

# HUMOR IN MOHAWK GIRLS: THE DEFT INTERWEAVING OF GENDER AND RACE

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## ABSTRACT

The sitcom *Mohawk Girls* (2014-2017) calls for a change in racialized and gendered identity models. *Mohawk Girls* deftly approaches racial issues, often in a serious tone, all the while giving its audience what it expects from a sitcom: witty dialogue, many of which play on issues of gender. Through the analysis of two episodes of the sitcom's first season, we look at how the show represents issues of race on a reservation and how racialism is part of the community's unspoken norms. Choosing to produce a sitcom, a genre heavily rooted in white North American

culture, comes out as an act of resilience that is manifested by the First Nations' director and producers. In the analysis of the documentary work of director Tracey Deer, an argument has been made to the effect that this resilience has historical roots in the culture of Hodinöhsö:ni' nations (once referred to as the Iroquois). In order for these communities to adjust to, at times, abrupt changes in their population, adoption of individuals or groups of individuals has long been an important cultural institution. This can be illustrated by the fact that the integration of a neighboring group to the Hodinöhsö:ni' is referred to in the group's own culture as an adoption where an outside eye might see it as the outcome of a political alliance. The show, through exaggeration and grotesque, takes on the issues of gender and its games of seduction, all the while considering the ambiguous interplay of seduction and domination. These borrowings are helpful in breaching a critical indent into the unwearied oppression that white society imposes on First Nations.

Do you realize [...] that when the United States was founded, it was only 5 percent urban and 95 percent rural and now it is 70 percent urban and 30 percent rural? [...] It means we are pushing them into the cities. Soon we will have the country back again.

(Vine Deloria *Custer Died for your Sins*)

## INTRODUCTION

Reclaiming a conquered territory is a battle with many bouts. It is played out in the real world when, yet again, lands of the First Nations are stepped on. The colonial appetite for land still marks the life of peoples of different nations across North America. In 1990, for example, a group of white developers tried to extend a golf course on Mohawk land in Kanehsatà:ke, near Montreal. Another sad and more recent example is the struggle by the Sioux at Standing Rock in 2016 and early 2017 to block the development of a pipeline across ancient burial grounds.

The battle is also played out on the field of cultural issues by the development of autonomous cultural institutions. In Canada, the Aboriginal Peoples Television Network (APTN) – founded in 1999 as a cable channel available across Canada from the springboard of 1992 network for nations of the north – is such an institution. Much of APTN's programming is made up of shows it commissioned. Thus, even if one takes into account the fact that, like other TV licensees, it presents some content developed in Hollywood, most of its content (80%) is Canadian and much of that is made by First Nations production firms. In its 2012 brief to the Canadian Radio and Television Commission, APTN could boast that other than content presented in English or in French, it showed more than 40 hours per week of content in different Aboriginal languages and dialects. In fact, almost half of the shows it commissions are available in an Aboriginal language version (APTN 2012)<sup>1</sup>. These shows are available as part of the programming grid and through the website [aptn.ca](http://aptn.ca).

Among APTN's programming, the sitcom *Mohawk Girls* is of particular interest. It takes on the issue of racism towards the First Nations and how this permeated within their com-

munities, giving to the concept of races validity inasmuch as it was left undiscussed. The show is centered around the love life of four young women but also deals with racial prejudice and blood quantum as a basis for Indian status. Considering the number of sitcoms that have given a large place to the relations between the sexes, the use of the sitcom format might seem typical on the surface of it. However, we read the show's adoption of a mainstream format as a basis from which to sidestep into issues of race. In fact, we will show that the adoption of cultural traits from other groups is a concept that describes especially well what *Mohawk Girls* does, and is one with deep roots in Mohawk culture and history. Thus, a concept derived from the Hodinöhsö:ni's own epistemological background seems a useful route to understand how cultures and customs can mesh, and how *Mohawk Girls* is especially good at this.

*Mohawk Girls* was shown on APTN from 2014 to 2017. What does it say about the cultural background of *Mohawk Girls* to note that the show is directed by a Mohawk, Tracey Deer, and that it tells the story of four women living on the reserve of Kahnawá:ke? If cultures are moving and unstable aggregates, this is not less true of the Mohawks. Hence, we do not approach *Mohawk Girls* by identifying how it represents autonomous characteristics of Mohawk culture.

Although very little academic research has been done on Tracey Deer's fiction films, her documentaries have been the subject of some commentary. Amongst the research on her documentaries, Rebeka Tabobondung (2010) offers a few insights. The main argument in her article is that film and other multimedia works have made inroads for dissenting voices within the First Nations; in Deer's documentary work, she sees a fine example of this dissent as the Mohawk film director equates colonial policies' insistence on race and her own community's reference to blood quantum in its membership policy. One of the more interesting texts about Tracey Deer is a chapter devoted to her work in Penelope Kelsey's *Reading the Wampum* (2014). Kelsey finds in Deer's documentaries a view of the Mohawk world as a culture open to renewal and with a capacity for borrowing from the white culture, which she terms "adoption". The pertinence of this metaphoric use of the word is reinforced by the fact that actual adoption has always been an integral practice among First Nations. It was common practice to adopt a person from another nation in order to, among other possibilities, replace the loss of a member who had special skills. More importantly perhaps, if such a practice has been identified among many of the First Nations on the North American con-

1 APTN. *Aboriginal Peoples Television Network. Licence Renewal Application. Application 2012-0993-2*. [http://crtc.gc.ca/eng/archive/2013/2013-19.htm?\\_ga=2.141789745.2025133608.1499531153-152375325.1499130630#bm17](http://crtc.gc.ca/eng/archive/2013/2013-19.htm?_ga=2.141789745.2025133608.1499531153-152375325.1499130630#bm17)

continent, adoption has a specific historical importance for the Hodinöhsö:ni'. The Hodinöhsö:ni', otherwise known as the Iroquois, is a confederacy of Aboriginal nations that includes the Mohawks. The confederacy's territory engulfs much of what is now New York state, parts of Pennsylvania and parts of Southern Canada at the junction of Quebec and Ontario. For a long period of time before the Europeans came, there had been five member nations. Early in the eighteenth century, the Tuscarora joined the confederacy which became the Six Nations. The political association was commemorated, as was the custom among First Nations for symbolically charged events, by the weaving of a belt decorated with beads, a wampum. It is known as the adoption wampum.

We have been using the expression First Nations – and just now referred to the Five and the Six Nations – as the Aboriginals use these expressions themselves. The idea of nation does not lend itself to easy definition. Is it racial unity, a shared culture, or a shared cardinal value, like that of democracy? Benedict Anderson's (1983) classic take on nations as imagined communities highlights the arbitrariness of these characteristics of nationhood. The most common contemporary views on the concept of the nation tend to involve culture and values and exclude the idea of race. Kwame Anthony Appiah (1992) has made a compelling argument against the validity of the idea of races as an artefact of misinformed science, and has termed belief in the existence of races as "racialism". All forms of racism are inherently racist. However, whether the use of the concept of race by some First Nations in order to grant Indian status makes them racist is an altogether different issue. With Appiah, we would rather describe such insistence on race – in the imposition of a blood quantum, for example – as an effect of racist beliefs. In their self-definitions, the imagined communities of the different First Nations tend to navigate between an insistence on cultural characteristics that were traditionally believed to be significant, and a reference to concepts of race drawn from more recent colonial history.

Valaskakis (2005) has shown how being Indian is the result of such complex references to the past and present of the Indigenous peoples. Elements of tradition such as animism afford very different categories of belonging, as the link to kindred souls can surpass tribal affiliation, identification to a species and even such occidental categories as the difference between the living and the object; the latter two have a history in occidental thought that is not universally shared by other cultural traditions. However, Valaskakis insists that present conditions are also of utmost importance and that "the

sense of identity that unifies Indians is a reaction to their ascribed status and relative deprivation" (2005: 219). For Kelsey, drawing on Stuart Hall (1989), being Indian is a "positioning". Kelsey's work, to which we are indebted, also insists on the copresence of past and present in any claim to Indianity. The present can (and must) be changed. However, the effects of imperialism cannot be erased. Kelsey would thus rather interpret the relation between dominated and dominant culture with the particular ethical determination that the concept of adoption carries, calling for an attitude of openness and welcome to others<sup>2</sup>. The Tracey Deer documentary that Kelsey studies, *Club Native*, is understood as an example of the complexities in the interrelations between past and present and a defense of a view favorable to the evolution of tradition.

The cinematic and audiovisual productions of Aboriginal peoples have been the subject of many recent studies. With the creation of APTN, the First Nations whose traditional territory encompass what is known as Canada have been at the forefront of these. The important work of Lorna Roth (2005) on the development of production and broadcast facilities owned by the First Nations in Canada is a good example. Roth notes that APTN and its prior incarnation "have been the only aboriginal television networks in the world to broadcast such a high volume of programming from indigenous sources" (Roth 2005: 217). Marian Bredin (2012) optimistically states that the APTN's main focus on Aboriginal programming "may ultimately result in the gradual 'indigenization' of Canadian media culture" (Bredin 2012: 91). Whether this vision will come to pass remains to be seen. However, most recent scholarship on the filmic work produced by members of the First Nations has insisted on the fact that our analyses need to de-romanticise the First Peoples. Roth devotes a chapter of her book to the broadcast policy-maker's imaginary and how it was necessary to develop views of the First Nations that do not essentialize these groups. Bruno Cornellier (2015) has seen the same fault in many movies from the end of the twentieth century that were directed by white moviemakers sympathetic to the cause of the First Nations. "In effect," he writes, "it seems impossible for these directors to imagine

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2 One might be tempted to think that with this concept Kelsey walks a line already treaded by Homi Bhabba (1994) in shedding light on the importance of imitation of elements of the colonizer's culture by groups that have lived through colonial presence. Homi Bhabba's concept of mimicry has had an important success in academia. It would be interesting to compare adoption and mimicry as to the ethical stance to the other that they encompass. Perhaps one could posit attitudes to the borrowing of elements of a culture on spectrum going from the more welcome to the more critical, adoption describing the attitude at one end and mimicry at the other end.

an Indian whose experience of modernity would not be at the same time an experience of alienation” (Cornellier 2015: 114; authors’ translation). In the case of Tracey Deer’s work, there is no doubt as to its modernity. As Rimbaud has made it clear in the closing poem of *A Season in Hell*, the culture of modernity acts as an injunction, in this case to the effect that newness is good. However, Tracey Deer, without contradicting her modernity, can also be said to create works of empowerment for the Mohawk people; another injunction is central to her work and, in a paraphrase of Rimbaud, we could put it as “One must be absolutely Mohawk”.

In watching *Mohawk Girls*, one notices how it touches on gender issues with ease. When criticizing gender norms, the series is capable of sparkling humor. However, when it ventures onto racial issues, it frequently does so with a serious, dramatic tone. Often, the two issues intertwine; a set of differences that society has coded into stereotypes can conceal another. The production company for the show, when called before the Canadian regulatory broadcast agency, the Canadian Radio-Television and Telecommunications Commission (CRTC) described the show as “*Sex and the City on the rez*” (short for Indian reservation)<sup>3</sup>. And the second scene of the first episode presents Anna, a character documenting her life on a vlog, thus updating for the 21<sup>st</sup> century the columnist trope of the Carrie Bradshaw character in the famed American TV show. Anna arrives on the reserve straight from Manhattan and, because she is snappily dressed, a snarky remark is overheard in the group of onlookers at the window of the small-town café: “Where does she think she is? *Sex and the City*?” Since *Sex and the City* has been at the forefront of discussions about postfeminism, we could wonder if *Mohawk Girls* is or is not postfeminist. However, we agree with feminist theoretician Lori Saint-Martin that “the word ‘postfeminism’ masks the social reality – the persistence of profound real inequalities between the sexes despite the equality in principle guaranteed by law” (1997: 236; authors’ translation). Kathleen Rowe’s (1995) feminist take on the sitcom provides a useful theoretical framework to understand why gender issues have been such a mainstay theme in sitcoms and helps in understanding how sexual difference has been used as a stand-in for other disparities within society.

In all likelihood, there might be more than one element explaining why the series plays on humor when tackling gen-

der issues and not when taking on racial issues. Some possible explanations belong to the reception history of sitcoms, others take into account the remnants of historical oppression against First Nations people, and its continuation today. In the following pages, we will analyse two episodes of the series’ first season: the pilot, “Welcome to Our World”, and the seventh episode finale, titled “Beast”. It is understood that such an analysis can only begin a discussion on the manner in which the filmmaker chose to present stakes that are transculturally shared by whites and Mohawks altogether with a self-representation of her community.

From the title of the sitcom, we expect a show with characters gendered as girls. The main characters are a group of four young women, all in their twenties. An episode early in the first season presents the heterosexual dating scene in Kahnawá:ke as one where the women are called on to approach the men. This cultural fact is one of the driving forces of the series, bumping each moment of action ahead in the different story arcs. Of the four characters, two are actively in search of a relationship: Bailey and Caitlin. A third character, Zoe, is a few years older than her friends. Being a young professional, she shares a house with her friend Caitlin, and claims that the dating scene should wait until she has invested in her budding career. Finally, Anna, of Mohawk lineage from her father, is the youngest of the group. She was brought up in New York, has just moved to the reserve and must learn the customs of the community. The dynamic of the show is built on contrasts between characters: whereas Bailey feels guilty when looking for love outside the reserve and taking the risk of having to move out, Anna is intensely involved in learning about the community in which she had only spent summers as a child. If moving out – to a certain extent emigrating – is anxiety-inducing, returning to the reserve also has its challenges. Valaskakis (2005) quotes from a First Nations testimony anthology (Nabokov 1992), which includes examples of the different behaviors people engage in upon moving back to the reserve, such as doing too much and trying to prove themselves. As for the other pair of characters, Zoe is overly responsible, whereas Caitlin has a much more free-wheeling lifestyle. Their relationship is best epitomized in a dialogue early in the episode “Welcome to Our World” (1.01, middle of scene 4 at 3:18). The women are talking in a café:

**Caitlin:** Must be lonely out on Mount Judgemore, Miss Perfect.

**Zoe:** I just can’t stand all the awful things outsiders say about us. We need to be beyond reproach.

3 Roth, Lisa. (November 7th, 2012). Transcript to the hearing on Broadcasting Notice of Consultation CRTC 2012-475. Line 1305. <http://www.crtc.gc.ca/eng/transcripts/2012/tb1107.html>

**Caitlin:** OK. OK. There's no audience here, so you could just give it a rest, OK.

**Zoe:** My point is: We can't just do whatever we want. Or go to bed with whomever.

**Caitlin:** Speaking of bed, check this out! Myrezlove.com. You should totally check it out. Come on, you need a little bit of romance in your life. Plus, it might help loosen you up.

Whereas Caitlin's lines are emotional moving from the initial irritation at her friend to a newly found enthusiasm, Zoe stays cerebral. Her two lines are founded in a "us and them" perspective; the "we" in each of her lines insists on the sense of belonging and is posited heads on against the words "outsiders" and "whomever". In brief, we observe for each pair of characters that being an Aboriginal is an issue that intersects with all aspects of the characters' lives.

In order to uncover how *Deer* works the issue of race into her storyline, we have identified how different sequences of episodes from the first season form syntagms. Even if our reading is informed by a viewing of all the seasons, we have limited our analysis to episodes of the original season, the first episode and the season finale. The borrowing of the linguistic concept of syntagm has a long history in cinema and media studies. Our use is in line with Fiske and Hartley's (1978) classic semiotic work on television. A syntagm is a combination of formal choices (camerawork, editing, mise-en-scène, dialogue, etc.) that cohere into a meaning and in which ideological tenets transpire. These formal choices are the building blocks of the meaning process that is the syntagm. In order to approach these diverse elements, we have divided into scenes the two episodes that we thought pertinent to approach issues of Indianness. Scenes and syntagms are not equivalent, though at times a specific syntagm might be found in only one scene. Cinema semiotician Christian Metz (1966) defined the scene as a unit of action, space and time that can be presented in more than one shot, while globally maintaining a coincidence of screen time and diegetic time. Metz's methodology calls for a description of each shot that constitutes a scene. As a general rule, *Deer* builds scenes using many shots, the change in camera placement often used to produce the classic shot reverse shot structure. At times, however, the editing of one shot to the next obeys a different rule. With the show's comedic undertone, there are many occasions where the rapid pace of shots is important. In such cases, we will move down from the scene to the smaller unit of the shots that constitute it. Thus, we will at times stop at

minute details in order to better understand how *Mohawk Girls* opens a space in which the traditionally white-privileged genre of the sitcom can be adopted by the First Nations.

## 1. FILIATION: FINDING ROOTS IN THE SITCOM

The sitcom is a highly coded genre. Some of its codes have roots that go back to the tradition of the vaudeville and variety theater<sup>4</sup>. In terms of reception, the success of a situation comedy hinges on a play with the public's expectations: a sitcom should generally reproduce forms inherited from the past, whether the dysfunctional family, the group of quirky friends or co-workers, and if the series has a bit of pizzazz, it should be done with a hint of originality.

Kathleen Rowe (1995) in her book *The Unruly Woman: Gender and the Genres of Laughter* argues that feminism has had an effect on the representation of women in situation comedies. We have seen less of the archetypal homemaker, second fiddle to her husband, and the harpy mother-in-law (in the domestic comedy trope) and, from the 1970s and on, more women working as professionals or on the production line (in the quirky friends and coworkers trope). Kathleen Rowe goes on to establish kinships between the TV sitcom and two movie genres, the romantic comedy and the melodrama, which she posits at either end of a spectrum. Rather than the difference in tone between the two, the quick rhythm of comedy and the build-up of drama, Rowe differentiates these genres in regard to their narrative resolution. Thus, a melodramatic plot in which the unhappy ending is averted would not be very different from a romantic comedy. Reciprocally, a romantic comedy without a happy ending, or in the least the reconciliation, would take on the air of a melodrama. In both genres, Rowe argues, women have always been important characters:

Both narrate the stories of women with "excessive" desire which is limited to the realm of heterosexual

4 The sitcom can be defined as: "a half-hour series focused on episodes involving recurrent characters within the same premise. That is, each week, we encounter the same people in essentially the same setting. The episodes are finite, what happens in a given episode is generally closed off, explained, reconciled, solved at the end of the half-hour [...]. The most important feature of sitcom is the cyclical nature of the normalcy of the premise undergoing stress or threat of change and becoming restored [...]. This faculty for the "happy ending" is, of course, one of the staples of comedy according to most comic theory." (Mintz 1985: 114-5).

romance and motherhood. Both use the deferral of sexual fulfillment not only as a means to create and sustain the fantasies of romance but as plot devices to prolong narrative suspense (1995: 110).

Rowe concludes that the variations in the love life of women characters constitute a decisive element in moving the diegesis forward. Comedies, both the movie romantic comedy and the TV sitcom, use the interplay between moments of drama and moments of humor to manage the suspense. Often a moment of comedy will act to slow down the pace before the plot comes to a resolution<sup>5</sup>.

*Mohawk Girls*, with four characters who all have complicated love lives, plays a tightrope act between romantic comedy and melodrama. For instance, most of the sequences in episode 1.01 are in a comic register whereas the season finale is more melodramatic. This is reflected in the respective scene structures of the episodes. The first episode contains eighteen scenes, most of which feature many brief shots; by contrast, the drama of the season finale calls for many overlapping storylines and numbers twenty-two scenes that feature, in many cases, longer shots.

The themes that each episode develops are a good indication of this: the first episode is built upon quite a few scenes that criticize gendered behavior and give the actresses an opportunity for exaggeration in their mimicry and posture; the season finale takes on high emotional issues, among them three moments of discussion on community and racial belonging and two scenes of intense discussion between two lovers having a hard time understanding one another. Accordingly, the use of close-up in the shot-reverse-shot structure across the two episodes is different. There are four in the first episode, seven in the finale<sup>6</sup>.

5 As a general rule, one might say that comedy has its particular techniques in playing up the narrative tension. The classic circus clowns make this clear. Whereas it is more often than not the White Clown who moves the story forward, the Auguste acts to disrupt temporarily the forward motion of the story.

6 In episode 1.01, we note the use of the close-up in the shot reverse shot in scenes 4 and 5, and at two distinct moments in scene 12 (the events portrayed in those scenes are the following: Zoe and Caitlin discuss their opposing views on sexuality; Bailey is accompanied by her lover whom she presents to her father; at a party, Bailey erupts in anger against one of the guests; later in that scene, Bailey meets the host of the party, Jack). In episode 1.07, we find close-ups in scenes 6, 8, 9, 13, 15, 16 and 19 (the scenes 6, 8 and 15 take on the theme of racial and community belonging; scenes 9 and 13 show couples in intense discussions; and scene 16 extends on a recurring motif in the series, disagreement between Zoe and Caitlin on the relative importance of having a love life; and finally, scene 19 has us closing in on Caitlin looking at herself in the mirror, with a positive pregnancy test in her hand).

Not only does *Mohawk Girls*, as we have just shown, weave drama in the romance, but also it serves its audience happy endings and neat resolutions of conflicts. Towards the endings of the two episodes under study, a couple kisses. In the first episode, the main storyline involves one of the characters, Bailey, learning that the man she is dating might be her cousin (that is, if stories about an act of adultery years ago are true). This information separates the pair during the episode. And just when they are reunited in a kiss towards the end, Bailey comes to accept that she would rather be prudent and not get further involved with the man. The season finale brings to a conclusion different arcs that have developed during the season, but gives two couples that have formed a sense that their love is true, hence the kiss in the case of one couple and the short dialogue showing a developing trust in the case of the other. Thus *Mohawk Girls* plays up the codes of the sitcom.

## 2. GENDERED FASHIONS AS A SYNTAGM

One might be tempted to cast away *Mohawk Girls* as a normative cultural product simply reproducing gendered codes. The opening titles for instance seem to pander to hegemonic representations of femininity with, among others, a low-angle shot of the legs of a woman in a short skirt and the hem of her sweater, two shots of a necklace with – in one case – a hand with a shiny ring brushing the shoulder blade, and of an ear lobe with a pink-feathered earring. The attention to clothing and accessories is apparent in most shots of these titles. However, as the episodes unfold, it becomes clear that Tracey Deer includes scenes meant to criticize the norms that articulate sexual difference in the contemporary liberal world.

The fact that fashion weighs differently on men and women has been understood for a long time. Early in the twentieth century, Virginia Woolf questioned the pressure placed on women as objects of beauty, aesthetically bettered by the deft arrangement of feathers on a hat (Woolf 1986: 114-119). Almost a hundred years later, the situation has barely evolved. A series anchored in the present like *Mohawk Girls*, with women as main characters, could not leave aside the issue of fashion.

The many facets behind the concept of adoption are of interest here. One idea of adoption is to make an object or a practice one's own. For example, it is common to say that a person adopts a clothing style. Adoption in this sense brings forward the interweaving of self and other. Is the care of the

self in one's clothing a choice or an unconscious capitulation to the dictates of an industry? In the relation of self to self, subjugation and possibilities for resistance nourish one another and are articulated one to the other. Fashion constitutes a prime example of this liminality between subjugation and its resistance.



FIGURE 1. STILL FRAME OF *MOHAWK GIRLS*  
1.01 SCENE 13 AT 14:32

Let us take a scene of episode 1 in which room-mates Zoe and Caitlin discuss whether or not Caitlin's choice of a dress and accessories are appropriate for a night out (scene 13 at 14:32). One of the shots in the scene is particularly telling as to the tension for a subject in-between self-affirmation and subjugation (see Figure 1). To the left of the frame, we see Caitlin's reflection in the mirror and to the right a shoulder and part of the back of her head. At the center of the frame, we see Zoe, absorbed in reading, a sheaf of documents in hand. If we consider mirror and documentation in symbolic terms, the opposition of the characters is reinforced; this opposition has profound roots in history, going to Plato's valorisation of ideal Forms and his criticism of images. If we were to follow this tradition, the mirror would be negatively connoted. However, the event that the scene depicts seems to bring out the qualities of the mirror. Of the two women, only Caitlin sees her reflection. She evaluates herself and seems to appreciate what she sees – her clothes, her hair. Hence the mirror has a double valence, at once negative and positive depending on how we address its use in the scene.

In the dialogue between the two women during this scene, there is a tacit agreement that gendered fashion is considered as an ornament for women in a heteronormative world, but disagreement as to whether or not one should conform to this. This is apparent in their dialogue which, af-

ter Zoe has declined her friend's invitation to go out, starts like this:

**Zoe:** The only kind of guys you're going to attract like that are the bad ones. Cai, you deserve so much more.

**Caitlin:** Thanks, mom.

**Zoe:** I'm serious.

Even if Caitlin's reply shows her irritation by pointing to her friend's nosing in her choice of lifestyle, the adequation between friendship and filiation that her reply implies is an indication of the tacit agreement between the two. In this sequence, the ambiguity of the motives behind the care of the self becomes quite clear. It is possible for a person to appreciate and depreciate oneself in the same instant. Fashion designed for women holds both possibilities in this case.

Another element of the two friends' discussion is the desire for a child. In Kahnawá:ke, a person's decision to start a family can get entangled with politics. Earlier in the episode, when the friends are talking in a bar, one of them mentions that having a family is seen by some as a step in rebuilding the nation. Whereas the bar scene offers a melodramatic discussion about family by involving it in racial issues, the discussion at home while Caitlin is in front of the mirror develops against an unquestioned heteronormative background in which sexuality and maternity are conjoined. The dialogue quoted above continues with Zoe advising her friend not to try to seduce a man she does not think much of:

**Zoe:** I hope you're not planning to...

**Caitlin:** To what? To find a man. To fall in love. To have all these cute little babies that will love me forever. Yeah. I'm looking for that. I can't wait for that.

We learn of Caitlin's desire for a child in a line that caricatures the narcissistic element of such a desire. Rather than imagining having children as taking up a responsibility towards the nation, Caitlin's character's line involves a series of emphatic words, "all" and "forever", in a fantasy in which the mother is represented as the permanent center of the world for her children. Even if Caitlin's desire finds its source in immature motivations, it has the merit of untangling the idea of having children from the political background of life on the reserve.

Consequently, it appears that the issue of gendered norms, here in a discussion that moves from rather fickle

fashion issues to attitudes towards motherhood, can cover up the undealt racial issues. The surface subjects are open to a comedic treatment. We could posit a hypothesis that sitcoms have developed more of an ease in humoring gender issues than racial issues. Kathleen Rowe believes that the openness to humor about gender is one of the characteristics of the sitcom since the 1970s:

Romantic comedy treats the social difference that impedes community as a matter of sexual difference and so builds the feminine into both its narrative conflict and the resolution of that conflict (Rowe 1995: 107).

### 3. EXAGGERATION AND GROTESQUE

Of the two episodes that we studied in detail, we noted a difference in pacing of the shots. Considering that one of the factors of comedy is rhythm, it seems clear that the first episode with faster-paced scenes has more of a comedic intent. If at times, the humor appears in the dialogue because of the line given to one of the actresses as the one we alluded earlier, at many others, the director chose to use the specificity of the audiovisual genres, namely shot size and angles, editing, scoring. If we stop only at moments where the comic effect is produced by such effects, there is on average a gag every minute and a half. The longest wait between two comic effects happens rather early on in the episode. Three minutes go by without such a gag.

At times, the visual humor is founded on an exaggeration of gendered norms. The first scene (presented before the

opening titles) includes the daydream fantasy of one of the characters. In that fantasy, she is marrying her current love interest. She and the husband are dressed according to the gendered norms of such an event. The actress playing the part farcializes the moment with her posture, standing on one leg and bringing the other to the back as she throws one of her arms upward (Figure 2).

Later in the episode, a shot reverse shot is used to suggest a confrontation. Tracey Deer adds a music track in which steel guitar and harmonica call to mind the atmosphere of Sergio Leone's films, bringing a touch of irony to the scene built around the moment where a father tests the young man his daughter just presented to him.

In terms of visual effects, humor often uses the body, at times by an exaggeration of facial expressions, at others by a taste for the grotesque. A prime example of the work with facial expressions is the time where an actress exaggerates disdain as she tells her friends her current love interest might be a cousin. Another comes up when one of the principals exaggerates the expression of desire as her character is about to open her laptop to watch a short self-presentation video by a fan of BDSM (see Figures 3 and 4 respectively). The grotesque emerges in two different moments. One comes in a daydream fantasy that is woven into the marriage fantasy discussed above, by imagining the child born of the union of two cousins, a small being with an immense eyebrow hovering above the eyes and hairy warts (Figure 5). As the episode comes to an end, Deer veers into scatologic grotesque, a character coming home from a night spent in a bar with a dried flow of vomit on her dress (Figure 6). The grotesque focuses on the way that body types which differ from normative expectations are to be considered monstrous, and it has been a source of humor for centuries. This focus on the body is of particular interest within the context of Tracey Deer's sitcom considering that *Mohawk Girls* deals with differences, both sexual and racial.

Men are secondary characters in the story. However, the episode does have a moment that stages men's bodies, playing both on an exaggeration of stereotypes and presenting an image that overreaches into the grotesque. In the ninth scene of the first episode, the friends get together to find out if the dating web site MyRezLove.com might be an option for them to find interesting partners. The scene is filmed in a variation of the shot reverse shot: we see the back of the laptop and the faces of the women in a lateral travelling shot from one to the other, and conversely a shot on the computer screen that they are facing. In one of the self-presentation videos on the



FIGURE 2. STILL FRAME OF *MOHAWK GIRLS*  
(1.01., SCENE 2 AT 00:36).



FIGURES 3-6. STILLS FRAMES OF *MOHAWK GIRLS* 1.01 (SCENE 7 AT 7:16; SCENE 13 AT 15:32; SCENE 8 AT 7:12; AND SCENE 17 AT 18:34).

site, a man, while speaking of his desire for a relationship, suddenly becomes violent and starts throwing various objects around. Another one ends his self-presentation by standing up before the camera seemingly getting ready to show his genitals; the friends rapidly close the cover of the laptop just before they come in full view. The least ridiculous of the candidates explains in his presentation that he is looking for a purely “fun and sex” relationship, no strings attached. In the MyRezLove.com scene, humor is used to question gendered norms of masculinity with a wit similar to the show’s criticism of stereotypes imposed on women.

#### 4. THE HODINÖHSÖ:NI’ ADOPTION WAMPUM

In our introduction we referred to the only published research on Tracey Deer’s work as a filmmaker. In her analysis of Deer’s documentaries – a 2005 film also titled *Mohawk Girls*, and her 2008 *Club Native* – Penelope Kelsey remarks on the fact that Deer gathers a community of interviewees

who feel that learning about their people’s tradition involves an openness to regenerating it:

The community gathering of traditional knowledge in *Club Native* serves to bring Kahnawake Mohawk cultural ideals into the present, while inflecting and transforming them [...] it ensures the continued use of these renewed traditions in the future for the purposes of building community (Kelsey 2014: 102).

In our opinion, it is possible to say the same thing of her sitcom *Mohawk Girls*.

One of the ways in which the series makes its viewers reflect on adoption comes in its developments concerning fetishism. There are moments where the sitcom offers an amused look at fetishism, others when it is critical. The fetish is not always the one to which media and advertising have accustomed the public.

Fetishism is the fixation of desire on a body part or an object, and its social construction plays an important role in the

narrative and life trajectory of a character in *Mohawk Girls*. Here, an analysis of the last moments of the seventh episode will serve to show how Deer weaves such a practice into her representation of life in Kahnawá:ke. At different moments of the first season, Zoe is excited by representations of BDSM. A scene in the middle of “Beast” (1.07) has her hesitate about entering a sex-shop. This is one of the few moments of comedy in this episode. Scene 14 of this episode begins at 12:31. In the first shot, Zoe enters the frame on the left, hesitates in front of the door of the sex-shop and goes out of the frame on the right. Then she enters on the right and walks out of the frame on the left. Finally, in the last shot, she comes into the frame on the left and finally decides to go into the store. Here the rhythm of the editing plays an integral part in the comedic effect insisting on the character’s hesitation.

Later in the episode, sexual difference as it is articulated by gender becomes the equivalent of a difference articulated in racialized norms. In a way, the end of the episode alternates between two representations of fetishism. Zoe is looking at an advertising leaflet that she picked up at the sex-shop. It represents three latex-adorned women in an ad for a fetish night. The camera closes in on the ad on which we can read: “Let Loose, Be Free”. The following scene is centered around Anna, the young woman who had just moved into Kahnawá:ke. She is at a party where people mingle and is taken by a burst of jealousy and anger at one of the women. The actress plays the emotion of anger by her facial expression, anger which is reinforced by a scene of fantasy where Anna marks her face in war paints. It is as if Anna acted upon the “Let Loose, Be Free” injunction through a fetishism other than latex. Whereas war paints have a social value, symbols of the warriors link individuals to the community and to nature. This scene moves the practice of marking one’s face to the private sphere. War paints have become a stereotype of First Nations in colonial representations, and have become heavily fetishized. Here the fetish is reclaimed as a marker for the pulsion of anger. It not only represents the pulsion but seemingly concentrates it. Such a juxtaposition of scenes opens a channel between private sexual desire and displayed cultural identity. It also acts to renew the gendered role of women in sitcoms, a role that Kathleen Rowe (1995: 110) described as bearer of “‘excessive’ desire” whether as mothers or as romantic partners.

The use of the situation comedy codes allows Tracey Deer to take on the sometimes-ambiguous interplay of domination through gender in order to breach a critical salient into the unwearied oppression that white society imposes on First Nations.

## 5. RACIALISM AS A SYNTAGM

There are times where dialogues in *Mohawk Girls* take the issue of white racism head on. In such cases, the heroines rebuff the racist remarks with a keen repartee. The series also considers racialism on the reserve in relation to the pressure to form a couple with a Mohawk of recognized lineage. An episode is titled “Marry Out, Get Out” (4.06), a clear reference to one of the effects of the Kahnawá:ke membership law.

Addressing such issues with humor might be difficult. However, there are a few moments in the episodes we have analyzed that venture into this territory. We have already mentioned the visual gag of the child born of cousins. This tackles the issue of genetic proximity in a small national group. More often than not, it is humor on gendered norms, typical of the situation comedy, which opens an indirect roadway into the prevalence of racialism within the Mohawk community.

Blood quantum is an important factor in determining whether or not a person can be considered a Mohawk of Kahnawá:ke. Section 11 of the *Kahnawá:ke Membership Law* defines the criteria for accepting members, some are cultural, for instance a sustained interest in Mohawk culture, others pertain to lineage. Among the many different cases identified in the subsections, there are constants: being born of at least one member and having at least four great-grandparents with Indigenous lineage. A person born of non-members can apply for membership if they have at least four great-grandparents from Kahnawá:ke, or, in the case of a member’s spouse, at least four great-grandparents with Indigenous lineage.

The first time the character of Anna meets the other three lead characters (end of scene 9 at 10:05), racialism is presented as part of the doxa in Kahnawá:ke:

**Anna:** I came to introduce myself. I’m Anna.

**Zoe:** Oh! you’re Ruth’s granddaughter. The one from New York.

**Caitlin:** So, your mom’s white. Hmmph!

**Anna:** Yea! I’m gonna live here and go to university in Montreal. It’s awesome that it’s so close. And McGill has a great philosophy program.

**Zoe:** Philosophy! That’s indulgent. You should be studying something that will help our people.

**Caitlin:** She is not our people!

**Bailey:** Caitlin!

— Short silence, summer crickets —

**Anna:** Well, I'm going to a friend's party in the city and I just wanted to see if you guys wanted to come.

— Longer silence, summer crickets —

**Anna:** OK. I'll see you around. I guess.

The dialogue constructs the drama of rejection, especially in the exchange between the characters. There are two moments of silence where crickets are heard in the background. Of course these sound (which are slightly heard during the whole scene) create a realistic backdrop for a summer evening. However, these silences, especially the longer one, become comical. After the first silence, Anna – seemingly so naïve that she does not perceive the sly remarks – invites Zoe, Caitlin and Bailey to come with her to the city. The fact that Anna is clearly out of sync with what is happening is made clear by the longer silence. Part of the humor comes from the fact that it is crickets we hear. In stand-up comedy, the sound of crickets after a poorly told joke is used to evoke the awkwardness of the situation. Even if being humorous on such a delicate subject as racialism is difficult, this scene clearly manages the trick.

In addressing racialism, Deer is true to the Hodinöhsö:ni' adoption wampum, both mindful of the existing practices within the Mohawk community and working to gently nudge these practices in a regenerated relationship to tradition.

The situation comedy genre is used by Deer to graft comedy codes that have developed in the particular context of television since the 1950s to elements of life in Kahnawá:ke where the series is set. The Mohawk culture is rich and diversified and can certainly not be encompassed by any stereotype made up by the colonial culture. In an essay published during the days of the Red Power movement in the United States, Vine Deloria Jr. challenged the validity of the representation of Indians as stolid and grim individuals. One of the chapters in his book develops the importance of humor in the daily life of Indians (Deloria 1969: 146). Laughter opens up the diaphragm. It opens a space in the chest. Space to breathe.

Deer knows very well that she represents clichés of gender. Such a choice entails a risk. At stake is the possibility for political recuperation of her work in the oppression of women. But her choice is also a play with social practices finding flexibility even where the norm is most apparent.

Playing with material is always a search for flexibility. Keeping this in mind, one can see *Mohawk Girls* as the work of an artist threading nacre beads on a wampum. A woven work such as wampum gains its flexibility in the constant

interplay of thread and the space between thread. *Mohawk Girls* has the flexibility of adoption in its relation to others.

And if the concept of adoption can be useful, all the while acknowledging that adoption is never without risk, it is perhaps because the interplay of woven thread reminds us the importance of play in human activity. Our aptitude for play as a dive in the imaginary opens a possibility of renewal in the games of seduction and identity construction as the episodes of *Mohawk Girls* demonstrate.

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