoma (bunkeyehawk.com). Curator Alaka Wali stresses that Echo-Hawk draws on his traditional

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heritage but “speaks in a contemporary idiom”: “Look at the skateboards. Look at the Nike shoes. . . . Indians are not about the past. They’re about the present and the future.”

Echo-Hawk has stated that he first and foremost addresses Native audiences, stressing that he creates art “for the advancement of our people” (“Bunky Echo Hawk”): “I live for our youth. I live for our future. . . . I live to be a voice. I live to see, in my lifetime, change for the better. I live for proactive action. This is how I’m living. How are you living?” (“Bunky,” *beatnation.org*). Echo-Hawk’s notion of ‘proactive action’, which can be defined as “taking the initiative and anticipating events or problems, rather than just reacting to them after they have occurred” (“proactive,” OED Online), is reminiscent of survivance, a key aspect in Echo-Hawk’s activist art. In fact, with Echo-Hawk’s work, the Vizenorian “traces of tribal survivance” (*Manifest* 63)—the presence of real Native people beyond their representation in the artwork—is literalized: during artistic performances, Echo-Hawk takes his audience’s questions while painting and thus engages them in the process. Art is thus defined as a community-based event rather than a pastime of elites. The artwork itself is unburdened from having to mimetically represent Native cultures as proof of their enduring existence.

Echo-Hawk has stressed the “positive message” (“Bunky Echo Hawk”) in his paintings which might strike viewers as odd considering his representations of poisoned environments and neon green skin that glows toxically. However, a subtle and dark humour pervades Echo-Hawk’s compositions that overrides tragedy without downplaying environmental catastrophe, neocolonial oppression, and tribal corruption. His *Gas Masks as Medicine* series effects weird survivance through the dark humour of portraying Native warriors as survivors in a poisoned environment. The figures look eerie: their facial features are hidden behind gas masks that appear as blends of protective technology and futuristic devices that have become a part of the wearers’ bodies. In *In the Pursuit of Justice* (2010) that shows a rider on a horse, the horse’s face looks like it has melted into the gas mask, its muzzle grotesquely warped into the filter cartridge canister, and its eyes eerily widened into black holes. The painting appears in monochromatic green. The gas mask might be interpreted as a signifier for the toxicity in the horse’s and rider’s environment that makes visible through artistic means the pollution extant beyond the canvas in the viewer’s own world.

The bright green and neon yellow in Echo-Hawk’s paintings of gas masks are not symbolic of a vibrant nature, but of radioactivity via analogy with pop culture representations of radioluminescence, such as Homer Simpson’s glowing, poison-green fuel rod from the

opening segment of the TV show *The Simpsons*. In *Pursuit*, then, the toxicity is everywhere, seeping through clothes and skin and consuming every other shade of color. The existence of horse and rider within this hostile environment creates a complex image of resistance and complicity. Represented in a position of power, high up on his horse and complete with suit and tie, the rider seems fluent in the language of the corporations responsible for the corrupted environment, while simultaneously equipped with the knowledge—and the technology—to resist and survive.

In the language of Echo-Hawk's paintings, signifiers of Indigeneity such as headdresses, eagle feathers, mohawks, Native patterns, and ceremonial objects denote a Native warrior status—Echo-Hawk's 'modern warriors' in our poisoned, postapocalyptic world.<sup>5</sup> As Wali explains, "Bunky Echo-Hawk sees himself as a modern warrior, following in the tradition of Pawnee warriors. Although he's not a fighter ... with a military weapon, he sees himself as fighting for the dignity and well-being of his people" (WBEZ). As the rhetoric of modern warfare suggests, under Echo-Hawk's brush, the canvas itself becomes a weapon—surely a symbolism that should be approached with caution—to provoke and outrage. Echo-Hawk's paintings envision a path of determined, if not violent, resistance against colonial oppression; nevertheless, they capture the complexity of Indigenous and non-Indigenous relationships that cannot be reduced to binary positions such as colonizer/colonized or victim/perpetrator.

The prevalent irony in *Pursuit* is that of an unexpected form of Indigenous survival, not only rejecting the still widespread stereotype of Native backwardness, but representing the gas masks as *Indigenous* technology. The signifiers of radioactivity and toxicity may cause 'harsh laughter': yes, the painting tells a story of active survival, but to what end when the world is no longer livable? Echo-Hawk's image of horse and rider in a poisoned landscape is reminiscent of Lawrence Paul Yuxweluptun's representations of chemical fallout as Dalíesque melting tribal symbols in *Native Winter Snow* (1987) (273) and Bob Boyer's (Métis/Cree) ironic depiction of acid rain as pretty droplets of color in *Let the Acid Queen Rain: The White Goop Devours All* (1985) (274). "Toxic humour doesn't get much stronger or more literal than this," Ryan states about Yuxweluptun's and Boyer's work in *The Trickster Shift*. The same might be said about Echo-Hawk's uncanny warrior and eerie horse in *Pursuit*, or his representation of a toddler wearing a gas mask in *Inheriting the Legacy* (2004). With these images, Echo-Hawk draws attention to environmental catastrophe, locating the reasons in neocolonial capitalist politics, while hinting at the possibility of

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change through resistance. The modern warrior in *Prosecution Rests* (n.d.) carries a briefcase: the painting shows a lawyer who has suited up for court, the gas mask on his face symbolizing both toxicity and the wearer’s resistance to it. The eerie blue horse outfitted with a poison-green gas mask in *Tribal Law* (2003) appears immobile in a toxic landscape. It seems to be watching the spectator, which rounds off the unsettling scene. One might imagine Echo-Hawk’s blue horse to be both an ironic take on the movement and energy of Pop Chalee’s (Taos Pueblo) *The Blue Horse* (1945) or Franz Marc’s *Large Blue Horses* (1911), as well as a continuation of their natural beauty in a toxic future. While Echo-Hawk’s representations reveal the effect of human pollution on the natural world, his paintings nevertheless imagine the endurance of animals.

As the series title suggests, the gas masks signify healing—good medicine. The term might be understood as referring to the effect of the paintings on their viewers. The unsettling depictions of enduring survival effect weird survivance: the viewers laugh darkly about the fact that in our chemically poisoned world, humanity as a whole has become the endangered species physically unfit for survival that the Western world believed Indigenous people to be. The bizarre figures in Echo-Hawk’s paintings, then, both estrange and empower. The neon-colored Natives outfitted with radiation protection gloves and gas masks are metaphors of environmental pollution. However, their transformation on canvas into strange warriors in an irradiated landscape also gives hope for an enduring existence into the future through creative resurgence. As Echo-Hawk explains, “I get inspired and motivated to do my art from injustice in Indian Country. There are a great number of atrocities that our people faced ... throughout the past five hundred years and my fuel for my art comes from how those atrocities affect us today as Americans, ... as Native Americans” (“Bunky Echo Hawk”). Echo-Hawk’s paintings juxtapose the reality of these atrocities with the possibility to overcome. As Echo-Hawk notes about his struggle to represent Fetal Alcohol Spectrum Disorder in illustrations for the American Indian Science and Engineering Society, “it was really hard to stomach, for me to even try to draw it—so what I ended up doing was trying to draw something that was more empowering” (WBEZ). These words might be applied to his *Gas Masks as Medicine* series as well. Gas masks and neon colors as weird survivance constitute a form of empowerment through dark laughter that spites death and disappearance while refusing to mitigate the horrors of our everyday world. Echo-Hawk thus works to upset viewers and hopefully startle them into action, on the one hand acknowledging the toxic

futures in stock for subsequent generations, on the other hand refusing to give up without a fight.

#### **4 Low-Rez Rock 'n' Roll: Humour and Weirdness in Daniel McCoy Jr.'s Native**

##### **Lowbrow**

Weird survivance takes the form of vivid color and a relentless flood of images—rendered in acrylic on canvas and pen-and-ink on paper—in the works of Potawatomi and Muscogee Creek artist Daniel McCoy Jr. In his paintings and drawings, the darker realities of contemporary Indigenous life in the U.S. combine to create fantastic and strange worlds. McCoy's compositions deal with such themes as alcohol and drug abuse, illness, loneliness, the damages done by consumerism, and the psychological distress of living in a colonial society. In *The Letter*, a 2011 collaboration with Topaz Jones (Shoshone/Lummi/Kalapuya/Molalla), scenes of “angst and heartbreak” (Meredith) unfold around a large, human heart that looks as if it had just been extracted from a body: the aorta is still attached to the organ and dripping with blood. *Andrew Jackson Meets Voltron* (2009) shows General Andrew Jackson facing the superhero from the 1984 animated series *Voltron, Defender of the Universe*, a revisionist take on Indian Removal and the U.S. American genocide of Native people. As McCoy notes in his artist's statement, “I paint so I can leave an imprint of my existence. I enjoy the process immensely. I re-create past triumphs, current disasters, as well as inspiring stories in my works. My interest in exposing truth on my past, spirituality, and dreamtime recollections has taken form in the work lately” (McCoy).

Daniel McCoy Jr. is a Santa Fe-based artist whose work has been featured in various art shows across the U.S. and won major awards, including best painting at the Santa Fe Winter Indian Market (SWAIA) in 2011 for *The Indian Taco Made by God*. McCoy graduated from the Institute of American Indian Arts in Santa Fe, New Mexico. He is a member of the Potawatomi Nation. For his art, he draws on a variety of styles, from Native American Flatstyle art—discernible in his highly detailed, colorful scenes that fuse traditional patterns with contemporary themes and artistic styles—to album covers and underground comic books. The influence of the latter is visible on the levels of content (provocative themes like sex, drugs, etc.), representation (comic style, use of speech/thought bubbles etc.), as well as technique (the delicate ink patterns that provide shape and depth to McCoy's drawings, reminiscent of the ink work of Keno Don Rosa or Ed Roth). McCoy is a fan of H.P. Lovecraft's stories and grew up with science fiction, but he credits his father, Daniel

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McCoy Sr., with being the biggest source of inspiration, saying that “he was [an] automotive pin striper and a very good artist in his own right. I owe my talent to him, he introduced the airbrush, H.R. Giger, and Frank Frazetta to me as a child. My other favorite artists include Robert Williams, Joan Hill, Rick Griffin, Woody Crumbo, Johnny Tiger Jr., Jerome Tiger, Robert Crumb, Jack Kirby, and recently Arik Roper and Jus Oborn. I was heavily influenced by Heavy Metal and Rock Music from the 70’s and early 80’s, in particular the darker themed music. I hope to work for an artist one day still, possibly find some great band that needs great art for their albums” (personal communication, 29 Jan. 2016).<sup>6</sup>

McCoy’s works are rich in detail and color, the arrangement of image on top of image reminiscent of Lowbrow, an underground art movement also known as Pop Surrealism that emerged out of 1950s and ’60s counter cultures such as the punk, rock ’n’ roll, and hot rod scenes. Lowbrow artists like Robert Williams set out to upset preconceived notions about art with their vulgar and grotesque paintings. Like Williams, McCoy both engages and unsettles the viewer through a sheer flood of visual stimuli. McCoy’s style has been called *Low-Rez*, a term popularized with the exhibition *Low-Rez: Native American Lowbrow* (2012, Santa Fe, NM), and which featured McCoy’s works alongside Native artists such as Ryan Singer (Diné), April Holder (Sac and Fox/Wichita/Tonkawa) and Chris Pappan (Kaw/Osage/Cheyenne River Sioux).<sup>7</sup>

“Beneath the thin crust of conformity that characterized mid-century America lay a bubbling cauldron of weirdness,” Larry Reid remarks about the emergence of Lowbrow. Emphasizing the weirdness—a confusing number of grotesque shapes and their unexpected arrangement—is similarly worthwhile when looking at McCoy’s paintings. In *The Amazing Couch* (2005), a man is lounging on his couch, a bottle of beer in one hand, TV remote in the other. The thought bubble over his head is crammed with gaudy images, such as a bottle of Jägermeister, a melee of buildings, a boy in bed sick and, top centre, a hand pouring beer out of a Coors can right into a funnel that is sticking out of a disembodied liver. The man seems to be enjoying this hodgepodge of personal memories and images seen on TV on his amazing couch—except that he’s clearly dead. His grinning skull and skeletonized hand imply zombification through mass media images. The bizarre difference between the man’s dried-out shell and the vivid images that, even post mortem, keep rushing in on him, provoke ‘harsh laughter,’ a self-conscious chuckle at having one’s own, dark reality represented on canvas.

Like many of McCoy's works, *Couch* could be imagined as a panel from a comic strip, and therefore as an individual scene in an ongoing story. Furthermore, there is always a sense of vulgar satisfaction at breaking the rules and upsetting viewers with macabre scenes. As McCoy says, "I like to get back at enemies, ex-wives, figures in the wrong, and general acts of poor ethics. Without saying a word, I can get my revenge" (personal communication, 29 Jan. 2016). However, he also stresses the importance of balance and healing which he equates with "[m]oving from a square structure with doors to circular structures. Many problems arose when the modern western dwelling was introduced to the Native Americans, alcoholism, secrets, rape, and abuse came with what happened behind closed doors" (personal communication, 29 Jan. 2016). Different from hedonistic pleasure or iconoclasm for the sake of chaos, McCoy's works effect decolonization through weird survivance. Anger and outrage at colonial cruelty and ongoing grievances are outbalanced by the urgent wish for change. Painting (in) a Native-centred world transforms Lowbrow. The wild rush of images not only unsettles viewers but also educates them about their realities and hopefully startles them into action.

McCoy's particular set of influences, then, is discernible in a dark form of humour, a visual language of dry wit and biting irony in which he is fluent, and which is informed by historical, political, and social issues. For instance, the grotesque red figures of two naked people, a man and a woman, in *Insulin Holocaust* (2011) might incite laughter that becomes stuck in the viewer's throat once the painting's dark theme is recognized. The figures' mouths are screwed open around the ends of a giant hot dog that connects their expressionless faces. The woman seems to be pregnant. The couple is surrounded by images of junk food and cheerful cartoon faces, uniformly colored in shades of blue and grey. A cake is folded into the space between their bellies, a large burger covering up the lower parts of their bodies. A giant syringe can be seen floating into the picture from the top left; a skull in the top centre crowns the composition, red sparks glowing in its dark sockets. McCoy's painting perfectly visualizes the relentless agony of diabetes suggested by the title. The word *holocaust* moreover hints that the introduction of junk food might be understood as a systematic crime against humanity—an apt signifier although its borrowing and estrangement from historical and religious contexts might upset viewers and cause them to recoil.

McCoy sees the overwhelming presence of injured bodies in Native societies—from rape and alcoholism to health conditions like obesity and diabetes—as yet another facet of colonization: "With flour and processed foods came diabetes and weight troubles. ... History

repeats itself indeed” (personal communication, 29 Jan. 2016). By translating this horror into art, McCoy’s representations confront viewers with the strangeness of their own reality, with their own complicity even, and thereby undermine viewers’ attempts to distance themselves from the subject-matter. *The Indian Taco Made By God* (2011) features outstretched arms reaching for a piece of frybread, another ironic comment on consumerism in Native America. As America Meredith points out, “underneath the dazzling colors and masterful graphic strokes lies [sic.] questions. Why does Indian Country fetishize a food so unhealthy, born of poverty and privation? Nostalgia for comfort food is a running theme in McCoy’s work—Frito pies, Spam, commodities—but we are what we eat.”

Similar to *Couch* and *Holocaust*, weird survivance in *Taco* is created through the depiction of dark realities in McCoy’s very own visual language. The Indigenous-centred narratives he imagines on canvas clearly speak of the horrors of history and the often incomprehensible cruelty and stupidity of human conduct in general. However, the sheer pleasure of exploring the details of the paintings invariably engage the viewer, from the masterful brushwork, bright colors, and the odd internal organ, to what Meredith calls “McCoy’s flair for visual puns”—she mentions “the clouds [that] resemble bubbles in hot lard” in *Taco*—that make for “a clever joke.”

With McCoy’s paintings, viewers have to make an effort to reassemble fragments of a narrative on their own terms. Unlike McCoy’s characters that often appear as passive victims in a chaotic world, viewers are moved into a position of power. McCoy’s impertinent narratives surprise and shock; the problems Native people in North America face on a daily basis are loud and inescapable. However, McCoy’s art also provokes laughter that empowers because it is incompatible with the wish to wallow in self-pity. Instead, it makes viewers aware of their own trickster streak, not only their capacity for wickedness, but also for resilience. That dark chuckle, then, constitutes the first step toward acknowledging, facing, and tackling larger problems. It moreover signals an acceptance to be teased, criticized, and called to action—a positive feeling and rush of energy necessary to face the darker realities of our world.

## 5 Chance Connections and Black Humour

In his *Anthology of Black Humor* (‘l’Anthologie de l’humour noir,’ 1966) French Surrealist writer André Breton sounds exceedingly Vizenorian when he introduces the concept of black humour as “[c]hance encounter, involuntary recall, direct quotation?” (xxiii): “To take part in

the black tournament of humor, one must in fact have weathered many eliminations. Black humor ... is the mortal enemy of sentimentality” (xix). As Mark Polizzotti points out, Breton assembled his infamous anthology in the wake of the Second World War and included, alongside artists and writers such as Rimbaud, Swift, Picasso, and Dalí, five German-speaking authors, suggesting that while the horrors of war make carefree jest impossible, there is a dire need for communal ‘harsh laughter’ at the ironies of history and the cruelty of human nature, a transformative chuckle that empowers because it is a sign of resistance (Polizzotti viii–ix). Breton urged quick publication of the book in 1940 (Polizzotti viii–ix), noting that “[i]t seems to me this book would have a considerable *tonic* value” (qtd. in Polizzotti ix; italics original).

Dark humour is a defining element of the mechanics of weird survivance in the works of Bunky Echo-Hawk and Daniel McCoy Jr., and it similarly engages the viewers of the artwork in communal ‘harsh laughter’ at perverted food culture and environmental catastrophe. Grotesque or uncanny figures command our gaze for the weirdness in our everyday lives, for what is off, unhealthy, or simply ironic. The empowering element and sense of resistance reside exactly in the fact that while producing humorous images the artists nevertheless succeed in conveying the horrors of colonial history, environmental pollution, illness, and depression. Drawing on a multitude of influences, Echo-Hawk and McCoy surprise and even outrage their viewers, a necessary “upsetting” (Vizenor in Coltelli 172) that precedes all change. Resisting sentimentality and victimhood, the *Gas Masks as Medicine* series and works such as *Insulin Holocaust* depict Natives at the centre of their own worlds and stories, in a position of power despite injury, and of responsibility for the world for the sake of future generations.

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### Notes

<sup>1</sup> I am indebted to Stina Attebery for providing feedback while I was developing this article, and for giving me permission to use her phrase *weird survivance*. I take full responsibility for my definition and suggested use of the term. The title of this essay borrows from, and suggests the influence of, Mark Polizzotti’s introduction to André Breton’s *Anthology of Black Humor* (1966; 1996) entitled “Laughter in the Dark.”

<sup>2</sup> This work was re-issued in 1990 under a new title—*Bearheart: The Heirship Chronicles*—that would be more memorable to readers since it emphasized “one strong word” (Vizenor in Vizenor/Lee 95).

<sup>3</sup> The *weird* in *weird survivance* might therefore be understood in analogy to the notion of *weirdness* in New Weird Fiction. This umbrella term groups together fantastic literary works that engage in mapping out worlds as unsettling and mysterious (i.e. weird) as the readers’ own realities. In his much-quoted definition, U.S.-American author Jeff VanderMeer defines

the *New Weird* as having “a visceral, in-the-moment quality that often uses elements of surreal or transgressive horror for its tone, style, and effects” (xvi); furthermore, “New Weird fictions are acutely aware of the modern world, even if in disguise, but not always overtly political. As part of this awareness of the modern world, New Weird relies for its visionary power on a ‘surrender to the weird’ that isn’t, for example, hermetically sealed in a haunted house on the moors or in a cave in Antarctica” (xvi). The term has been used to describe the fantastic and bizarre elements in the fiction of such authors as China Miéville, M. John Harrison, and Michael Moorcock.

<sup>4</sup> *Triple Threat* is part of the series *Skin Ball* dedicated to Native athletes and was reproduced on t-shirts and sneakers for the Nike *N7* series.

<sup>5</sup> For a more detailed discussion of Echo-Hawk’s use of Pawnee regalia and pan-Indigenous symbols, see Olena McLaughlin’s insightful article “Native Pop: Bunky Echo-Hawk and Steven Paul Judd Subvert *Star Wars*” (2017) in *Transmotion* 3.2.

<sup>6</sup> For more details on McCoy’s life and art, please refer to Alicia Inez Guzmán’s 2018 interview with the artist in *the/magazine*, at [themagsantafe.com/daniel-mccoy/?fbclid=IwAR2wCcl1SVJ184HskFzQog9Lf0Wn2bqfl-WW1iunnfKKUXysNGD8zOQNnCU](http://themagsantafe.com/daniel-mccoy/?fbclid=IwAR2wCcl1SVJ184HskFzQog9Lf0Wn2bqfl-WW1iunnfKKUXysNGD8zOQNnCU). Some of McCoy’s works can be found on [artslant.com](http://artslant.com).

<sup>7</sup> April Holder’s representation of blood-smeared, mangled Native zombies in *Relics of an Undead Culture* and Chris Pappan’s *Native American Porn Stars* series also make wonderful examples of weird survivance in Native visual art. See also: [chrispappan.com](http://chrispappan.com); April Holder can be found on [artslant.com](http://artslant.com).

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