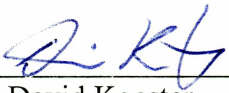


LETTERS AS LITERATURE: SEMANTIC AND DISCURSIVE FEATURES OF  
IRONY IN *LETTERS TO HOWARD*

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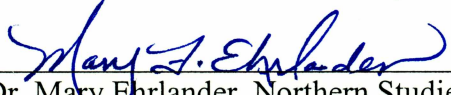
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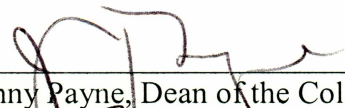
  
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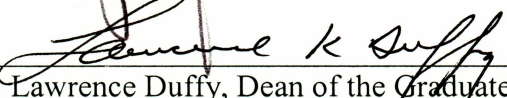
  
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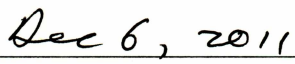
  
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LETTERS AS LITERATURE: SEMANTIC AND DISCURSIVE FEATURES OF  
IRONY IN *LETTERS TO HOWARD*

A  
THESIS

Presented to the Faculty  
of the University of Alaska Fairbanks

in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements  
for the Degree of

MASTER OF ARTS

By  
Corinna Jo Cook, B.A.

Fairbanks, Alaska

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## ABSTRACT

This thesis examines the literary features of the *Letters to Howard*, a series of letters to the editor of the Alaskan newspaper, the *Tundra Times*. Published over the course of several months in 1973, the letters were signed by two semi-fictional characters: an old Eskimo man, Naugga Ciunerput, and a lost VISTA volunteer, Wally Morton, the two lone inhabitants of the imagined Land's End Village, Alaska. Naugga and Wally had a pointed agenda: they were addressing editor Howard Rock and his readership with their concerns regarding the newly-passed Alaska Native Claims Settlement Act, or ANCSA. In truth, Naugga and Wally's letters were written by two graduate students, Fred Bigjim (an Iñupiaq from Nome studying education) and James Ito-Adler (a law student who had switched to anthropology). The use of irony in these letters is the subject of my analysis here; I focus first on the semantic layers of irony and second on its discursive dimensions. This thesis' ultimate goal is to illuminate the ways in which these letters contest history, frame the nature and distribution of power, and examine the myriad tensions at play between Native peoples' historic, cultural, and political ties to the land.

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and Cody, for the colorful abundance of your pen and highlighter marks which blossomed, at one time or another, on the paragraphs of every page herein.

## FOREWORD

The title of the collection, *Letters to Howard*, was published without the definite article. For the sake of formality I have used this wording in the title of my thesis, “...Irony in *Letters to Howard*” (instead of “...Irony in the *Letters to Howard*”). However, omitting the definite article “the” in the body of this thesis’ discussion leads to awkwardness in certain contexts. This is exacerbated by the fact that “*Letters*” is plural. Unwavering loyalty to the wording of the publication’s title yields such grating phrases as, “*Letters* does,” “*Letters* has,” or “*Letters* is,” leading to the discord of sentences like this one: “*Letters* engages the critical faculties of its readers.” In an imperfect effort to resolve this problem, I have opted to use the definite article throughout the body of this work. Outside of section headings and chapter titles, I thus refer to Bigjim and Ito-Adler’s text as “the *Letters to Howard*,” or simply, “the *Letters*.”

## INTRODUCTION

During the spring, summer, and autumn of 1973 a series of letters to the editor signed by two semi-fictional characters was published in Alaska's *Tundra Times*. The letters, all addressed directly to the newspaper editor Howard Rock, were signed by an old Eskimo man, Naugga Ciunerput, and a lost VISTA volunteer, Wally Morton, the two lone inhabitants of the imagined Land's End Village, Alaska. Naugga and Wally took to the pen out of concern for a particularly abstruse piece of legislation which present-day readers may most readily recognize as ANCSA, the Alaska Native Claims Settlement Act. Naugga and Wally never mentioned it by either of these names, though, referring to it consistently as "AN ACT (Public Law 92-203)" and predicting that it would have a dramatic and irreversible impact on all villages and all Natives in the state of Alaska. Naugga and Wally's letters were written by two graduate students at Harvard University, Fred Bigjim (an Iñupiaq from Nome studying education) and James Ito-Adler (a law student who had switched to anthropology). In the year following the letters' appearance in the *Tundra Times*, they were collected and re-published as a book called *Letters to Howard: An Interpretation of the Alaska Native Land Claims* (referred to hereafter as the *Letters*).

There are twenty-four letters in the collection. The earliest is dated March 30, 1973, and the last is from November 26 of the same year. Each letter ranges in length from roughly 350 to 650 words. Most are signed by Naugga; however, two are written in Wally's voice and signed by him.



The content of the *Letters* is three-fold: (1) the *Letters* communicate what is in AN ACT, (2) they explore the implications of AN ACT, and (3) they judge those implications. The central purpose of this thesis is to consider the role of literary features in the *Letters*' accomplishment of these three things.

Here is an early example, the second of Naugga and Wally's letters to appear in the *Tundra Times*.

Land's End Village

State of Alaska

April 10, 1973

Dear Howard:

The mail plane finally got through last week, so I am able to get out another letter to you about the problems I am having with the Secretary's plan, AN ACT, about us Alaska Natives. With the help of my friend Wally Morton, the ex-VISTA volunteer, I was able to fill out the Native Enrollment Form in time, so I guess that qualifies me as a Native of Alaska.

A wry humor finds its place in the letter almost immediately. Naugga's is an ironic humor, the substance of which takes shape between his seemingly straight-forward delivery and the light sarcasm a reader cannot help but infer. His voice is earnest but here, as elsewhere, his meaning cuts two ways.

Within this brief beginning, Naugga takes his stance as an outsider (at least regarding present politics) and a critic, and Wally is set up as the resident expert on bureaucratic paperwork. Wally's role here tacitly raises two problems: his dependability is (1) not available or accessible to all Alaska Natives—an unknown proportion are certain to need help properly filling out what is likely one of the federal government's characteristically convoluted forms; and (2) absurd in its centrality to the question at hand, which is that of Naugga's being recognized as a Native Alaskan.

In other words, within its first two sentences, this letter sets the scene and sketches its characters: Wally has a non-Native background and is conversant if not fluent in bureaucratic ways, Naugga is stubbornly critical of the new legislation and grudgingly endeavoring to stay on top of the changes it is bringing about, and this unlikely pair are living in a place where letters are posted when weather permits the mail plane to fly.

Already, we see the resistance expressed in the *Letters* unfolding on multiple levels. On the surface, Naugga has explicitly set out to discuss problems brought on by the legislation. Expressing the same in counterpoint, the irony of Wally's much-appreciated involvement with Naugga's enrollment as a Native stands as a second layer in the critique of the process. And traces of the concrete reality of village life—witnessed here in the mention of weather—insist on the primacy of life as it is and conditions as they stand, reminding us that the paper reality of a government decree clashes with practical realities and is, at most, in a constant state of negotiation with life on the ground.

Naugga goes on in this letter to describe a particular section of the enrollment form in greater detail:

One of the things that I had to do was fill out a Family Tree which is probably so the Secretary can see if it really has Native Roots. It made me sad to do this, because it took me back to the times when we were younger and we saw so many of our friends and relatives dying during the time of Sickness. Wally is too young to remember those times when the outsiders brought their sickness and diseases to our villages. Though it makes me sad, it also makes me remember how the survivors opened their hearts and homes to adopt the children who were left without parents. We all knew our responsibility to each other in those times. I wonder how this will appear in the family trees that the Secretary is collecting? Can he build a Native Forest out of these paper trees which are taken to represent our lives?

The problem underlying the narrative is that Naugga has to prove his Nativeness. We see two clashing modes of discourse here. By one logic, Nativeness is a practical question resolved by a genealogical exercise. But this logic is incoherent in the discourse of a people's still tangible history of destruction. Naugga gives voice to this latter mode of discourse: one thought leads to another and he is soon in the realm of memory and reflection. This passage's simplicity gives clear voice to a profound grief. This more

serious emotional turn makes for a link to the truth, to the substance of being Native as it is embodied in the colonial history of the people. The problem of proving Nativeness is transformed from being something of a demeaning inconvenience to a tragedy. In addition to the historical tragedy, tragic consequences also inhere in the potential to ultimately fail in representing the self. The format of this representation, government forms, guarantees its unidimensionality, as well as the ensuing anticipation that judgment will be harsh against what is so thinly and simplistically represented. A thematic concern with arbitrariness thus becomes evident between the lines of Naugga's questions. The tragedy is that Naugga's Nativeness makes him human, but proving his Nativeness strips him of this depth and leaves him all the more vulnerable to powerful, yet arbitrary, decisions.

But the letter does not evoke self-pity. Its tone takes a pragmatic turn:

As Wally was helping me, I began to realize that many of my relatives would not be able to fill out these Native Enrollment Forms without help. They are very difficult to understand even if you speak some English. I see my friend Wally complaining that he needs a Legalese Dictionary to translate the Bureaucratic English in AN ACT which explains all the rules and reasons for these forms. Just imagine the problems of a poor old man like myself and you will see why I worry about those who did not have help before the deadline. Did they become Lost Natives after March 30, 1973, as far as AN ACT is concerned? I guess two years is a long time to

some people, but out here in the villages it is a short time in a way of life that has been going on for as long as anyone knows. Wally says that the Secretary refused to extend the enrollment deadline for even 30 days. Did he really think that the month of April was so important to his plans when he made this plan two years ago?

This section offers explicit judgment on the process of enrollment: the bureaucratization of Native heritage is rhetorically revealed as a logistical quagmire. Here, the sentence-level posing of questions, ironic self-deprecation, and the practice of deflecting authority (rather than claiming it) come together as the unlikely platform for Naugga's position. I call this platform unlikely only because his message is not tentative or wavering, nor is it veiled. On the contrary, his judgment of enrollment regulations is bold, critical, and quite evident. The three devices of questioning, self-deprecation, and the deflection of authority all seem essentially self-undermining, but their combined effect is much the opposite. Here I consider each device individually.

Naugga ascribes authority to Wally in much the same way that sources are cited in scholarly writing. This has two immediate effects. The first is corroborative: the reader is less inclined to be skeptical of a writer's claims if those claims are also made/supported/accepted by others—Naugga's overall authority is thus reinforced by his deferral to Wally on the specific point of the Secretary's refusal to extend the enrollment deadline. The second effect is more complex, raising more questions than it answers. If we understand his deflection as a self-marginalizing device, does this imply self-pity on

Naugga's part? Or does his yielding to Wally's authority carry ironic undertones, implicitly drawing critical attention to race relations, power, and privilege?

Naugga's use of self-deprecation in this letter raises related questions. He describes himself as "a poor old man," implying that he occupies a status lower than either Wally's, the complex U.S. government's, or both. But this hierarchical positioning carries an ironic edge. It is as if Naugga is holding his hands up to show his innocence, yet he is not shy in pointedly criticizing ANCSA's enrollment process in the remainder of the letter. Thus, self-deprecation paradoxically collides with a critique that, in aggregate, reads as confidently outspoken. We can take the paradox as a signal that calls on the reader to mentally invert Naugga's meaning—to understand that the opposite of what he says may well have a place among his intended meanings.

Naugga's self-deprecation is therefore not functioning here as intentionally marginalizing: when understood ironically, it is rather a move toward humanizing the particular problem of the complexity of the enrollment procedure and revealing the insensitivity of the paper bureaucracy to people's real ties. Consider "a poor old man." In the colonial discourse, this phrase might have straight-forward meaning. But in another discourse the phrase becomes ironic. When we take "a poor old man" to mean its opposite (something like, "a healthy, economically self-sufficient person with a vibrant mind and a proclivity for critical thinking"), then the whole of Naugga's statement—"just imagine the problems of a poor old man like myself and you will see why I worry about those who did not have help before the deadline"—implies that the enrollment deadline is problematic not because deficient people need extra help but because perfectly normal

people throughout the villages of Alaska will encounter problems just like Naugga's. We see a simple phrase simultaneously echoing on two planes in two discourses, recalling the personalized irony of much Native American traditional narrative and contemporary humor. In this way the problem is subtly lodged not with the people but with the bureaucracy.

Finally, we can turn from the deflection of authority and self-deprecation to sentence-level questions. The two questions posed in this section of Naugga's April 10 letter begin to embody the philosophical underpinnings of the social and political critique advanced by the *Letters* as a collected work. The first question ("did they become Lost Natives after March 30, 1973, as far as AN ACT is concerned?") exposes an instance of ambiguity in the legislation. By modeling a mode of critique in their treatment of ANCSA, the *Letters* are functioning as a broader lesson in reading, questioning, and problematizing legal documents at a time when governmental regulations are becoming increasingly more relevant to Native Alaskans' lives. But the questions also lead us closer to the core of that critique, revealing a thematic concern raised throughout the *Letters*. The second question ("did he really think that the month of April was so important to his plans when he made this plan two years ago?") carries similar weight, but as a gesture toward arbitrariness. Both questions in this passage invoke the *Letters*' central abstract concerns. The question form is less confrontational than a declarative allegation. But the questions ride directly on the project's philosophical underpinnings in the problematics of ambiguity and arbitrariness, reinforcing the senses and feelings that give the project its momentum.

The letter continues:

Finally there is one more thing that has been bothering me about Enrollment under AN ACT. What is wrong with all our children and grandchildren who are being born since AN ACT was passed? Are babies born after December 18, 1971, to Natives somehow less Native than those born before this date? On paper they are not Natives as far as AN ACT is concerned. As a family ends when there are no more children to carry on, what happens to a people when they do not claim their descendants? Are we setting brother against brother according to their birth dates?

It is important to pause here for a brief historical note: Congress passed the ANCSA Amendments of 1987 (Public Law 100-241) in early 1988. Among other things, this amendment addressed the “new Natives” issue that Naugga brings up in his letter, that of Natives born after December 18, 1971. This amendment authorized the issuance of additional stock to Natives who missed the official enrollment of eligible shareholders in the ANCSA corporations, and includes those who missed the deadline because they were born subsequently to the enactment of ANCSA. Still, at the time of the *Letters*’ publication, this issue was one of ANCSA’s more troubling elements for those concerned with the long-term implications of the legislation and the generations of people who would live with its effects without having participated in its inception.

Naugga ends his letter with the following:



I am sorry, Howard, for carrying on about these problems because as Wally says—many lawyers must have spent much time and money to settle these questions. But even though this old man may be ignorant he knows who he is without seeing the papers on the Secretary’s desk and he knows who his people are and how to act toward them. Even though Wally says this is all too late, I am comforted by the fact that I am still learning new things every day. It is possible to sleep through the morning but still wake up for the new day.

Your friend,

Naugga Ciunerput

In this final section of the April 10 letter, we see a handful of features already noted. A series of philosophically-weighted questions are posed in the second-to-last paragraph, ironic self-deprecation arises in the letter’s final paragraph, and authority is again attributed to Wally when Naugga apologizes for his complaints (though the apology itself can be understood in layers of ironic self-deprecation or false modesty, suggesting that an ironic edge is probably also present in this deflection of authority).

Perhaps it is Naugga’s likability that merits mention in closing. Signing the letter “your friend” shows Naugga as a personable correspondent, no matter how skeptical he is of the subject matter raised in the letter. This closing puts words to an invitational quality that is unfolding through the tone of the letter as a whole: in befriending the editor to

whom the letter is addressed Naugga is simultaneously attempting the same with his unknown readers, inviting agreement, consideration, and an essential form of empathy. But this does not serve only as a form of recruitment. The personal tone used in the letter precludes a purely political and economic understanding of ANCSA; it folds profoundly human experiences like bereavement and pride, along with psychology, identity, knowledge, place, and history into the issue—and thus foregoes any claim to a solution, a quick fix, or a key compromise. The *Letters*, then, are not a call to action. They are a call to thought, to critical and lucid reflection.

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Accordingly, this thesis considers the literary elements essential to the *Letters*' positioning as a voice of prescience and dissent regarding the outcomes of Alaska's struggle over land claims. The first chapter in the body of this thesis provides a three-part discussion of the historical context surrounding the *Letters to Howard*. It emphasizes the nexus between social issues and resource development issues influencing the legal decisions made during the period of Alaska Native land claims, delineates a brief history of Native American newspapers, and draws from my recent correspondence with Fred Bigjim and James Ito-Adler, the authors of the *Letters*, to shed light on their artistic collaboration. This chapter supplies the background necessary for a socially, politically, and historically informed reading of the *Letters*.

In the second and third chapters of this thesis I turn my attention to a central literary feature operating in the *Letters*, irony. Chapter two parses the various ways in

which irony constructs a multiplicity of meanings. I draw from elements of Linda Hutcheon's theory of irony, applying her ideas to textual examples of irony from the *Letters* and drawing the literary elements of character and voice into consideration as well. The thrust of my effort here is to reconstruct layers of significance as the act of tracing Hutcheon's theory helps to locate meaning between the lines.

Chapter three develops a discursive understanding of irony in the *Letters*. It begins with a discussion of Mikhail Bakhtin's dialogic philosophy, then moves into a consideration of ironic passages in the *Letters*, turning again to Hutcheon's guidance in illuminating these subtleties. Finally, this chapter also considers the *Letters*' participation in public discourse, examining the ways in which the *Letters* contest history and frame the nature and distribution of power.

Ultimately, the dual purpose of this thesis is to consider how literary features contribute to content in the *Letters to Howard*, as well as how these features expand the scope of the *Letters* past content alone, pushing Bigjim and Ito-Adler's work into the realm of art.

## CHAPTER ONE

### **Angles on the Historical and Political Scene Surrounding *Letters to Howard***

This chapter explores the historical and political context in which Bigjim and Ito-Adler wrote the *Letters to Howard*. A history of the Alaska Native land claims appears below, but as historical description is not the central purpose of this thesis, my historical discussion is limited both in scope and depth by time and space. Nevertheless, an understanding of the literary features operating in the *Letters*—not to mention an understanding of their ironic subtleties—demands a basic understanding of the political complexities of the times. Accordingly, the national political climate, the Statehood Act, the discovery of oil, and the fundamentals of ANCSA (the Alaska Native Claims Settlement Act) are all introduced in the opening section of this chapter. Next, I touch on the development of literacy among Alaska Natives and the role of published news in indigenous American history in order to contextualize Bigjim and Ito-Adler's use first of the written word and second of the *Tundra Times*, two essential features of their vehicle of expression. This section exposes the literary importance of the *Letters* in the area of Native Alaskan writing, and provides the foundation for this thesis' approach to the *Letters* as literature. Finally, this chapter's third goal is to shed light on the practical circumstances of the letter writing itself and on the collaboration that occurred between Bigjim and Ito-Adler. To this end, I draw from my personal correspondence with the authors.

## **Alaska Native Land Claims**

### *The Civil Rights Political Climate of the 1960s*

The Civil Rights Act of 1964 embodies the dramatic restructuring of our nation's perspective on the legitimacy of marginalized peoples' demands for social and economic justice. In this climate, political consciousness expanded quickly among a small group of mostly young Alaska Natives, all of whom were influenced by experiences they had outside of Alaska villages, and many of whom were college educated. The ensuing rise in political participation among Alaska Natives thus paralleled that of other disenfranchised populations throughout the country (Mitchell 12).

Yet this is not to say that Alaska Natives had been politically inactive during the decades leading up to the larger Civil Rights movement: far from it. Native Americans had received U.S. citizenship in 1924. But unlike Alaska Natives, Indians in the contiguous forty-eight participated very little in their states' politics during the thirties, forties, and fifties, largely because they were discouraged from doing so. In Utah, for example, the right of reservation Indians to vote was not settled until 1956. Alaska Natives, on the other hand, already had a long tradition of political participation by the time the sixties rolled around: in Alaska, the tradition of voter participation had begun as early as 1916 (Mitchell 12).

Three sudden threats to Native land rights helped spark the dramatic increase in Native political action during the sixties. The Barrow Duck-In of 1960 was a somewhat comedic protest against an international migratory birds treaty that limited the hunting

season. In a show of solidarity for a hunter who was arrested for shooting a duck outside of season, 138 hunters shot ducks and presented themselves to Barrow's federal game warden for arrest (Arnold 95). Hunting rights thus became front-page news, bolstering Natives' concerns over their land rights.

Three years later, Stevens Village filed a protest against the Rampart Dam, a federal project designed to produce electrical power and a recreation area by flooding land occupied by numerous Athabascan villages. The villages of Beaver, Birch Creek, and Canyon Village followed suit, filing claims to the land they used for hunting, fishing, and trapping (Arnold 102-103).

Project Chariot, something of a freakish plan for nuclear experimentation, may rank highest on the list of cathartic events that sparked a sudden increase in Native political action in the sixties. While Natives in Alaska had recently been putting more and more pressure on Congress to give them a clear definition of their aboriginal rights, the Atomic Energy Commission (AEC) had developed plans to explode hydrogen bombs just a few miles from the village of Point Hope, Alaska. In his book on the history of Project Chariot, Dan O'Neill writes with understated equanimity that "the idea was to create an instant deep water harbor at Cape Thompson in northwest Alaska by simultaneously detonating several thermonuclear bombs" (O'Neill 35). In 1958, the AEC requested that the Department of the Interior withdraw 1,600 square miles of federal land adjacent to the village of Point Hope from the public domain, and thus unwittingly confirmed what Native leaders had already come to believe: that without legally specified rights, the nature of their existence within the borders of a global power would remain

precarious at best. Under these circumstances, the statewide movement known as Native Land Claims was born (Mitchell 15).

In fact, it was the chaos surrounding Project Chariot in his Native village of Point Hope that lured Iñupiaq artist Howard Rock<sup>1</sup> into the full immersion in Alaskan politics that marked the final fifteen odd years of his life. After playing a central role in the fight against Project Chariot, Rock became the editor of a newspaper founded to serve Alaska's remote peoples and villages. And Rock's work with the *Tundra Times* occurred in perfect synchronicity with a broader national pattern: the increased cultural and civil rights awareness that blossomed in the 1960s had ushered in a notable expansion in the number of indigenous American newspapers to enter circulation. Indeed, the year 1970 saw more Native newspaper titles established than in any other year (Littlefield Jr. and Parins xix). It was in the midst of this last wave in Native American newspaper development that the *Tundra Times* was established in Fairbanks, Alaska: its first issue appeared in October, 1962.

### ***Implications of the Statehood Act***

Section six of the Statehood Act authorized Alaska to select and be conveyed legal title to over one hundred million acres of federal land in Alaska. Section four of the same act required the new state to “disclaim all right and title to any lands, the right or

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<sup>1</sup> The details of Rock's life are chronicled in Lael Morgan's biography of him, *Art and Eskimo Power: the Life and Times of Alaskan Howard Rock*.

title to which may be held by Indians, Eskimos, or Aleuts,” declaring that such lands would “remain under the absolute jurisdiction and control of the United States until disposed of under its authority” (Mitchell 83). It was a confusing legal situation. Virtually all of Alaska was affected by Native aboriginal title, to which the Organic Act of 1884 did not offer the specific protection it extended to miners and missionaries—but the Organic Act did recognize aboriginal title insofar as it promised continued land use and occupancy to those with aboriginal rights (Arnold 68). In any case, Section four of the Statehood Act seemed to prohibit the state from selecting the federal land that Section six authorized it to select.

Late in 1959, the Tlingit and Haida Indians received a favorable decision from the United States Court of Claims. The decision held that these Native groups had claim to most of Southeast Alaska via aboriginal title before the federal withdrawals. The decision set the stage for Natives across the state to assert similar land claims in court (Case and Voluck, 156). Eventually, they would mobilize to push collectively for a settlement.

Native organizations began pressuring the Secretary of the Interior to halt the state’s land selection until Alaska Natives’ aboriginal claims were settled (Mitchell 88). They also methodically protested the state’s oil leasing program on the grounds that the state’s ownership of the land was still subject to the question of aboriginal title (Mitchell 138). In 1966, the U.S. Secretary of the Interior, Stewart Udall, imposed a “land freeze.” The freeze effectively prevented the transfer of federal land in Alaska to the state, thus



protecting against the possibility that Alaskan acreage would be drained away, leaving the Natives with a land claim but no land to select (Martin n.p.).

### *Understanding Oil*

Although the land freeze was designed to create pressure for a settlement with Alaska Natives, the freeze itself never wielded as much pressure as did the North Slope oil discoveries (Berry 1975 and Martin n.p.). Indeed, it is oil and the money associated with it that provided the motivation necessary for the government to deal with its Natives' land claims. It is thus critical to consider the role of fossil fuels leading up to and during the land claims period.

When he became president in 1953, Dwight Eisenhower ended the government drilling program, making lucrative oil exploration contracts more available to private companies. Three years later, when the Israeli-Egyptian war temporarily closed the Suez Canal—blocking oil tanker traffic, among other things—the managers of British Petroleum became convinced that they needed to find a dependable supply of oil, preferably located in a less politically volatile location than the middle east. British Petroleum thus joined ongoing efforts to explore for oil in Alaska (Mitchell 182).

In 1964, 1965, and 1967, the Alaska Department of Natural Resources held the first three competitive lease sales offering tracts in Prudhoe Bay. Oil was struck in April of 1967—the year immediately following Secretary Udall's land freeze—and oil fever became the newest epidemic to hit Alaska (Mitchell 182). The find was tremendous. It set the scene for a new challenge: that of pipeline construction. Alaska's two most

important political and economic issues thus converged. As Donald Craig Mitchell writes in his highly detailed account of ANCSA's passage, *Take My Land, Take My Life*,

In addition to the design and construction challenges of forging and then laying 800 miles of zinc-coated, four-foot-diameter steel pipe in subzero temperatures, first across tundra underlain by permafrost and then over the 150-mile-wide Brooks mountain range, there was a plethora of potential political pitfalls.

The first and most important was that the pipeline would cross hundreds of miles of federal land—but as a consequence of the land freeze, the BLM had stopped approving applications for right-of-way permits... (Mitchell 183-184)

The crux of the matter, then, was that Alaska was forced to address the issue of aboriginal title to its land if it was to develop its world-class oil resources.

### ***The Essentials of ANCSA***

The version of the Alaska Native Claims Settlement Act that was enacted into law in 1971 was over 27 single-spaced pages long, comingling Indian law, public land law, and corporate law (Mitchell 270). Yet for all its complexity, ANCSA must be understood as a highly specialized piece of legislation. A close study of the federal government's relationship to Alaska Natives, *Alaska Natives and American Laws*, points out that while

American law has historically been applied to Alaska Natives in relation to four distinct areas—land, human services, subsistence rights, and Native government—ANCSA only directly affects one of these areas, that of land (Case and Voluck 16).

While the legislation went through myriad drafts and congressional hearings, it retained a basic three-part structure throughout its iterations. Part one granted each Native village legal title to federal land within and surrounding the village. Part two granted each village ownership of the surface of a number of additional acres. Part three centered on monetary compensation for the extinguishment of their aboriginal title to the federal land they would not receive (Mitchell 143). In its finalized state, ANCSA required village and regional corporations to be conveyed legal title to forty-four million acres of federal land and to be paid \$962.5 million, thus settling the 102-year-old land claims dispute (Mitchell 493).

It is notable that title to the land was to be turned over not to the villages as they already were, but to the villages as they would be organized in corporations (Mitchell 156). At first, introducing the corporate model into Alaska's dealings with Native land struck lawmakers as perposterous because it was so far removed from the U.S.' previous patterns of addressing Indian land issues. But by the congressional hearings of 1968, there was such unanimity on the point of corporations that it was not even mentioned as an issue. More than sixty Native leaders representing every Native organization in Alaska either testified or submitted a statement during the February 1968 hearings, and none raised any objection to the requirement that Alaska Natives organize state-chartered business corporations (Mitchell, 163). As Mitchell puts it, "by the spring of 1971

regional corporations were as sacrosanct a settlement term as forty million acres of land” (426).

Although at present it is both common as well as politically correct to critique the introduction of the corporate model to Native land management, this was not the case during the late sixties while land claims were being negotiated. Nor was it so during the early seventies, when Bigjim and Ito-Adler were writing the *Letters to Howard*. It is particularly notable, then, that Bigjim and Ito-Adler offered such prescient critique of Native corporate land management given that they were steeped in a political climate that featured so little comparable dissent.

The explanation that Mitchell offers in *Take My Land, Take My Life* for the Natives’ widespread agreement with ANCSA’s corporation stipulations centers on the economic trends that had been established during the previous two centuries—centuries during the course of which Alaska Natives had become active participants, both as consumers and laborers, in what Mitchell calls the “white economy” (459). The most culturally transformative technologies to which Alaska Natives had enthusiastically sought access included firearms, outboard motors, snowmachines, and finally, all-terrain vehicles (Mitchell 511). Mitchell explains what myriad others’ opinions, experiences, studies, and reports also support: that while such technologies have reduced the amount of physical labor necessary to support life in Native villages, these improvements have come at a deep psychological cost (527). Decreased self-sufficiency is at the root of this phenomenon.

Nevertheless, as many of the savvier politicians in Congress understood during the land claims negotiations, once the issue of aboriginal rights to land ownership had been settled, Alaska Natives would wish to finance further and improved access to the dominant, material culture by developing whatever marketable natural resources occurred on their lands (Mitchell 460). Indeed, when ANCSA was enacted, giving Alaska Natives a hand in the development of the state's economy, the Native corporate leaders began to pursue natural resources development activities "with an enthusiasm equal to that of the white business members of the Anchorage and Fairbanks Chambers of Commerce" (Mitchell 517). Extensive concrete documentation of this can be found, among other places, in Kathy Durbin's book, *Tongass: Pulp Politics*, a discussion of the various actors involved in logging southeast Alaska. Durbin exposes the voracity, abandon, haste, and lawlessness with which Native corporations razed the old-growth forests on their lands—often to the dismay of their stockholders—in a study that exemplifies the short-sightedness of the resource development mentality so characteristic of the profound human greed embodied in the for-profit corporate model.

By Mitchell's analysis, some critical observations regarding ANCSA's outcomes achieved the status of "fact" roughly a decade after its enactment, during the early 1980s: the first was that it became apparent that most Alaska Natives would have no involvement implementing ANCSA. In other words, most Natives had become shareholders in corporations in which they would never participate at either the managerial or the operational level. And most importantly according to Mitchell, by the eighties it had also become apparent that the legislation's land and monetary

compensation had “done little to alleviate the economic and social problems that are pandemic in Native villages” (Mitchell 504). To reiterate a critical undercurrent of this thesis, what is exceptional about the *Letters to Howard* on a political level is the precision with which its writers make their predictions about ANCSA’s outcomes—outcomes which, as Mitchell points out, were not accepted publicly until a decade had elapsed since the law’s enactment.

The trepidation surrounding ANCSA that is expressed in the *Letters* is mirrored in select other sources, such as Willie Hensley’s explanation to the Senate Committee on Interior and Insular Affairs why village corporations on the North Slope were doomed. Hensley’s warning came just two years subsequently to the publication of the *Letters* in the *Tundra Times*, and emphasized the suddenness and foreignness of the concepts and stipulations made in the legislation, as well as the scarcity of experienced managerial talent in the Native community (Mitchell 519-520). But far from blaming land claims era politicians, Mitchell emphasizes Native accountability and agency in the crafting of ANCSA. He writes,

ANCSA was not, as its most vocal critics ... now charge, a scheme hatched by a malevolent Congress to steal Native land and destroy traditional Native cultures by requiring Alaska Natives to organize corporations. Rather... ANCSA was an unprecedented experiment in Native American economic self-determination that Alaska Natives actively participated in crafting. (541)

The question of Native political involvement versus manipulation will now, however, be put aside in the interest of more closely approaching this thesis' central aim: to shed light on a single yet salient voice of Native dissent that articulated a poignant critique of ANCSA almost immediately after its enactment. Because this voice found its platform in a Native newspaper, my effort at presenting historical context now shifts first to an overview of the introduction and subsequent rise of literacy among Alaska Natives, and then to an examination of the national phenomenon of indigenous periodicals and news organizations.

### **A Brief Overview of the Development of Literacy Among Alaska Natives**

Fred Bigjim's generation was the first to achieve a widespread, more-than-functional literacy. Alaska Natives were first exposed to textual communication by Russian missionaries in the 1820s. In his article on the history of literacy among Alaska Natives, William Schneider explains that the power perceived to be derived from the written word of God fueled and inspired some of the earliest forms of Native literacy ("Writing Within the Tradition" 250). During this time, the bulk of Native writing consisted of bible translations, but also included some manuscripts, correspondence, and diaries (Schneider "Writing Within the Tradition" 248).

With the purchase of Alaska by the United States in 1867, education in Alaskan villages underwent a long period of administrative transfers during which time very little effort was made by the U.S. government to support or invest in an Alaskan school system. Yet many Alaskans acquired what Schneider calls a “functional literacy,” in which “reading and writing were taught as necessary skills, but little encouragement was offered or given to approach writing as a creative activity” (“Writing Within the Tradition” 251). The 1960s, however, saw a florescence of writing by Alaska Natives. Funding was directed at developing literacy among Natives through, for example, the founding of the Alaska Native Language Center in 1972 and the inception of the Foxfire program in 1974. As Schneider explains, writing came to be seen as a tool with which to document and preserve traditions, an interest which was related in large part to developments on a broader, national scale. More specifically, the social upheaval of the 1960s, which involved a movement toward recognizing and celebrating cultural diversity, likely played a role in spurring the use of writing and publishing among Alaska Natives.

As these textual forms of communication spread into Native circles, literacy rose to the fore of modern anthropological interest in Alaska’s indigenous peoples. Phyllis Morrow, for example, considers authoring as a culturally-specific tradition. Here, she questions its cross-cultural translatability: “authoring itself is, and even exists in, a peculiarly Western cultural milieu. Is it then possible for a Native author . . . to create—or represent—a discourse that departs from the conventions and cultural implications of authoring?” (Morrow 31). Morrow’s concern here is that the medium of discourse itself—in this case, writing—may be thoroughly bound up in that discourse’s



assumptions, values, judgments, and general rules of the game. If this is understood as the case, then the medium itself places insuperable constraints on the discourse that can occur within it. A speculative question that I would like to raise in turn, is this: to what extent is it possible for a voice to be heard in a cross-cultural (yet dominantly western) public discourse without use of the written word? The dominant metric of authority and importance is, after all, built on evaluating written sources, not oral ones. Is participation contingent on a degree of cooperation with this convention?

While the question I have posed here falls beyond the scope of this chapter and of this thesis in general, I raise it in part out of respect for Fred Bigjim's decision to participate textually via the *Letters to Howard*. Despite its deep-seated cultural implications, writing may, despite Morrow's concerns, be understood as a tool that Alaska Natives have adapted to their own needs; in the way that Angela Sydney insists that English is a Native language (Cruikshank, *Life Lived Like a Story* 16-17), perhaps in a certain light it is reasonable to understand writing and authoring as a (new) Native cultural practice as well.

### **The Role of Published News in Native Alaskan History**

The basic premise of Daniel Littlefield, Jr. and James W. Parins' guide to American Indian and Alaska Native newspapers is that the historical period of 1925-1970 was one of many rapid, notable changes in the development of Native peoples'

periodicals. While the development of a recognizably Native press did not truly occur until the 1970s, the groundwork for that development occurred in the decades leading up to it (Littlefield Jr. and Parins xi). Old policies and attitudes of missionization and assimilation dominated Native American periodicals in the 1920s and '30s, but a strong movement in the counterculture had begun to oppose such views, arguing instead for rights in areas such as self-government, religion, and civil liberties. Foremost among these was the American Indian Defense Association's publication, *American Indian Life*, which was known for its attacks on the policies of the Office of Indian Affairs (Littlefield Jr. and Parins xii).

By the end of World War II, the political mood had shifted decisively toward severing federal involvement in Native American affairs. The need for a coordinated, informed effort to meet the challenges that this political mood posed—both to individual tribes as well as to Native Americans collectively—thus gained momentum in the late 1940s. The news publications that resulted can be attributed in part to this post-war political climate, but they are also attributable to the increasing urbanization of the Native American population. Mid-century urbanization brought together people from widely diverse backgrounds and fostered a fruitful exchange of ideas about common issues (Littlefield Jr. and Parins xv).

Soon thereafter, the increased cultural and civil rights awareness that blossomed in the 1960s tipped the scales. The American Indian centers developed during this time became the primary sponsors and distributors of urban Indian newsletters, including, just to name a few, Seattle's *Indian Center News* and Denver's *Indian Times* in 1960, San

Francisco's *Indian Center* in 1964, and Milwaukee's *Smog Signals* in 1969 (Littlefield Jr. and Parins xvii). It was in 1962, during the early building of this wave, that the *Tundra Times* was established in Fairbanks. It was accompanied by *Native News* in the same year, *The Trail Blazer* in 1966, and *Arctic Village Echoes* in 1969. This period of rapid indigenous news expansion culminated in 1970, the year that saw more Native newspaper titles established than in any other year, including additional Alaska Native publications such as *Alaska Federation of Natives* and *Sitka ANB News* (Littlefield Jr. and Parins xix-xx). The *Tundra Times* continued to expand in the 1970s, but led a shakier existence after the death of its beloved editor, Howard Rock. Yet even throughout its decline in the 1980s, the *Tundra Times* was agreed to be the strongest independent Native voice in Alaska (Littlefield Jr. and Parins 426-427).

Much of this came from the momentum of Howard Rock and his motley, yet utterly devoted, newspaper staff. Philanthropist Henry Forbes agreed to fund the *Tundra Times* briefly until it became financially stable (Mitchell 34), but ultimately, he would end up underwriting the paper until his death six years later (Morgan 221). Rock, with the full-time help of his friend-become-colleague Tom Snapp, a reporter for the *Fairbanks Daily News-Miner*, scrambled to learn the ropes, launch the paper, and then keep it in print throughout subsequent years (Mitchell 32).

When he found his calling as a newsman, Howard Rock's life had already spanned a great cultural spectrum. He was born in the high arctic and raised in a harsh hunting society. Rock later left Alaska to live a highly cosmopolitan lifestyle, much of it as a commercial artist, for nearly fifty years. When he returned to Alaska in 1961, Rock

found his home village of Point Hope threatened by the experimental plans of the Atomic Energy Commission. Lael Morgan notes in her biography of Rock that when he discovered the nuclear threat his village was facing, “he moved to defend his people and their heritage with extraordinary decisiveness and skill” (Morgan ix). Rock would then spend the rest of his life immersed in Alaskan politics as he became consumed with running the under-financed *Tundra Times* and keeping close tabs on Alaskan politics and other Native issues.

Howard Rock explained the newspaper’s purpose in an editorial that appeared in its first publication:

Long before today there has been a great need for a newspaper for the northern Natives of Alaska. Since civilization has swept into their lives in tide-like earnestness, it has left the Eskimos, Indians, and Aleuts in a bewildering state of indecision and insecurity between the seeming need for assimilation and... the desire to retain some of their culture and traditional way of life. (*Tundra Times*, October 14, 1962, also quoted in Littlefield Jr. and Parins 426)

The central communicative purpose of the *Tundra Times* was tri-fold. It was to provide a medium through which Native organizations could air their views, it was to keep Natives throughout the state informed on shared matters of interest, and it was to publish articles on Arctic culture. The content of the *Tundra Times* reflects all three of its

original purposes. Of particular interest to us here is a recurrent theme relevant to each of these—the clash of cultures. Readers were constantly reminded that “if they adopt the new, they necessarily lose some of the old” (Littlefield Jr. and Parins 426).

### **Political Critics: Fred Bigjim and James Ito-Adler’s Literary Collaboration**

When ANCSA was passed in 1971, Rock hailed it in the *Tundra Times* as “the beginning of a great era for the Native people of Alaska” (*Tundra Times*, December 17, 1971), but expressed certain reservations immediately. While he applauded Native people for navigating the complexities of land claims, Rock warned that the tasks set forth in the legislation would test the strength of Native leadership (Morgan 222).

Howard Rock’s similarly-minded Iñupiaq friend, Fred Seagayuk Bigjim, was a student enrolled in the Harvard Graduate School of Education at this time. Rock and Bigjim had shared a good deal of time together in downtown Fairbanks at Tommy’s Elbow Room (Bigjim, personal communication from September 16, 2011), and now that Bigjim was living in Cambridge, the pair’s focus turned to their shared concern regarding various misconceptions surrounding ANCSA. Bigjim hatched an idea for contributing to the *Tundra Times*. Then he asked his classmate James Ito-Adler, a graduate student in anthropology minoring in law, to help interpret ANCSA’s legal jargon (Ito-Adler, personal communication from May 4, 2011).

The collaboration that eventually ensued resulted in the collection of letters to the editor central to this thesis, the *Letters to Howard*, in which Bigjim and Ito-Adler assume the names and characters of the semi-fictional Naugga Ciunerput and Wally Morton, residents of the fully-fictional Land's End Village, Alaska. As Ito-Adler describes the overall project, "we were gently mocking essentially decent people who might be brought to their better senses" (personal communication, August 14, 2011). This is embodied in the relationship between the two characters. In the *Letters*, Wally is "brought along by Naugga Ciunerput with some gentle Eskimo pedagogy" (Ito-Adler, personal communication, August 14, 2011).

"This was 100% Fred's idea and project," explains Ito-Adler, who had returned to anthropology after spending two years in the Peace Corps, an experience for which he had abandoned his previous studies at Harvard Law School. Ito-Adler emphasizes that Bigjim "supplied the main energy and vision" (personal communication, May 4, 2011) for the *Letters to Howard*, explaining, "I am adamant that [Fred] receive full credit for the inspiration of doing the project and the deep knowledge of Native ways and thinking" (personal communication, May 5, 2011).

In Ito-Adler's memory, the collaboration was a natural one, and he calls the partnership "complementary serendipity" (personal communication, May 4, 2011). "I don't remember a single moment of contention or disagreement between us," he writes. The pair thus agreed to meet once a week to draft a letter in the William James Hall Cafeteria over coffee and donuts. "We would simply meet, go over some section of the legislation that interested us, or Fred would bring in some news ... and we would have at

it” (Ito-Adler, personal communication, May 5, 2011). Ito-Adler further explains his comfort with the project in terms of Bigjim’s fundamental goodwill: “one of the reasons I went along with this was my confidence in Fred and sense of his transparent motivation” (personal communication, May 4, 2011).

While the inception of the *Tundra Times* occurred in tandem with the nation-wide flourishing of Native periodicals and newspapers, Bigjim and Ito-Adler’s letters to the editor—hinging on a mixture of fictionalized elements and poignant political commentary—were written seventy years after their most similar predecessor, Alexander Posey’s Fus Fixico letters, had appeared. The Fus Fixico letters, originally published in a Creek Nation newspaper beginning in 1902, were a literary reaction to the dramatic transformation of the Indian nations of Indian Territory. They mixed a rustic dialect with sly humor, the content of which centered largely on the nexus between the literary tool of characterization and the sociopolitical issue of the shift in land tenure that was then dismantling notions of common ownership in favor of privatization. Much of the humor in the Fus Fixico letters derives from the perspectives of the characters whose views are somewhat aloof and disjointed, distancing them from the events hurtling the Creeks toward a new political order. The letters’ characters are “amazed, amused, puzzled” (Littlefield, Jr. and Hunter 37) by the greed, materialism, political ambition, dishonesty, and hypocrisy of the whites—yet they recognize the complicity of Indians, even themselves, in the process. They are humorously split: proponents of prohibition who drink whenever they can get it, and mocking Indians who take on white ways, yet imagining themselves smoking fancy cigars and walking on plush carpets. For his

authorship of the Fus Fixico letters, Native news scholar Daniel Littlefield considers Alexander Posey one of the best Indian humorists of all time (Littlefield, Jr. and Hunter 47).

Despite the strong parallels in method or template between Bigjim and Ito-Adler's 1973 letters and Alexander Posey's from the turn of the century, the Harvard pair was not familiar with the Fus Fixico letters (Bigjim, personal communication, September 16, 2011). "For me," writes Ito-Adler, "there were no conscious models that we were following" (Ito-Adler, personal communication, May 12, 2011).

Ito-Adler explains that the style which took shape in the *Letters to Howard* evolved quickly as he and Bigjim invented and fleshed out the characters. "To the extent that Naugga rang true as an old Eskimo man, it came from Fred and I suppose I absorbed his spirit when I drafted anything in Naugga's voice," writes Ito-Adler. And "Wally was easy...teaching at Harvard we were surrounded by Wallys—good intentions, somewhat naïve, but willing to learn, just the kind of people I knew in the Peace Corps as well" (Ito-Adler, personal communication, May 12, 2011). The heartfelt, idiosyncratic voices of the characters in the *Letters to Howard*, like that of those in the Fus Fixico letters, are key: characterization and voice are a poignant part of what makes each set of letters articulate as well as socially and politically astute.

When I asked Ito-Adler about influences more immediate than Alexander Posey, that is, the influences both at Harvard and more broadly in the U.S. that were affecting his work with Bigjim on the *Letters to Howard*, he cited Sandy Davis' course, "Native Americans in the Contemporary United States," a social sciences class in which both Ito-



Adler and Bigjim served as teaching fellows. “This was a fabulous course...” writes Ito-Adler. “Sandy Davis was very radical in his commitment to indigenous peoples” (Ito-Adler, personal communication, May 5, 2011), an orientation which fell in direct alignment with Ito-Adler’s.

Second to the mentorship and inspiration provided by Sandy Davis, Ito-Adler also mentions the role of the broader social and academic context in which he and Bigjim wrote the *Letters*:

the seventies brought all the student radical movements into graduate school. ...Marxism and dependency theory...were strongly represented as well as powerful opposition from the senior faculty. ... The bottom line is that being an activist in some form or other was definitely part of the environment but neither Fred nor I by temperament or conviction were as radical as many of our peers. But we were committed to some form of action/activism. Our collaboration was a meeting of the minds and spirits in this regard. (Ito-Adler, personal communication, May 5, 2011)

The pair thus focused their attention on the task at hand, to draft letters to the editor with an ultimately informative and thought-provoking effect. In their introduction to the collected *Letters*, Bigjim and Ito-Adler write, “the letters are a very honest attempt to put down on paper certain questions, problems, feelings, and thoughts that we had about the situation of Native people in Alaska today” (Bigjim and Ito-Adler 5). Ito-Adler

explains further that “this would have been our greatest reward in the short-term: having people react to, discuss, think about, and question what was happening” (personal communication, May 5, 2011).

## CHAPTER TWO

### **Assemblies of Meaning: The Semantics of Irony**

Irony, a literary tool which Bigjim and Ito-Adler wield throughout the *Letters to Howard*, is the central concern of this chapter. Irony is one of the primary modes in which the *Letters*' meaning takes shape between the lines, and so will be considered here largely in light of its complexity and the resulting layers of meaning that take up residence in the text.

My own reflections on the *Letters* are deeply indebted to the discussion and insight in Linda Hutcheon's book, *Irony's Edge*. Hutcheon's central premise is that "the existence of one signifier—'irony'—should never blind us to the plurality of its functions as well as effects" (Hutcheon 44). In other words, irony is a dynamic literary device; it extends over a wide range of "tones, intentions, and effects" (Hutcheon 44). Indeed, I have found the ruminations in her book to be helpful in parsing both the roles and the layers of irony present in the *Letters to Howard*.

Rather than conceiving of irony as a blunt rhetorical tool, Hutcheon holds the position that irony creates layers of meaning in an essentially communicative process. While it is the task of chapter three to unpack the specifically communicative nature of meaning-making in irony, the chapter at hand closely considers the meaning-making itself, discussing the semantic characteristics of irony largely in terms of its provisional, self-deprecatory, and corrective functions (each of which will be further addressed

below). At the forefront of my analysis is the basic assumption that Hutcheon is correct in asserting that “*the power of the unsaid to challenge the said is the defining semantic condition of irony*” (Hutcheon 59, my emphasis). This chapter as well as the final one thus draws heavily from Hutcheon’s work, which forms the bulk of the theoretical lattice in the remainder of my thesis.

### **Markers and Method: Considering the Recognition and Attribution of Irony**

A question that seems to have divided theorists of irony to no end is that of attribution. In short, how does one recognize irony? Is it something the ironist stashes in a text or an utterance, like a prize or a trap? Is it something the audience ascribes to a text or an utterance, something birthed and encompassed in that singular experiential act of interpretation? While questions of attribution and recognition are not ones on which I choose to linger with respect to the *Letters to Howard*, a brief consideration of this particular debate will help to define the scope and limitations of my approach to discussing irony in the *Letters*.

Wayne Booth’s seminal discussion of ironic markers—that is, the various clues which lead to the reconstruction of ironic meaning—includes five basic categories. As Hutcheon explains in *Irony’s Edge* (151), the forms of markers that Booth outlines consist of (1) straightforward hints delivered in the authorial voice; (2) deliberate denial of shared knowledge, or obvious falsification; (3) contradictions internal to the work; (4) stylistic clashes; and (5) conflict between the audience’s belief and that which we attribute to the author. The list’s strength is its scope: it allows for any combination of

text (or utterance), circumstance (surrounding context), and discourse (the intertextual) to be drawn in to a given scheme of the markers flagging a work's irony.

Booth's list leads Hutcheon to the question, "are textual or contextual markers meant to signal the *presence* of irony, the *intent* to be ironic, or maybe simply the possibility that the utterance might be *interpreted as* ironic?" (Hutcheon 150, emphasis in original). I largely bypass this question in my own work, and judge the overlap between presence, intent, and interpretation as too murky to warrant careful distinction. However, I wish to acknowledge this position largely in the interest of full disclosure and transparency regarding my own methodology, informal as it is.

Overall, Hutcheon identifies three theories regarding the marking, or signaling and identifying, of irony. "Intentionalist" theories of irony claim that the ironist leaves guiding clues for her interpreter. "Pragmatic" theories argue that something has to trigger the interpreter's search for meaning beyond the said. "Formalist" theories claim more specifically that markers of irony are textual (Hutcheon 149). It is particularly the formalist perspective that is most closely aligned with my approach to the *Letters to Howard*, although pragmatic elements are also folded in to my approach. That is, I discuss irony as it manifests "on the page," or as it takes shape textually. But where my methodology is also in part aligned with pragmatic theories, a basic understanding of the social, political, and cultural context also informs my interpretations of irony in the *Letters to Howard*. Finally, I suppose I mostly disregard intentionalist theories of irony, taking questions of authorial intent—that is, the issue of the author's deliberate placement of clues meant to guide her interpreter—as moot.

In other words, ironic meaning in the *Letters to Howard*, as I have reconstructed it in the pages to follow, is due almost exclusively to my orientation toward what Booth identifies as the second and third categories of ironic markers: the deliberate falsification of shared knowledge, and contradictions internal to the work.

Booth explains these areas further. “Factual discord” contained in a passage (Booth 61) may arise in areas such as popular expressions, historical facts, and conventional judgment. As Booth explains, when an interpreter discovers a breach of shared knowledge in any one of these areas, and thus interprets the passage as ironic, the irony resides in the interpreter’s guess, assumption, or understanding that the author of the passage does not share her speaker’s ignorance or misunderstanding.

But often this factual discord can be identified within a passage without any recourse to shared knowledge, that is, without departing from the content of the text. In this case, the ironic marker is known as “conflicts of fact within the work” (Booth 61). When a writer reveals a fact and then contradicts it, Booth claims the interpreter has only two possibilities: “either the author has been careless or he has presented us with an inescapable ironic invitation” (61). The essential structure of this form of irony is as follows: “(a) a plausible but false voice is presented; (b) contradictions of this voice are introduced; (c) a correct voice is finally heard, repudiating all or most or some of what the ostensible speaker has said” (Booth 62). Such internal contradictions serve as flags to savvy interpreters, who then must navigate the irony to identify which voice is, in fact “correct.”

This description implies a certain stability of meaning, however, which Booth sees as “fixed, in the sense that once a reconstruction of meaning can be made, the reader is not then invited to undermine it with further demolitions and reconstructions” (6). This notion marks a critical divergence between Booth’s theories, influential as they are, and Hutcheon’s description of the ways in which ironies can and do operate. Considering the discursive, or dialogic element of irony, Hutcheon declares that “it is almost a miracle that irony is ever understood as an ironist might intend it to be: all ironies, in fact, are probably unstable ironies” (Hutcheon 195). The following chapter will take up dialogism and Hutcheon’s notions of the discursive communities that make irony (and deciphering it) possible. But for now, it suffices to say that Booth’s inventory of ironic markers is useful in demarcating the modes of factual discord on which this analysis of irony in the *Letters to Howard* is fastened. However, I hesitate to follow through with Booth’s more formal definitions of ironic structures of meaning—that is, I am not sure that his map of the “correct” voice which emerges in ironic factual discord is as helpful in understanding the dimensions of irony in the *Letters* as is Hutcheon’s perspective on ironic meaning as perpetually unstable, or, as will be discussed later, essentially plural.

### **Understanding Irony’s Edge in *Letters to Howard***

For Hutcheon, irony happens when the said and the “plural unsaid” rub against one another with a “critical edge” (Hutcheon 19). But the said and the unsaid constituting ironic meaning is not to be understood simply as ambiguity. Hutcheon writes that “ambiguity and irony are not the same thing: irony has an edge” (Hutcheon

33). This notion of the edge figures prominently in Hutcheon's understanding of irony; she insists somewhat metronomically that "irony has an edge... irony can put people on edge... irony is decidedly edgy" (Hutcheon 37). Part of my project in this chapter is thus to tease apart the meaning in Hutcheon's notion of the edge. This effort runs parallel to this chapter's central purpose: to explore the role of the ironic edge in the *Letters to Howard*.

For Hutcheon, irony's edge hinges on the notion of plural functions. That is, the meaning lodged in ironic statements involves a perpetual "cutting both ways." Consider the introductory sentence of the first letter to Howard: "Dear Howard: I have been living in this village for many years all alone except for Mr. Wally Morton, who was an old VISTA volunteer who got lost up here in 1970 and never got evacuated" (Bigjim and Ito-Adler 11). I identify this statement as ironic because it involves, as Booth has designated it, a falsification of shared knowledge: VISTA does not typically lose its volunteers in the bush and simply abandon them there, so we must be in the realm of irony. There are also in-text ironies at play, here: the terms "evacuated" and "lost" are ironic overstatements. First, VISTA volunteers do not get evacuated from their assignments. There is an absurd sense of disaster implied by the notion of evacuation. Second, Wally is not really lost; he is in Land's End Village, Alaska. Irony exists both in the vocabulary of the passage as well as outside it, in relation to readers' common knowledge.

Where, then, is the statement's edge? Where does its meaning cut? On one hand the statement's emphasis is on Wally's background—perhaps his presence in the village is haphazard at best; it seems to be the product of confusion, or of crossed lines of



communication. But the statement can also be read as simply inaccurate: its irony may be in its falsity. Either way, we find a split in the mood resulting from the statement: there is something of a dopey atmosphere surrounding Wally's circumstances. But on the other hand, the implications are also somewhat darker. VISTA, known generally as a well-intentioned service organization, is here pegged with a certain incompetency. Its (invented) disregard for its own volunteers suggests that the communities it purports to serve and support are also likely of little importance. The ironic edge cutting two ways thus functions as follows: slyly folded into the dopey accidental nature of Wally's present situation is a harsh skepticism of institutionalized "help" and charitable endeavor. The statement contains both a cartoonish depiction of Wally's character as well as undertones of a highly complex mistrust regarding urban/village and white/Native dynamics.

Furthermore, ironic play has quietly taken up its place in the very names of the two characters we meet in this first letter. As Ito-Adler explains to me, "Wally Morton" is named for Wally Hickel and Rogers Morton, "the two Secretaries of the Interior who were featured so prominently in AN ACT" (personal communication, May 4, 2011), and "Naugga Ciunerput" is Iñupiaq for "our destiny" (the translation of which was confirmed by Bigjim, personal communication, September 16, 2011). Wally's name has its roots in the figures so problematically given control over things such as determining what Native means and who qualifies. Yet, as noted above, the strong leadership is not exactly central to Wally's character traits. Wally's dopiness can thus be read as an ongoing critique leveled directly at the Secretary himself, continually calling into question the Secretary's competence in handling the tasks defined by the new legislation. In contrast, Naugga

Ciunerput, “our destiny,” becomes the clarion call of the future. His name endows him with the power of something much akin to an oracle. But, like classical oracles, Naugga’s identity as such is not immediately apparent: while his insight is unfailingly sharp, over the course of the *Letters* he will prove to be nothing if not self-deprecating, -effacing, and -minimalizing, but in the decades following ANCSA’s enactment, concerns expressed by Naugga in 1973 will have become common currency in Alaskan politics. Ironically, Naugga practices a degree of self-effacement throughout his letters, yet consistently signs the Iñupiaq words for “our destiny” at the bottom.

We do not have to look far to find that a flair of the tricksteresque is evident in Naugga’s irony. Throughout many indigenous cultures, the trickster is both a “benefactor and a buffoon” (Radin 124) and is responsible for the physical and social realities of the present. Arthur Koestler’s notion of “bisociation” is frequently cited in scholars’ efforts to expand views of the trickster figure from an actual character to an impulse or an underlying, unifying structure. Arnold Krupat explains that in bisociation, we see a situation in two incompatible ways. Bisociative thought thus engages the binary mind which hops boundaries between disparate fragments (Krupat 51-52), creating the provocative mental doubling or overlap which Larry Ellis dubs, “the trickster space” (Ellis n.p.). In an interview with Joshua Nelson, Native American writer Sherman Alexie explains how that mental doubling operates via irony: for Alexie, irony, as a nexus of contradictory and plural meanings, gathers the big picture together. Irony thus complicates public discourse, which suffers from a fixation on the soundbite (Nelson 43). Irony’s essential trick, then, is its sneaky infusion of plurality into constrained spaces.

Hutcheon identifies a nine-part continuum of the functions irony serves. I have selected three functions in particular as those which best describe the ironies present in the *Letters to Howard*: the provisional, the self-deprecating, and the corrective. While I have already mentioned Naugga's self-deprecation in passing, the opening letter's statement discussed above probably falls into the first of these categories, the provisional. For Hutcheon, irony always contains "a kind of built-in conditional stipulation that undermines any firm and fixed stand" (Hutcheon 51). This is the seat of the tension between irony's said (overtly stated) meaning, and its unsaid (the amalgam of possible unstated) meanings. As Hutcheon puts it, irony has a "fence-sitting provisionality" (Hutcheon 51), that is, one in which the ironist can address remarks to a recipient who will comprehend those remarks, be known to comprehend them, know that she is known to comprehend them—yet neither party will be able to hold the other responsible for what has been communicated (Hutcheon cites Goffman 1974 for this idea).

When Bigjim and Ito-Adler write (in Naugga's voice), "Dear Howard: I have been living in this village for many years all alone except for Mr. Wally Morton, who was an old VISTA volunteer who got lost up here in 1970 and never got evacuated"—and when a reader deciphers that undercurrent of meaning that covertly hints at a tension between...is it service organizations and those they serve? Or is it a tension between the city and the village? Or more broadly, between whites and Natives—the colonial presence and the indigenous? As we find we cannot pinpoint the ironic edge's precise implication, it becomes impossible to hold the statement directly accountable for this particular realm of its meaning. Yet this is not the product of confusion of

miscommunication. It is the nature of provisional irony: irony which includes, among the clarity of its plural meanings, a persistent evasion. Provisional irony imparts meanings without necessarily owning up to all of them. Attention to the unsaid in ironic statements reveals a provisional dimension in virtually all of the ironies used throughout the *Letters*.

The next example of irony in the *Letters* is not strictly textual—that is, among its most overt meanings, this passage points out an irony of the political situation that Bigjim and Ito-Adler criticize. But a closer look also reveals ironic play on the level of character: Naugga dodges authority while simultaneously voicing a bold position. Ironic contradiction thus takes shape in two modes. Closer to the surface it appears in terms of subject and content (on the plane of politics), and beneath this level irony resides in the passage's voice as veiled self-deprecation.

Wally has been telling me for so long how important it is for us traditional Natives to learn how to use the modern legal political system. This is so we will be able to operate in the dominant White society, as he puts it. Now it says in AN ACT that Natives cannot use any of this money to influence the political system. I asked Wally if White corporations can use their money to influence politics and he admitted that oil companies, for example, maintain big lobbies... (Bigjim and Ito-Adler 21)

This passage is an instance of reported speech. In it, Wally's words and explanations are reported by Naugga. Then the latter's words are, in turn, printed and

carried in the *Tundra Times*. Meaning and the conveying of it thus depends on this chain of reports. Each link in the chain either lends its own interpretation or cachet of presentation to the meaning and the act of communication. This instance of reported speech is one example of many; letters dated March 30, April 17, May 15, and July 15 also illustrate such a deflection of authority<sup>2</sup>. But Naugga's reliance on Wally's knowledge and explanations also works toward setting up a hierarchy between the two characters. Implicit in his constant reporting of Wally's speech and reliance on Wally's point of view is the sense that Naugga is consistently looking up to Wally.

First, consider the ironic content of the passage. What flags the content as an ironic portrayal of the political system? It underscores a contradiction within the system itself—a system that both demands, yet simultaneously blocks, Native participation in the corporate political order—a contradiction which, to paraphrase Booth, gives us the option of brushing it off as a careless mistake, or interpreting it as ironic.

The heart of the irony, as I interpret it, is in the general simplicity and neutrality of the vocabulary. Wally has not been demanding, commanding, or insisting, he has been “telling me ... how important.” And Wally's position is not couched in the severity of survival, it is about being “able to operate.” The language has a calmness to it, stripping the passage of the melodrama or theatrics expected in association with statements of political protest. Naugga's voice is gentle. He brings his meaning into focus by understating it.

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<sup>2</sup> In the latter two examples, Naugga defers not only Wally's knowledge but also to that of Joe Ayagtug, a character who makes a brief appearance in the *Letters*.

The passage's meaning thus cuts into the absurdity of the system, but it also makes a sociocultural comment via attitude. Outrage in the face of injustice is (perhaps paradoxically) widely accepted as reasonable: we see it anywhere from children's tantrums in the aisles of grocery stores to politicians raving over healthcare decisions during congressional hearings. Over-the-top displays of emotion and heavily dramatized rhetoric seem to go hand in hand with the ever-increasingly graphic nature of both news and entertainment media. Next to the culture of often flamboyantly emotive expression, Naugga's even-keeled wording takes on a dimension of meaning all to itself. Here we see some of the "gentle Eskimo pedagogy" Ito-Adler mentioned (see preceding chapter). Naugga calmly raises his objection to the unfairness of the system which will not allow Native corporations to function fully as corporations—a system which is requiring corporate participation in the first place—and while it is not fair that Natives are blocked from full corporate participation in politics, Naugga himself opts out of full emotional participation in injustice. He does not meet the system's severity on its terms, rather maintaining a detached levelheadedness. Political power is said to reside on the side of "the dominant White society" but Naugga's expressive calm simultaneously undermines his own portrayal of the distribution of power, implicitly complicating the view that dominant society defines and monopolizes the framework. Voice and language thus move the passage beyond the absurdity of contradiction in politics into the realm of the ironic edge.

Here it is useful to distinguish between voice and authorial stance. The voice is that of an old Native man reporting a white VISTA volunteer's words. Yet the authorial

stance involves two graduate students collaborating on a critique, with the Native student providing the initial impetus, motivation, and lead on the project. The authorial stance, largely collaborative, contrasts with the sense of status and hierarchy conveyed through Naugga's voice, his use of reported speech, and the resulting power dynamic taking shape between the *Letters*' characters.

We can sharpen our focus on the power of Naugga's voice by turning our attention to self-deprecatory techniques. I notice that ironic self-deprecation in the *Letters* is associated with contradictions internal to the text: that is, in Naugga we encounter a sharp, critical thinker who persists in using diminutive terms like "just" when referring to himself, saying that he is, for instance, "just an old man from a small village" (Bigjim and Ito-Adler 22—examples abound nearly every page). Diminutive terminology is the most explicit form of self-deprecation present in the *Letters*, but two other recurrent stylistic elements have self-deprecating implications as well: (1) questioning, and (2) the deflection of authority.

The first of these, questioning, occurs in nearly every letter. For example, regarding the lobbying limitations imposed on Native corporations Naugga writes, "if this is supposed to be a *fair* and *just* settlement of the Alaska Native Claims why is our use of the money restricted by AN ACT?" (Bigjim and Ito-Adler 21, emphasis in original). The question is clearly rhetorical, standing in for the direct statement that restrictions on Native corporations' use of money is unfair and unjust. In a later letter which also questions the significance of fairness and justice, Naugga discusses the creation of parks, refuges, and sanctuaries. He asks, "how then can this be a 'fair and just' settlement if that

land was taken from us without our knowledge and is not going to be included in the selection process? What will become of the villages in these areas? Who is this wildlife being reserved for?” (Bigjim and Ito-Adler 30). While I am not inclined to read Naugga’s questions as individually self-deprecating, their frequency has a net effect beyond that of any particular example. In other words, Naugga’s style, which is heavily reliant upon questioning, is non-combative. He often opts for a question over a direct statement of opinion, and frequently softens his direct statements by interspersing them with questions, ultimately allowing him to stake out a very clear, unpopular stand without coming across as belligerent or inflated with superiority. By asking questions, Naugga remains approachable. And approachability, in the fiery, volatile context of Alaska’s land claims era, may well be taken as a close cousin of self-deprecation.

In tandem with Naugga’s diminutive language and question-posing, I next consider the deflection of authority. This which often takes the form of an informal citation, or a gesture of deference to outside knowledge (most often Wally’s). This can be seen in one of the later letters that recalls the Secretary of the Interior’s power as the final arbiter in questions of who does and does not qualify as Native. Naugga writes, “Wally says that an agreement with all of the discretionary power on one side is a pretty one-sided agreement” (Bigjim and Ito-Adler 88). Here, it is opinion that is communicated by Naugga—but through Wally’s presumed authority. And in the following example, Naugga draws on factual information which he cites informally, rather than declaring it as his own, or even as public, knowledge: “Wally says that the



Federal Government terminated the Menominee tribe in Wisconsin by bargaining with them over a claims settlement that they had been awarded” (Bigjim and Ito-Adler 92).

Naugga’s persistent deflection of authority recalls norms of indirect address commonly found among traditional indigenous Alaskan groups. While indirect address is not self-deprecatory in the least, the formula “Wally says” operates as a form of self-deprecation in part because Wally is the last one to whom authority probably should be ascribed, at least in any earnest way. As we have seen from the *Letters*’ opening, Wally does not seem to be stunningly competent or an expert in anything in particular—he is an ex-VISTA volunteer so we can infer that he has a certain zeal for participating in positive change, but given that he is stranded in Land’s End Village and given up as lost, we must assume that Wally does more drifting through life than actively controlling it. Deferring both factual claims as well as positional or value-based claims is a mildly self-deprecating act in the first place, but deferring these claims to mild-mannered Wally’s authority signals a particularly deep humbleness on Naugga’s part. The implications of reading such a humbleness as ironic will be considered shortly.

Hutcheon treats self-deprecation as a form of irony whose function is ultimately defensive or protective. She discusses ironic uses of self-deprecation in terms of its Canadian use in the face of a historic French and British colonialism and a U.S.-dominated present, but her inventory of implications is intentionally broad enough to be useful in considering other examples—like those in the *Letters to Howard*—as well:

Canadians have often resorted to a self-deprecating use of irony as a way of signaling their reluctant modesty, their self-positioning (as marginalized and maybe self-marginalizing), their self-doubts, and perhaps even their rejection of the need to presume or to assume superiority—especially against such overwhelming odds. ...self-deprecation can be feigned [Hutcheon cites Knox 1989]; it can be a form of indirect self-promotion ... a deliberate attempt to render oneself invulnerable. So, self-deprecation can be read as a defensive move, as well. (Hutcheon 50)

In the *Letters*, I read Naugga's self-deprecation neither as much of a tool of defense nor as a form of indirect self-promotion. Instead, I read it as containing various shades of what Hutcheon calls "self-positioning" embedded in a deep cultural and trans-cultural awareness. The self-deprecatory techniques I have identified in the *Letters*—diminutive language, questioning, and the deflection of authority—play on the marginalized nature of Native villagers' political voices. On one level, Naugga's self-deprecation is both an acknowledgment and a refusal: by downplaying his own importance he first acknowledges his voice as a marginalized one, that is, as one that does not hold any notable political sway. But on a second level, Naugga is simultaneously refusing to pose as more powerful or authoritatively influential than he is. In other words, he does not pretend to have any particular degree of political sway, choosing instead to emphasize the opposite. That is, Naugga is neither pursuing power nor even the semblance or cachet of power (that is, as it typically manifests)—his use of

self-deprecation is thus not only an accurate reflection of his marginalized position, it is also a distinctly self-marginalizing device. Naugga's consistent and recurrent use of self-deprecation is a wry gesture. He accepts, and even advertises, his own political poverty and thus implicitly calls into question the very meaning, and ultimately the value, of corresponding forms of wealth. Naugga has orchestrated a reversal: insofar as his self-marginalizing calls the nature of political authority into question, Naugga has taken the reins of power in this conversation for himself.

But if we understand Naugga's self-deprecation as ironic, we must remain sensitive to the plurality of its meanings. First, self-deprecation is an instance of self-positioning, meaning that Naugga is both marginalized by the terms of the political system, but he is also willfully self-marginalized, that is, marginalized on his own terms. Second, Naugga's use of self-deprecation also serves to suggest a level of absurdity in the distribution of political power. Here we find the sharpness of the ironic edge: Naugga's self-deprecatory tendencies are juxtaposed with the lucidity of his insight. He undermines the declarative authority of his own voice through tone and word choice, but he remains a consistently sharp thinker whose clear, articulate questions are always one step ahead of the convoluted answers suggested by the text of the legislation. In other words, Naugga makes sense, and shows us where An Act does not. His use of self-deprecation marks an ironic inversion of the correspondence between power and coherence.

It may be helpful at this juncture to recall the distinction between authorial stance and voice, or character. Naugga's self-deprecation, read as an appropriation of power, is

closely aligned with the authorial stance of the *Letters*: it is a direct reflection of Bigjim and Ito-Adler's sense of social justice. The appropriation of power is not as closely tied to voice in the *Letters*. Ultimately, this reading of self-deprecation is more relevant to understanding the authors' standpoint than it is in fleshing out the character of Naugga and his positioning in the *Letters*' narrative.

The third broad function of irony that takes shape in the *Letters to Howard* (alongside its provisional and self-deprecating functions) is, as Hutcheon calls it, corrective. In cases where irony functions correctively, we find it being used generally “as a means of ridiculing—and implicitly correcting—the vices and follies of humankind,” although this is not necessarily to be understood as an exclusively contemptuous gesture, for Hutcheon notes a “very wide tonal range” within the corrective function, “from the playfully teasing to the scornful and disdainful” (Hutcheon 52-53).

The examples of irony drawn from the *Letters to Howard* thus far all contain a corrective dimension. Examples of self-deprecation include a corrective element insofar as they challenge both urban and white arrogance, as well as modern-time superiority or condescension toward villagers, Natives, and old-fashioned traditions by presenting discerning, cutting-edge political commentary in the voice of an old, rural Native man, Naugga. Recall that Naugga ironically belittles himself while simultaneously writing quite articulately about a highly complex legal situation and its associated tangle of political, social, and cultural ramifications. The effect of this irony, understood in its corrective dimension, is to flag a common conceptual error: that of bias. Systematic, institutionalized, and otherwise widely-held viewpoints that dismiss rural Native

engagement in modern politics are problematized by Naugga's ironic self-deprecation, which deals a fatal blow to the credibility of such bias.

I find compelling examples of corrective ironies in the letters dated April 10, April 26, May 10, May 15, and July 23. In the interest of concreteness, I will consider the May 10 example here in order to reconstruct its specific corrective function. After the questions Naugga poses about land consecrated to parks, refuges, and sanctuaries, he writes, "Wally says that maybe we Natives should apply to the Federal Government for protection as an 'endangered species' " (Bigjim and Ito-Adler 30). The falsification of shared knowledge signals this statement's irony; that is, we know that the term "endangered species" refers to something quite external to humans and human culture. It refers to terribly constrained, waning populations of animals, or perhaps of plants and lichens, but not to ourselves, not to people—even if we admit that there do exist terribly constrained, waning populations of certain kinds of people. The statement's edge cuts into social notions of "us" and "them," at once playing on the marginalization of Natives by exaggerating it into a full-blown taxonomical divide, while simultaneously grieving for the implications of this divide (as Nativeness becomes subsumed by dominant society, it draws fearfully close to extinction).

I read this statement as tonally closer to playful than to disdainful, but it is a wry playfulness that winces at itself and at its proximity to the truth. The statement's corrective function takes the form of a reprimand: by suggesting that Natives apply to the Federal Government to be recognized as an endangered species, Naugga is tacitly giving the government a slap on the wrist for prioritizing some of its land allocations to the

habitat needs of its wildlife rather than to the habitat needs of its indigenous peoples. He is, in all seriousness, indicating the potential for governmental land allocations to have life-threatening consequences for Alaska's indigenous populations.

### **Parting Thoughts**

In conclusion, irony in the *Letters* can be identified based on the way in which common or public knowledge is contradicted in the text, or based on the way that information within the text is twisted or inverted. These markers lead us to identify irony and its edge—that is, meaning that cuts more than one way, serving the provisional, self-deprecatory, or corrective functions. But as we look closely at examples of each of these, parsing our understanding of irony more and more finely, it paradoxically becomes evident that these functions are enmeshed. Aspects of ironic meaning constantly overlap, taking their perpetually shapeshifting forms on top of one another. In other words, self-deprecation is also corrective, and as we locate more and more ironic meaning in that tacit realm between the lines, we see the evasion characteristic of the provisional function consistently taking shape in the shadows of the ironic edge. In conclusion to her examination of irony's plural functions, Hutcheon writes the following paradoxical summation: "irony's edge, then, would seem to ingratiate and to intimidate, to underline and to undermine; it brings people together and drives them apart" (Hutcheon 56). There is thus an implicit tension in the literary usage of irony, as it is a device that involves the constant collusion and collision of meanings, both of which are consistently borne out in the concrete examples of irony in the *Letters to Howard* examined here.

## CHAPTER THREE

### Discursive Dimensions: the Politics of Irony

#### Plural Meaning

As mentioned briefly in the beginning of Chapter Two, Hutcheon conceives of irony not as a rhetorical tool, but as the complex layers of meaning which result from a communicative process. While the task of Chapter Two was to focus on the shapes of that resulting meaning, this present chapter widens the scope of its attention to examine the communicative process itself. Philosopher Mikhail Bakhtin's dialogic philosophy lays the groundwork for a theoretical consideration of communicative processes, and this chapter will draw from analyses of his thinking. The discussion at hand will thus rest on a two-part foundation made up of (1) Bakhtin's ideas concerning dialogism, and (2) Hutcheon's application of discursive concepts to her project of understanding irony.

Bakhtin's dialogism, most simply introduced, frames a theory of knowledge. Scholar Michael Holquist helps further explain this philosophy in his book, *Dialogism: Bakhtin and his World*. Holquist notes that dialogism emerges at a time in history when knowledge is increasingly becoming understood as relative, or positional—that is, as a question of perspective (Holquist 17). Dialogism thus invokes interaction and the exchange of dialogue to explain what knowledge is and can be. In dialogic thinking, meaning is discursive: it comes from the always-evolving relation between self and other.

Teun Van Dijk's introduction to critical discourse analysis helps establish an understanding of the fluidity and necessarily relational aspects of discourse. He writes that critical discourse analysis

sees discourse—language use in speech and writing—as a form of 'social practice'. Describing discourse as social practice implies a dialectical relationship between a particular discursive event and the situation(s), institution(s) and social structure(s) which frame it. ...Discourse is socially *constitutive* as well as socially shaped. ...It is constitutive both in the sense that it helps to sustain and reproduce the social status quo, and in the sense that it contributes to transforming it. (Van Dijk 258, emphasis in original)

The first half of this passage recalls Mikhail Bakhtin's ideas about dialogism, the idea that perspectives in discourse are based on necessarily relational positioning. Van Dijk points out here that discourse occurs between events and their circumstances. And the second half of this passage acknowledges the way in which participation in discourse is necessarily multi-layered: participation reinforces a conversation rather like stoking a fire, but it also constitutes a perpetual reinscribing. With each new participatory move, a discourse is reinscribed into an ever-evolving present, altering it through time.

Making sense of history, the world, or both—that is, the ordering of chaos into patterned meaning—is a profoundly human endeavor. But Bakhtin argues that the price



we pay in so doing is that articulating, which is a form of organizing, and hence categorizing and defining, stultifies the world's variety (Holquist 84). Yet he does not advocate chaos. Bakhtin believes in the human impulse to order the world into coherent schemas. A Bakhtinian ethic emerges here: he supports the body of utterances least destructive to "heteroglossia," or diversity. As Holquist puts it, "heteroglossia is a plurality of relations, not just a cacophony of different voices" (89). In other words, Bakhtin supports "a polyphony of social and discursive voices" (Holquist 69), calling specifically for a non-authoritarian, openly conversational mode of making meaning.

Anthropologist Julie Cruikshank's interpretation of Bakhtin helps us to pinpoint the philosopher's intention: "[Bakhtin] saw what he called the 'dialogic,' relational possibilities of conversational storytelling as a model intrinsically opposing authoritarian speech" (Cruikshank, *Do Glaciers Listen?* 72). Bakhtin was in no position to take authoritarianism lightly; his dialogic philosophy was, in part, a response to the transformations he observed taking place in post-revolutionary Russia during the 1930s (Cruikshank, *Do Glaciers Listen?* 63). Cruikshank's interest in Bakhtin stems from her work on oral narrative—a central concern of Bakhtin's as well. But the *Letters to Howard*, while textual (not oral), are written conversationally—and in any case, as with all texts, they operate dialogically, putting events into conversation with their circumstances, characters into conversation with the times, authors into conversation with their readers, and so on. Bakhtin does, in fact, assign great importance to the discourse that takes shape in literature. He understands literary texts as utterances—communication that cannot be divorced from particular subjects, specific situations, and

relational positioning (Holquist 68). The notion of simultaneity is central here: a text's meaning exists on many levels simultaneously, and all these levels constitute dialogic exchange. At this point, the ethical dimension of dialogism emerges. For Bakhtin, a text is good when it presents dialogues otherwise obscured by dominant discourse, because in so doing, that text expands human consciousness (Holquist 83).

Attention to Bakhtin and his interpreters thus encourages us to examine the discursive qualities of the *Letters to Howard*. And Cruikshank's observation about discourse as a natural opposition to authoritarian speech keys us in to the *Letters'* challenge to authority—that is, the authority of the dominant land claims narrative. Indeed, the *Letters'* unrelenting critique of the political system and its handling of Native Alaskan land claims runs counter to the dominant narrative of the times, which seems to have taken a generally celebratory stance regarding ANCSA (Arnold v, 145-146, and Berry 214). Accordingly, the *Letters* can be understood as a complicating—and thus important—contribution to Alaska's land claims narrative.

Yet the *Letters* do not throw a tantrum. They do stake out an opposition to the dominant narrative, but they do so artfully. They are finely-calibrated to the cultural sensibilities of ancient heritage, to the social sensibilities resulting from contemporary ethnic dynamics, and to the political sensibilities of affluent, capitalist economics. It is, of course, essential to remember that the land claims narrative to which the *Letters* contribute is shaped by a great number of diverse and divergent interests, perspectives, and agendas, and that the Native contribution alone is complex: it is multi-faceted, fractured, and passionate. A discussion tracing the spectrum of all of the voices that

make up the discourse on land claims—or even attention to the full spectrum of Native voices—is beyond the scope of both this chapter and this thesis. Rather, in the interest of maintaining a close alignment with this thesis’ central concern, I will now turn toward a consideration of the literary elements of voice and pacing in the *Letters*, each of which contribute to the unique discursive positioning of Bigjim and Ito-Adler’s work.

### **A Discursive Angle on Voice and Pacing**

First, the *Letters* are written in what is an essentially likeable voice, one that is meant to strike a chord with its readers. Indeed, it is hard not to like Naugga. And because the cadence of this voice is rooted in the patterns and informality of spoken conversation, the *Letters* retain certain features of speech, particularly its potential for social savviness: they raise pointed, problematic questions, but include a healthy dose of self-deprecation, -minimizing, and -mockery. This sets up a relationship with the reader that involves a good deal of trust, rapprochement, and a degree of fondness as well. The *Letters* are thus able to treat contentious and problematic subjects without appearing to be either didactic or condescending. While it is their textual nature that dramatically expands the audience they reach—for this audience is spread thin over an enormous landscape—it is the conversational style of the *Letters* that allows them to tap into various strengths inherent in speech.

Furthermore, because the *Letters* did not, at first, constitute one document but were published over a period of nearly a year, their initial presentation in the *Tundra Times* tapped quite literally into the element of time that characterizes spoken

conversation. The *Letters* are not a tirade: they inform, they think, they worry, they wonder—and they pause. These interludes of silence assume the reader’s participation. And as the *Letters* presently appear in book form, the separateness of each letter is preserved; each has its own chapter. Furthermore, most of the letters/chapters are separated by two- to twelve-page passages quoted from ANCSA. This sectional breaking of the whole text into individual letters is reminiscent of the pausing that spaced each letter’s original publication in the newspaper. Interludes of silence thus remain prominent in the pacing of the *Letters*. And whether these interludes are achieved through a letter-by-letter publication schedule or by hard sectional breaks in the collected *Letters to Howard*, they imply participatory involvement, elevating the silence both of time and of white space to the fore of the *Letters*’ discursive qualities.

The voice and pacing of the *Letters* operate hand in hand. First, consider voice. The success of Naugga’s voice is the result of his characterization. In other words, Naugga resonates with us: he is sharp-witted and articulate, but also modest, as well as grandfatherly and, at times, outright funny. His voice thus draws readers into a sort of friendship with the *Letters*, leveling the discursive playing field. Second, the pace of the *Letters* opens up room for discursive engagement, both assuming and insisting that the dynamic force of participation has a place here. Yet we must not make the mistake of understanding healthy discourse as boundless—in Bakhtinian thinking, the future of discourse is anticipated. It is limited by the discourse of the present. Thus the future, understood dialogically, does not encompass the vastness of infinite possibility—consider this theoretic conversational illustration: what is uttered at any point in conversation

determines what can be coherently uttered in response. Barring non sequiturs, the possible scope of a statement is defined in large part by what it answers and by the path of the conversation leading up to it. In this sense, the future is both (a) what will happen, and (b) how present consciousness conceives of it.

In the letter from July 23<sup>rd</sup>, Naugga is concerned with evolving and eroding definitions of Nativeness. The letter takes a dark turn as Naugga gives voice to the emotional depth of his grievance:

You see what is bothering me, Howard. I have never been a person who has been afraid of progress, even though many times I prefer the traditional ways of our fathers. To me every change must be checked to see if it will be better or worse than what it is to replace. Change is not always progress. AN ACT is bringing many changes to our way of life, and I fear that not all of the them will be helpful for our people. The sad part is that we had a better chance to deal with mechanical things like airplanes and snow machines, than with the changes that this piece of paper, AN ACT, is bringing so quickly to our villages. It is almost like a disease that will pass over us ... and leave no living Natives in its wake. (Bigjim and Ito-Adler 64-65)

Here, the future that Naugga invokes is tragic. But it is the path to that future that is particularly interesting; the limits of Natives' capacity to recalibrate in the face of

change was, by Naugga's lights, tested by the sudden infusion of mechanical inventions in day-to-day existence. Yet ANCSA is changing life so much more quickly than new technologies have that Naugga sees his people's capacity for recalibration as insufficient. Change here takes on tidal proportions, and is portrayed as something that will wash over a way of life with enough speed to destroy it. Naugga sees this future not as potential, but as the product of something that is already in full swing.

This is a view of the future that also has discursive and semantic implications, for the question of whether Natives will or will not weather the tidal wave of change is a function of what defines "Native" in the first place. As Naugga consorts with this dark future in which no living Natives are left, he is implicitly returning to the question of how best to understand "Native" and seems to be suggesting that "corporate shareholder" be nixed from the possible definitions that might emerge. Thus the future—portrayed as hinging upon (or being in conversation with) the present—also plays a discursive role in hashing out current definitions of Nativeness.

### **A Timely Return to Irony**

Hutcheon's understanding of irony is inspired, in part, by these notions of dialogism. She writes,

Ironic meaning comes into being as the consequence of a relationship, a dynamic, performative bringing together of different meaning-makers, but

also of different meanings, first, in order to create something new and ...  
to endow it with the critical edge of judgment. (Hutcheon 58)

In this statement we recognize the basic features of dialogism, that mode of thinking which casts meaning as a product of relationship, as well as Hutcheon's central point of interest, the ironic edge. The role of irony in the *Letters to Howard* will accordingly be considered in the remainder of this chapter specifically in terms of its discursive nature. This will be accomplished by tracing the arc of Hutcheon's argument for a necessarily relational understanding of irony's semantics.

In Hutcheon's discussion, the dialogic nature of irony is exposed and explained specifically in terms of its "inclusive" qualities. The inclusive nature of ironic meaning involves the capacity to hear and understand more than one thing at once. "In interpreting irony," writes Hutcheon, "we can and do oscillate very rapidly between the said and the unsaid. ... ironic meaning is *simultaneously* double (or multiple)" (Hutcheon 60, emphasis in original). Here, invoking its polyphonic property, Hutcheon makes a decisive move toward defining irony: "both the said and the unsaid together make up that third meaning," she writes, "and I want to argue that *this* is what should more accurately be called the 'ironic' meaning" (Hutcheon 60, emphasis in original). With both the said and the unsaid working together (or rubbing against one another) to create something new, this "semantic 'solution' of irony would then hold in suspension the said plus something *other than* and *in addition to* it that remained unsaid" (Hutcheon 61, emphasis

in original; her references include Barthes 1977, Bakhtin 1984, and Herzfeld 1982). This additional meaning is the product of dialogic interaction.

A delicately-constructed example of irony occurs in the letter dated April 26, 1973. In it, Naugga writes to Howard about a young and distant relative of his, Joe Ayagtug, who comes in on the mail plane to visit. Joe, who lives in Anchorage, has recently accepted a job with one of the regional Native corporations. “Ayagtug” means “he went away” in Iñupiaq (Ito-Adler, personal communication, May 5, 2011; confirmed by Bigjim, personal communication, September 16, 2011). The ironic play in this passage begins with the name itself: it is not a western name, and so bears a cachet of Native authenticity. But upon closer inspection (that is, on a semantic level), its meaning implies a breach of loyalty. Surface-level authenticity is paired with betrayal, or at least departure, and Joe Ayagtug’s name thus makes reference to the general and ongoing collision between tradition and modernization.

Because Joe has just accepted a job with one of the regional Native corporations, Wally asks him about the twelve-and-a-half million dollars that AN ACT is supposed to put into the Alaska Native Fund that fiscal year.

Joe Ayagtug said that as far as he knew, each Regional Corporation had received \$500,000 so far from the Fund. With 12 Regional Corporations that added up to only \$6,000,000, or one-half of the money that should have been in the fund. Wally said that he would like to have six million



dollars in the bank earning 6% interest for a few months which sort of made Joe wonder what was going on. (Bigjim and Ito-Adler 21)

This anecdote shows a Native leader who is barely conversant in the functioning of an economic system in which he has agreed to participate. The letter suggests—without blame—that Native corporation leaders have a weak grasp of a system that is new to them. Note that Wally, the ex-VISTA volunteer (whom we assume has only a layperson's understanding of the financial system) almost intuitively understands the time value of money and the process of accruing interest. Read one way, Wally understands that delaying payment is quite lucrative for the Federal Government, while Joe, now a Native leader in the new corporate world, just gets confused. The irony is in the inversion: Wally is an outsider but understands by virtue of his grasp on common knowledge how the system works. Joe, an insider in the corporation, has no frame of reference with which to understand finances.

Interpreted another way, Joe's wondering "what was going on" may be understood not as confusion over Wally's reaction to the finances but as suspicion of the Federal Government. If he is read as understanding Wally's implications his wondering may carry an accusatory dimension.

To come at the dialogic nature of the irony as bluntly as possible, consider the layers of significance in this order: the "said" is that only one-half of the money promised to the Native corporations has been distributed. But this passage also implies that while Joe works for a Native corporation he does not understand basic finances, making up the

first layer of the “unsaid.” The further “unsaid” (here, the hinted) meaning is that the Federal Government is using this gap in Native knowledge to its own financial advantage. Dialogically superimposed the one on the other, they yield an additional meaning: the ironic warning that as Natives are given corporate control, there exists a danger of Native leadership becoming a form of puppeteering. The rub between said and unsaid predicts the problem of Native leaders being reduced to figureheads.

### **Transideological Politics**

Implicit in the dialogic understanding that meaning itself is relational, or that meaning takes shape in the spaces between participants, utterances, or ideas, we encounter this basic assumption: that there are participants, utterances, or ideas, and that their positioning influences the space in which meaning takes shape. The chicken and egg question that intuitively ensues is, does community stake out and create the bounds of discourse, or does discourse stake out and create the bounds of community? Perhaps both forces work together symbiotically, but this is not yet the critical question.

Rather, as we narrow our focus to the issue of irony, the next iteration of the chicken and egg question becomes more pressing: does irony create discursive communities, or vice versa? As Hutcheon puts it, “irony ‘happens’ (and that’s the verb I think best describes the process)” (Hutcheon 5). But if irony is understood as the defining force, it becomes a divider between those who “get” it and those who do not, or between those who ironize and those who are targeted by the irony. In other words, if irony precedes and defines community, then it does so by establishing a hierarchy

separating those included either in understanding the irony or in the ironizing itself, and those excluded, either from understanding it, or because they are its target.

Hutcheon does not ascribe this level of social power to irony. She argues that it is only a literary and semantic tool, and that to the extent that social hierarchies are associated with the use and interpretation of irony, this is due to the norms and *modus operandi* of the discursive community itself (Hutcheon 97). Hutcheon's answer to the chicken and egg question is thus that discursive communities set the scene for irony, making it possible in the first place (Hutcheon 18). In other words, it is the shared language of a particular discursive community that opens the space in which irony's edge can carve out its multiple meanings. When the dimensions of the discursive community itself are understood to precede, and thus define, the ironic possibilities within that discourse, irony is restored to its place as a specifically literary tool—one which we may consider in light of its role in discourse on social justice, but not one which either shuts off or privileges viewpoints in that discourse.

This orientation toward irony as something which does not define social hierarchy (but which can certainly comment on it) is the foundation of what Hutcheon call the “transideological” nature of irony. She writes, “irony can be provocative when its politics are conservative or authoritarian as easily as when its politics are oppositional and subversive” (Hutcheon 15). In other words, irony can be deployed from any and all political sides, and can undercut any of those sides as well. No single political orientation monopolizes irony. “This is part of the transideological nature of irony: people of all political persuasions have been known both to endorse and to condemn its

use” (Hutcheon 46). It is a fine but important line: while irony can be used poignantly toward deeply partisan ends, it is, in itself, an essentially non-partisan tool.

This reference to partisan politics is not accidental. Irony is, in a sense, always political: it is bound up in power and its imbalances. “Irony *explicitly* sets up ... a relationship between ironist and audiences ... that is political in nature” (Hutcheon 17, emphasis in original)—in the sense that notions of hierarchy, subordination, judgment, and morality are invoked by irony. The stakes, in other words, are high.

Hutcheon distinguishes between a negative irony and a positive one. The ironist who stands outside the system, thus ironizing not the system but its product, assumes the powerful position of an external viewpoint which is not itself susceptible to the ironic edge. This is irony that tends to exclude and finalize (“negative” irony, in Hutcheon’s eyes). But “by contrast, the more constructive or ‘appropriative’ function of irony would target the *system* itself, of which the ironist was also a part” (Hutcheon 17, emphasis in original). For Hutcheon, irony that targets a system in which it is in some way complicit broadly relativizes and relates (“positive” irony).

These ideas are reminiscent of Joseph Boskin’s ideas about political humor in general. The thrust of Boskin’s analysis is that the forms of power subjected to humorous and comedic scrutiny and skepticism in America are quite limited. He writes, “levity has been permitted only to the extent that it does not undermine the essential political structure or undercut its symbolic representation” (475). It is the political individual who is kept in the crosshairs of political joking. The defective character of the corrupt politician may be mocked mercilessly, but the system through which such a character was

voted into power is typically not addressed. Boskin also notes that there is a distinct absence of humor surrounding the corporate world, leading him to ask, “does unquestionable immense power prevent such humorous intrusion...?” (Boskin 479). His final conclusion is that the theory of an open society has been undermined by a political and economic system so sanctified that humor is barred from addressing it. And given America’s infatuation with the individual, it is natural that its humor should reveal an obsession with character—although this very obsession is what exposes the deficiency of American humor as a tool with which to confront and critique politics and economics at a systemic or institutional level.

The *Letters to Howard* certainly fit into the American vein of character-based humor. Yet they run utterly contrary to Boskin’s observations about the bounds brought to bear on comedic scrutiny. While not all humor is ironic<sup>3</sup>, and not all irony is humorous, there can be notable overlap between the two—and the *Letters* do not by any means stop short or hold back in their system-level ironizing of either politics (involving countless Federal departments and bureaucracies) or economics (structured around a for-profit, corporate model). Rather, the *Letters* often target these systems explicitly—and in a further reversal of Boskin’s observations about American humor, they sometimes even go so far as to excuse the individuals presently participating so as to more sharply focus their scrutiny at the system itself.

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<sup>3</sup> As Hutcheon puts it, “the relationship between irony and humor is a vexed one... Not all ironies are amusing... Not all humor is ironic... Yet both involve complex power relations and both depend on social and situational context for their very coming into being” (Hutcheon 25-26). Irony and humor, while not commensurable, share a significant plot of common ground in Hutcheon’s eyes: each treat or deal with both distribution and imbalances of power.

For example, when a traveling salesman from New York comes to the Land's End Village to sell encyclopedias, Naugga sarcastically explains the encyclopedia company's reasoning and arithmetic: "with only about 60,000 Natives in Alaska and according to Section (6) (a) (1) (A), a first fiscal year payment of \$12,500,000, this should be enough money for each family to get a brand new refrigerator and a set of the New American World Encyclopedias!" (Bigjim and Ito-Adler 36). The economic system and capitalistic venture are squarely targeted here. The salesman himself is spared blame; it is rather a way of thinking and the financial system that results from this thinking that is ridiculed. Herein we see one of the more admirable qualities of Bigjim and Ito-Adler's work: in the medium of character-based letters to the editor, they find a toehold in public discourse; in their unwavering focus on systemic and structural problems, they do so on their own terms<sup>4</sup>.

### **History and Power—Framing Issues Through Story**

Specifics of the *Letters*' discursive participation will next be examined in terms of their contribution to the historical record. In considering the intersection between narrative and history, I return to interpretations of Bakhtin. Cruikshank draws out his interest in and concern for history: "Bakhtin formulated the problem of history as its tendency to foster apparent randomness—for the order of events seemingly to disintegrate. And he saw active narrative storytelling as a constraining, countervailing

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<sup>4</sup> The idea of Natives finding "a voice at the table" and doing so on their "own terms" is also explored in Schneider 2011.

force, working to hold things together” (Cruikshank, *Do Glaciers Listen?* 63). From his perspective of communist Russia, Bakhtin saw communication as a key challenge to hegemony. The *Letters to Howard* are not “active” in the sense of oral narrative performance. Nevertheless, the *Letters* participate actively in the telling of history: they frame issues associated with the Alaska land claims era with recourse to the literary tools of narrative, character, humor, and irony. Simply put, by storying the land claims with a voice of their own, the *Letters* do indeed function in opposition to what Bakhtin calls the randomness of history.

The *Letters*’ strongest accomplishment to this end might be in their unrelenting portrayal of the distribution of power. In other words, what Natives “get” in the land claims settlement is a function of what is most convenient for the government to give. This is taken up repeatedly in reference to the construction of the oil pipeline and the related rush to get ANCSA passed. On May 15, Naugga writes, “about half the period for land selection is over... With so little time and such complicated rules, how can we be expected to do such a thing when... the State of Alaska has had thirteen years to select land that was to be taken from us by the Statehood Act?” (Bigjim and Ito-Adler 32). Naugga thus protests the discrepancy between the pace of the State’s land selection process and that expected of Alaska Natives. It is evident that the timeline is set to favor the government. And on September 15, Naugga writes,

If you remember, AN ACT (Public Law 92-203) says in the beginning that  
 ‘there is an immediate need for a fair and just settlement of all claims by

Natives and Native Groups of Alaska’—Section 2(a). In the first place, the need for a ‘fair and just’ settlement is not only *immediate* now, it has been for some time. Where was Congress before there was an oil strike and an energy crisis? (Bigjim and Ito-Adler 87, emphasis in original)

Here, Naugga draws attention to the State’s ulterior motives in settling the Native land claims issue. It is ironic that at the time of the writing, a settlement of the land claims had been immediate among Natives for “some time,” whereas the U.S. government had only just then decided to recognize and declare that immediacy. The irony reveals disparate reasoning: a settlement matters to Natives for different reasons than it does to the State—but since Naugga underscores that it is on the State’s schedule that the land claims issue comes to the fore, the settlement is cast not as a Native accomplishment but as a governmental act of convenience. The *Letters* thus frame the story of the land claims settlement as a product of the State’s monetary greed. In this way the *Letters to Howard* unremittingly expose power relations and imbalances as the connective tissue between the shower of confusing, fragmented issues and concerns faced by Alaska Natives.

Like Bakhtin, Linda Tuhiwai Smith is concerned with the intersection between history and power. She writes, “history is mostly about power. It is the story of the powerful and how they became powerful, and then how they use their power to keep them in positions in which they can continue to dominate others” (Smith 34). Because the *Letters to Howard* so diligently work to point out where power resides, what seems to



drive it, where it is concentrated, and what structures reinforce its distribution, they may well be understood as playing a role similar to that of the “countervailing force” which Bakhtin believes narrative plays a vital role in contesting such authoritarian, domineering histories by constructing alternative, coherent frames.

For example, the November 7 letter targets the structure that reinforces and maintains a disparate distribution of power: “maybe the description of the White man’s culture as a ‘machine civilization’ is right after all. And we should think about that. Is it a way of life in which the machine rules and men have to adjust and conform to *its* needs and demands?” (Bigjim and Ito-Adler 100). Naugga uses a rhetorical question here as a way of imploring his people to be critical of the Federal Government’s settlement with them. The comparison to a machine implies that insofar as Natives opt to participate in the dominant political and economic structure, they will do so at great expense because machines operate not with tapestries of individuality and ingenuity, but rather with assembly lines, or cogs and wheels. This passage underscores the imbalance of power between Natives and the “machine civilization”—while the machine civilization can operate with or without Natives, Native involvement will not elevate them beyond the status of pawns. Naugga is, to say the least, looking a gift horse in the mouth.

Hutcheon, maintaining her focus on the literary tool of irony, helps sharpen our focus on the power of narrative to contest dominant historical discourse. She explains that “irony’s intimacy with the dominant discourses it contests—it uses their very language as its said—is its strength, for it allows ironic discourse ... to buy time (to be permitted and even listened to...)” (Hutcheon 30). Furthermore, she explains, by

appropriating the power of the dominant authority via its language (and by inserting unsaid, “edgy” meanings therein), ironic discourse destabilizes that authority.

Consider the following example in which Naugga makes an ironic play on words. Regarding the Federal Government’s process of negotiating its relationship with indigenous peoples, he writes, “Wally Morton, my ex-VISTA friend, says that... the process used to be called *termination*, but now they sometimes call it *self-determination*” (Bigjim and Ito-Adler 91, emphasis in original). Naugga is wryly aligning colonial practices of aboriginal termination in the contiguous forty-eight with the contemporary political buzz concept of self-determination, a notion built on ideals of autonomy and independence. The word play exposes the present jargon as empty, serving to clothe unchanged hostility and disdain in politically correct language. But as in so many other examples, Naugga resorts to a self-deprecating deflection of authority (“Wally says...”). Herein lies the irony. The accusation is thinly—but finely—veiled, not quite appearing in the form of a good-faith history lesson, but certainly reminiscent of that innocence. The statement is underlain with the bitter declaration that it is the letter and not the spirit of the law that has changed, but its form is softened, lightened, and delivered in a falsely naïve tone that excellently mimics that of the dominant system’s typical, simplified, schoolroom treatment of history.

This impetus for contesting history is, at its core, part of the human project of making sense of the world. Walter Benjamin, a thinker who (like Bakhtin, Cruikshank, and Smith) is also interested in narrative, writes:

one can go on and ask oneself whether the relationship of the storyteller to his material, human life, is not in itself a craftsman's relationship, whether it is not his very task to fashion the raw material of experience, his own and that of others, in a solid, useful, and unique way. (Benjamin 108)

In the *Letters to Howard*, the “raw material of experience” is the way in which the land claims settlement unfolds in Alaska. A fashioning of this material constitutes participation in discourse, or a contribution to Alaska's unfolding Native land claims narrative. In other words, fashioning the raw material of experience consists in making sense of it, and participating in discourse means recognizing that coherent depiction takes its position relative to other depictions. Paradoxically, one of the *Letters*' most notable sense-making thrusts may be the confusion they expose.

The *Letters to Howard* involve a number of recurrent themes. They sniff out arbitrariness and expose the way in which arbitrary decisions distribute advantages and disadvantages. Recall that the Secretary of the Interior's power in defining “Native,” for example, seems to be arbitrary, as does the definition itself (Bigjim and Ito-Adler 12). Arbitrariness here arranges power in the hands of the national government, not in the hands of locals or of Natives. As the *Letters* progress a pattern becomes evident in which arbitrary decisions are associated with limitations on Natives—in other words, what seems like arbitrariness is revealed to be systemic; present-day structures and strictures

defining the Federal Government's relationship to Natives are patterned, or institutionalized.

The *Letters to Howard* also note various absurdities of the legal and political system. Recall the previously-quoted letter in which Naugga grapples with corporations and personhood—Wally “said that a corporation was a Person under the Law, and that this was an example of a legal fiction. But Wally had already told me a Person was a Human Being, and that fiction was a story that wasn't true” (Bigjim and Ito-Adler 18-19). The passage is funny because it is written with earnestness, yet its effect surpasses humor: legal complexity is shown to be absurd, but the task of becoming fluent in such a system is the more troubling subtext. By drawing attention to the absurd, the *Letters to Howard* also protest the way in which AN ACT's absurdities systematically implicate Natives, demanding their cooperation with a system that does not make sense.

Alongside attention to absurdity is the issue of ambiguity. Subsurface rights, for example, are brought up in the letter posted May 10<sup>th</sup> and reappear in the November 14, 1973 letter. In the latter Naugga writes, “Howard, do you know what ‘subsurface’ means? Wally and I are a little confused right now. We were wondering if gravel was a subsurface particle or a surface particle” (Bigjim and Ito-Adler 102). The various ambiguities of AN ACT become all the more troublesome when considered alongside the issue of arbitrariness. Questions not answered in the settlement take on an ominous air because of the seeming senselessness which will come to bear on their eventual resolution.

Finally, the *Letters* implore Natives to be critical of what the settlement gives them, both in concrete terms of material wealth and legal power, as well as in more abstract terms, which cast the settlement as a sort of club card giving Natives a structured entry into the western economic system via the corporate model. The *Letters* decry the arbitrariness, absurdity, and ambiguity of AN ACT, implying that whatever Natives gain by it will be fraught with those same characteristics, and that whatever Natives lose by it is likely to be permanently undone.

### **Tracing One Letter's Irony**

The remainder of this chapter considers a single letter in its entirety. The text of the letter appears first, unbroken by commentary. Following is a discussion of the various dimensions of irony operating within it.

Land's End Village

State of Alaska

August 15, 1973

Dear Howard:

Do you remember when I told you that I was trying to learn how to speak the English language correctly with Wally Morton, my ex-VISTA friend for a teacher? Well, last night I almost gave up the whole thing. We had a fellow from Anchorage out here in the village, who was a

consultant to the Regional Corporation. He was trying to explain to us villagers how corporations were set up.

Now I thought that I knew a little bit about the subject since Wally had explained to me about shareholders, stocks, and the Board of Directors, but that turned out not even to be the half of it. This fellow told us so much about economics and law that my head is still spinning. There was stuff about business cycles, fiscal policy, profit ledgers, double-entry accounting, equity, liability, auditing, initial investment, and principal. I always thought that the principal was the fellow in the B.I.A. schools that whipped the students who had no interest in their work, but it turns out that the principal is the money that earns you interest if you give it to somebody else to use. Apparently, from the way he put it, you don't even have to do any work if you have this principal.

He then tried to explain inflation to us which really got me confused. The Federal government is supposed to print up the money in Washington, D.C. If they make too many dollars, then each one can buy a little less and in order to stay where you were, you have to be earning more. To stay still, you have to go faster I guess. Personally I never did like money very much anyway. In the old days we just bartered and traded for what we needed, but nowadays we seem to be needing so many more things—including money. I wonder if this is also inflation?

We were also told about the marginal utility curves for supply and demand, and the fellow kept talking about guns and butter. To decide which to buy, he said we would compare the utility of an additional unit of butter with an additional unit of guns. Well, if we lose our hunting and trapping rights as well as our land and we can't fish anymore, neither guns or butter will be much use. He sort of got angry with me and said I didn't really understand what "utility" meant. With all his talk about "guns and butter," he didn't know what a winter in the village meant either.

This could go on and on, Howard, but it just worries me when I realize how little prepared for the age of corporation which is dawning in our villages. According to AN ACT, Section 8 (a), the villages won't even get the land they stand on if they aren't organized into a corporation. So you can see how this worries an old man.

Your friend,

Naugga Ciunerput (Bigjim and Ito-Adler 71-73)

Naugga's opening reference to English lessons carries ironic undertones. First, Naugga's fluency in English is evident from his letters. Of course, Wally may be helping him with the writing; in a separate letter Wally explains that he is the one who has been drafting Naugga's thoughts in the letters because Naugga "is still unsure of his English, and doesn't know how to write yet, so he tells me what to say in the letters and I fix up the grammar, spelling, and punctuation" (Bigjim and Ito-Adler 25). Wally's claim here

can be interpreted literally, as part of the narrative surrounding Wally and Naugga's relationship. But in order for Naugga to express the finer points of his thinking to Wally, he must have a strong grasp of the language and of the system of thought—so even if Wally's claim is taken at face value, there is a discrepancy between statements about Naugga's struggles with English and the reality of his communication skills.

Furthermore, Wally's claim can also be interpreted as a joke making fun of the colonial impulse toward paternalism. The letters signed by Naugga are, after all, written in a different voice than Wally's two letters, undermining the believability of the latter's claim to be mediating all of Naugga's ideas and opinions. Either way, the reference to language lessons is interacting with contradictory meanings; it is ironic.

On one level, the reference to language lessons mocks (to use Ito-Adler's word) outsiders' ignorance about Alaska's Native peoples, falsely playing along with assumptions about Natives' foreignness. This is its humorous dimension. But on another level, the reference to language lessons carries an ironic resonance with Alaska's history of boarding schools in which students were forced to learn English and punished, often severely, for speaking their Native languages. The rub between this darker layer of meaning and the somewhat lighter one creates the tension characteristic of irony's cutting edge.

The letter does not leave this resonance with boarding schools between the lines, but takes it up directly. Naugga uses word play to skip bisociatively between the corporate model of the present and the boarding school policies of the recent past; he arranges the financial meaning of "principal" next to its education administration



meaning. In this way, Naugga uses a flair of the tricksteresque to link disparate meanings, juxtaposing a seemingly positive one (money making) and an obviously negative one (abuse within educational institutions). But the trick is livelier than just this: what first appears as juxtaposition may not be juxtaposition at all. In hopping between two disparate meanings it turns out that we do not have far to go from one to the other; the potential for financial success and the unhealed scars of boarding schools are tacitly exposed as faces of the same coin, that of cultural assimilation and demolition.

Keeping to its core concern with the financial quagmire Natives have been drawn into via corporate resource management, the third paragraph of the letter confronts the issue of inflation. The passage begins with a self-deprecatory admission of confusion. Yet Naugga turns around and offers a fairly lucid interpretation of the phenomenon (“if they make too many dollars, then each one can buy a little less and in order to stay where you were, you have to be earning more”). We see here Naugga’s intentional self-positioning: the passage simultaneously contains an acknowledgment of his marginalized position as well as a refusal that this marginalization strip his power as a critical commentator. More specifically, as a rural Native, Naugga’s background places him outside the dominant financial system; he must adopt a new language, if you will, to join the conversation. Yet he joins in this conversation confidently and critically, displaying the clarity of fluency. His hesitation at the start is only mock hesitation, for while he owns up to being confused, his comments display both a thoughtful grasp of the system as well as an uncanny ability to explain that very system in simple, straightforward terms.

Recourse to the device of self-deprecation thus allows Naugga to reverse notions of discursive fluency.

When Naugga takes the Anchorage corporate representative's illustrations of guns and butter literally, we are forced to confront the notion of fluency from another angle. In this portion of the letter, it is not Naugga's understanding or misunderstanding that is emphasized but rather that of the character from Anchorage. Naugga writes, "He sort of got angry with me and said I didn't really understand what 'utility' meant. With all his talk about 'guns and butter,' he didn't know what a winter in the village meant either" (Bigjim and Ito-Adler 72-73). The crossed lines of communication are fully evident, as is the double standard: we can infer that the character from Anchorage expects Naugga to understand him, but does not expect to have to understand Naugga. This exchange illustrates the irony of the larger cultural one occurring between dominant society and rural Native society. The latter is expected to adjust to the former, while the former steamrolls forward on its existing path. Irony takes on a corrective function here. By exposing the asymmetry in dominant society / rural Native society dynamics, this passage of the letter corrects a critical misconception, showing that confusion and failure to understand—whether occasionally or systemically—may characterize not only one, but both of the groups.

This letter ends with a return to self-deprecation. Its final paragraph cites a passage from the legislation, expressing a simple, terrifying reality therein: that villages will not even own the land on which they are built unless they have been organized according to corporate principles. This portion of the letter fulfills its informational

purpose. But the authors remain in character; Naugga's voice remains strong. He refers twice to his worry and uses the diminutive terminology "old man." This self-deprecatory turn at the end operates as a refusal: he refuses to play himself up or to denigrate the character from Anchorage (either as an individual character or as a symbol of dominant society), thus refusing to fully appropriate the power inherent in the role of critic, or to fully participate in the hierarchical power dynamic between criticizer and criticized. Yet, at the same time, Naugga does have the power of a critic—he has clearly turned a critical eye on various aspects of the financial system. This final instance of self-deprecation, then, redefines notions of authority by expanding the role of "critic" and challenging assumptions about the relationship one such critic must have to his target.

### **And So In the End**

The *Letters to Howard* function on multiple discursive planes at once. As a voice of critique, observation, and questioning, they make up a lively contribution to the overarching narrative of land claims in Alaska. In the public discourse, the *Letters to Howard* sidle up to readers, both befriending them and spurring them to think about the more troubling aspects of the settlement, ranging from the corporate model's disturbance of traditional Native lifeways to the disparity in power between the government and those whom the government's decisions affect most directly. The *Letters to Howard* are, then, in conversation with other public portrayals of the land claims settlement, as well as with portrayals and projected images of, for example, the central tenets of democracy. In other words, implicit in the *Letters'* treatment of the distribution of political power (in a

government of the people, for the people, and by the people) is the question, which people? The *Letters to Howard* raise this and other questions in large part through recourse to the literary tools of narrative, characterization, voice, and irony. The *Letters to Howard* thus simultaneously participate in a metadiscourse, if you will: they comprise a tacit commentary on literature and politics, combining characteristics of both into an overarching perspective on the fluidity of communication.

## CONCLUSION

This thesis has examined Bigjim and Ito-Adler's *Letters to Howard*, taking a literary perspective on the *Letters*' contribution to the narrative of land claims in Alaska. The *Letters* point out assumptions that still exist in various circles, like the conception that all Native corporate shareholders are rich. They raise concerns that were ultimately addressed, such as the "new Natives" issue. They suggest problems that have been borne out, such as the conflict of interest stemming from clashes between stewardship responsibility inherent in resource management and corporations' for-profit missions.

This thesis thus examines the ways in which the *Letters* constitute a voice of prescient dissent regarding ANCSA. The role of irony has been my emphasis throughout, for irony creates many of these layers of meaning which the *Letters* bring to the table. Structurally—that is, by layering meaning—irony contributes to the *Letters*' prescience by anticipating the convergence of seeming contradictions and the coexistence of divergent truths. For example, there is an ongoing, uneasy simmering that has and continues to characterize questions of resource management. This results from the unresolvable tension in the present day between for-profit corporate logic on one hand and the spirituality of a peoples' historic and cultural ties to those same resources on the other.

As Hutcheon has helped define it, this critical edge both introduces and insists on a basic multiplicity of voices. There is a pluralizing force in irony, requiring a mental

doubling for ironic interpretation. In this sense, the core result of irony is that it infuses a conceptual plurality into the confines of otherwise limited narrative or discursive spaces.

Three types of ironies identified by Hutcheon dominate the ironic landscape of the *Letters*. The first is classified as provisional irony, which implies meanings without owning up to them. This kind of irony evades responsibility for some portion of the meaning it imparts, as in Naugga's introduction of Wally as an old VISTA volunteer who got lost and was never evacuated—a statement which hints at tensions between groups not explicitly defined, such as charitable donor/receiver, urban/rural, and modern/traditional. The statement thus suggests friction while evading discussion of it. Secondly, corrective ironies challenge the arrogance, sense of superiority, and condescension that spans social divides like those mentioned above, as well as in additional pairings like white/Native and young/old. Irony in the *Letters* frequently operates (in part) to correct bias between groups like these.

The third form of irony prevalent in the *Letters* is self-deprecation. This is most noticeable in the *Letters*' recurrent use of diminutive terminology. In addition to word choice, Naugga (in whose voice the majority of the *Letters* are written) favors the softer rhetoric of questioning over direct statement and relies heavily on the deflection of authority through reported speech, the cumulative result of which carries the same defensive or protective impulses found in self-deprecation. Naugga's positioning relative to society and politics is thus achieved by the trope of the self-diminution. He plays up his politically marginalized position, but self-deprecation is juxtaposed with the clarity of the insight expressed in the *Letters*. In this way, he calls the nature of political authority

itself into question, ultimately taking the communicative reins of power into his own hands. The sharpness of the ironic edge is here, first in the inversion of the correlation between power and coherence, and second in the resultant redefining of what constitutes authority in the first place.

Bakhtin's dialogic philosophy helps expand this view of irony in the *Letters*. For Bakhtin, meaning is discursive: it arises from the relation between two subjects. And discourse is, according to Bakhtin, particularly valuable because it functions in opposition to authoritarian speech. The *Letters*, dialogically understood, challenge the dominant land claims narrative. They reframe history, contesting and retelling it with recourse to literary tools such as characterization, narrative, and irony. Indeed, irony is itself dialogic by nature; it involves a plurality of meanings akin to the voices participating in a conversation. And the ironic rub between the said and the unsaid gives rise to a third, specifically relational meaning. Recall Joe Ayagtug's statement about the Native corporations having only received one-half of the money promised (Bigjim and Ito-Adler 21), a passage in which the said (stated above) and the unsaid (that uneasy feeling that the Federal government is taking advantage of gaps in Natives' financial knowledge) give rise to a third, suspended meaning: the concern that Native leadership could be reduced to the farcical role of figureheads.

Dialogism also contributes to our perspective on the macrocosm of the *Letters*. Bakhtin's notion of dialogic anticipation is reflected in the collection as a whole: their progression displays an anticipatory momentum that arrives at a philosophical culmination in the letter dated July 23. The earliest letters build a concrete foundation for

a critical perspective of ANCSA, discussing the definition of Native, the power of the Secretary of the Interior, and the logistical difficulties posed by Native Enrollment forms. These tangible discussions lead up to the April 17 letter, which contains a more philosophic critique of clashing value systems. Then there is another wave of letters that focus on practical concerns, building to the second, darkly philosophical letter. This one is dated July 10, and considers the value of villagers' connection to place, their knowledge of wildlife patterns, and the risks both of severing this connection and of managing resources without this knowledge. One letter separates this one from the culmination of the collection, the letter dated July 23, in which Naugga shows that the legislation is insidiously dismantling a people's culture, and hence their very existence, from the inside out. He does so first by declaring that "change is not always progress" (Bigjim and Ito-Adler 64), a notion at the core of the *Letters*' critical perspective on ANCSA. Within a few short sentences following this one, Naugga goes on to predict the eventual annihilation of his people by comparing the new legislation to a disease that will "leave no living Natives in its wake" (Bigjim and Ito-Adler 65). Intervals first of practical and then of philosophic critique build with anticipatory momentum toward this point of culmination.

In combination with its discursive elements, irony can also be deployed for subversive and counter-hegemonic purposes for it can target notions of power, hierarchy, subordination, judgment, and morality. The *Letters*, in particular, employ irony to critique institutionalized ills existing in both the political and economic systems. Bigjim and Ito-Adler's writing exposes power relations and imbalances in both form and content.



The specifically dialogic, or pluralizing aspect of the irony they use poses a challenge to the rigidities of a systemically biased democratic republic. In addition, the content of the *Letters* is explicitly political. They criticize the economic system that has introduced for-profit corporations to manage a peoples' settlement money and traditional lands, they criticize the politics of land designations and resource management, and they criticize the politics of identity and the entanglement of ethnicity with economics.

At this juncture it may be possible to take a step back. This thesis has developed a focused understanding of the *Letters*' combined literary and political elements. Yet these still merit probing discussion within the overarching discourse of humor. As has been suggested but not fully developed in this thesis, much of the irony in the *Letters to Howard* is funny—although sometimes it is just sad. While it is not my intent to conflate humor with irony, I am confident in asserting that there is still considerable overlap between the two in Bigjim and Ito-Adler's work. Irony and humor work together, reinforcing one another in the *Letters*, but further discussion on how the two operate in tandem is in order. While such a discussion is far beyond the scope of my work here, I would like to conclude by planting some of the seeds that may prove to be fruitful in future analyses.

In his article on humor and ethnic identity, John Lowe invokes Bakhtin's ideas to develop a dialogic understanding of humor. He explains that humor requires a forced juxtaposition of opposites, and that this results in a discursive Bakhtinian plurality. In other words, "comic forms open up and atomize" (Lowe 84), meaning that humor

distinguishes between constitutive elements, drawing out juxtaposition, both acknowledging and emphasizing the contradictions inherent in experience.

In this sense, humor has much in common with the pluralizing effects of irony. But as Joseph Coulombe pinpoints it in his article on Sherman Alexie's work, humor is defined by its fluidity, its paradoxes, and its ability to surprise (95). Juxtaposition and paradox, those situations in which contrast and multiplicity are highlighted, represent the territory in which irony and humor are bound up in one another. But if humor maintains an identity that is distinct from irony's, perhaps it is, as Coulombe suggests, in the fluidity that leads to an element of surprise. The hallmark response to humor is, after all, laughter: that startled, often vocalized series of sharp, uneven exhales. Shifting to an inquiry into the humor of the *Letters* may involve honing a sensibility to the role of surprise therein.

Funniness in the *Letters* comes not from the surprise of, say, punchlines, but rather mimics the ironic meaning held in suspension between the said and the unsaid. That is, it is a humor that arises from relational positioning. In other words, there is a double-mindedness involved in experiencing the humor in the *Letters*. For example, when we find out that Naugga and Wally are teaching each other their respective languages, it is funny that the language lessons have been "pretty one-sided" (Bigjim and Ito-Adler 11). They are reading U.S. federal legislation together, a surprising choice for two-way language lessons because it gives Wally plenty of material with which to teach English, and gives Naugga exactly zero in terms of Iñupiaq material. The humor is understated, arising from a sort of triangulation between details.

While the humor in the *Letters* is largely ironic (rather than, for instance, slapstick), the irony in the *Letters* is not always humorous. Sometimes the critical edge of irony cuts out several meanings which do not cause the surprise characteristic of humor. For example, in the last letter to appear in the collection, Naugga mentions Secretary of the Interior Roger Morton's comparison of the Alaska Pipeline to the Egyptian pyramids. Naugga relates what he has learned from Wally, namely, that the pyramids were built with slave labor for religious purposes. "Maybe the Pipeline is being built by the Government for the religious purpose of preserving the American Economy," writes Naugga, "but now they won't need slaves since there are so many unemployed people" (Bigjim and Ito-Adler 104). One layer of irony in this passage may be in the juxtaposition between religious and economic values, but these two have been entangled across myriad cultures throughout history, so while stark, it is not a particularly surprising contrast. Another layer of irony may be in the initial pipeline-pyramid comparison, as well as in the parallel implied between the labor of those who are forcibly conscripted and those whose desperation for work precludes the necessity for conscription. Again, the relational positioning is ironic, but lacks the element of fluid surprise that might generate laughter: invoking the helplessness of forced laborers seems not to surprise but rather to confirm readers' (perhaps latent) sense of the helplessness experienced by the unemployed.

Careful attention to irony has thus created a foundation for further inquiry into humor. Perhaps analysis of irony and its humorous spins can contribute to developing a literary ethic: humor has the humanizing capacity to bridge differences through shared

laughter, but conversely, humor can also illuminate those very differences, undermining the homogenizing forces which have become so problematic as globalization has spread. In his oft-quoted chapter from a collection called *Custer Died For Your Sins*, Vine Deloria suggests that humor can be understood as a method of rapprochement, shedding light on foreign mindsets. He writes,

One of the best ways to understand a people is to know what makes them laugh. Laughter encompasses the limits of the soul. In humor life is redefined and accepted. Irony and satire provide much keener insights into a group's collective psyche and values than do years of research.

(Deloria 146)

A sensitivity to humor in the *Letters* may, then, give readers further access to the psychology of political critique specific to Alaska's land claims era. In addition, Bigjim and Ito-Adler's use of humor in carrying out their project of critique can be appreciated for its strategic value: with Deloria's words in mind, we can infer that a voice which communicates through humor can achieve the ring of authenticity and clarity necessary to strike a chord deep within its audience. Meticulous attention to irony and its pluralizing effects on discourse can offer a navigable path into this broader subject of humor, creating a platform from which to deepen a reading of the *Letters to Howard*. Furthermore, heightened sensitivity to the partnership between irony and humor may help us to approach other instances of contemporary Native American literature as well.

When such work is undertaken, we may find ourselves with one more point of entry into what Deloria refers to as the collective psyche, a lucid view of which is always one of a reader's ultimate goals, for it is this view that reveals the idiosyncratic elements of humanity pulsing at the core of all literatures.

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