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This Other Me: Uses of the Alter Ego in Contemporary Art

Matthew Ryan Smith, Ph.D.

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By Matthew Ryan Smith, PhD

The shadow escapes from the body like an animal we had been sheltering.
—Gilles Deleuze[1]

IN 1921, MAN RAY photographed artist Marcel Duchamp's alter ego Rrose Sélavy for the first time. Swathed in a fur-trimmed coat with glistening rings and a diamond bracelet, her patterned hat barely hides the wisp of hair that crawls down the side of her face. Sélavy's soft, posed hands gently cradle the fur of her coat, hands that may not even be hers but those of another artist.[2] Rrose Sélavy is Marcel Duchamp is Rrose Sélavy. Her name derives from a cheeky phonetic appropriation of the French "eros" and the expression "c'est la vie." Taken together, it translates as "sexual desire, such is life," a pun indicative of Duchamp's staunch commitment to trickery and farce. The aftermath of Sélavy "coming out" through Ray's photographs continues to unfold in art historical discourse. Duchamp's androgynous alter ego deconstructed sexual identity and self-imagery to challenge the performativity of gender, question heteronormative social behavior, and eroticize the everyday. Though Sélavy was a critical event, she is certainly not alone.

Indigenous artists have formed alter egos using a cosmology of media including performance, video, film, and photography; yet, despite its frequency,

Man Ray (1890–1976), *Rrose Sélavy (Marcel Duchamp)*, 1921, gelatin silver print, in public domain.

critical response remains sluggish. "Alter ego" derives from the Latin meaning, "second I" or "another I." One of the earliest known examples of this concept occurs during the 1st century CE, when Roman politician Cicero employed the phrase "second self" to describe a "trusted friend" in a philosophical treatise.[3] However, the first use of "alter ego" in full does not occur until 1537 when English diplomat Richard Layton wrote to statesmen Thomas Cromwell about the suppression of monasteries: "Ye muste have suche as ye may trust evyn as well as your owne self, wiche muste be unto yowe as *alter ego*."[4] Later still, it was not until the 19th century that experiments in hypnosis offered further evidence that "another self" could be exhumed from an individual while they experienced an altered state of consciousness.[5]

In the Western philosophical tradition, the alter ego continues to play an important role in the theoretical formation of identity and representation, as seen in the writings of Lacan, Derrida, Husserl, Merleau-Ponty, and Levinas, among others. Speaking generally, they come to define "Other" as "the other human being in his or her differences," as quite literally an 'other ego.'[6] Of course, these models of thought are positioned within Western epistemology and more specifically, continental philosophy. The development and practice of alter egos may have existed in Indigenous cultures since time immemorial, though it has not been called as such and takes on different guises and iterations.

The practice of oral storytelling implicates and induces the orator in a complex performance that utilizes voice and movement in an economy of knowledge, pedagogy, and exchange. It is possible that one assumes alter egos when embellishing certain moments and events in a story or when embodying the identity or appearance of a character, animal, or being in a story.[7] Moreover, the alter ego draws a strong conceptual link to the trickster, who becomes visible in the alter egos of several indigenous artists including James Luna, Lori Blondeau (Cree-Saulteaux-Métis), Adrian Stimson (Siksika), and Marcus Amerman (Choctaw). Allan J. Ryan describes the trickster as a figure who transcends "geographical boundaries and tribal distinctions" and is "most often characterized by frequent teasing, outrageous punning, constant wordplay, surprising association, extreme subtlety, layered and serious reference, and considerable compassion."[8] In this sense, the trickster is a social phenomenon that functions as a therapeutic form of compartmentalizing everyday realities and experiences, be they positive or otherwise. The embodiment of the trickster as a central facet of the artist's alter ego—as one struck with good humor, earnest critique, and tireless play—says much about the multidimensional characteristics of indigenous social identities as opposed to conventional Western concepts of the self as static, even fixed.

1. Gilles Deleuze, *Francis Bacon* (London: Continuum, 2005), 16.
2. Deborah Johnson, "R(r)ose Sélavy as Man Ray: Reconsidering the Alter Ego of Marcel Duchamp," *Art Journal* 72, no. 1 (Spring 2013): 93.
3. William H. F. Altman, *The Revival of Platonism in Cicero's Late Philosophy: Platonis aemulus and the Invention of Cicero* (Lanham, MD: Lexington Books, 2016), 8.
4. Thomas Wright, ed., *Three Chapters of Letters Relating to the Suppression of Monasteries*, Volume 26 (London: Camden Society, 1843), 156.
5. David Pedersen, *Cameral Analysis: A Method of Treating the Psychoneuroses Using Hypnosis* (London: Routledge, 1994), 20.
6. Robert Bernasconi, "Other," in *The Oxford Companion to Philosophy*, 2nd edition, ed. Ted Honderich (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005).
7. Adrian Stimson, email message to author, May 15, 2017. Adrian Stimson likens the performative aspect of storytelling to embodying an alter ego.

James Luna (Payómkawichum-Ipi-Mexican-American) as Shame-man, 1993. Images courtesy of the artist.

Shame-man

IN 1993, Payómkawichum-Ipi (Luiseño-Digueño) and Mexican-American artist James Luna performed under the name Shame-man at the National Museum of Natural History in Washington, DC, as part of an ongoing collaboration with Chicano performer Guillermo Gómez-Peña. Occupying a diorama space in one of the museum's halls, Gómez-Peña is sitting on a toilet dressed as a mariachi in a straightjacket with a sign hanging around his neck that reads, "There used to be a Mexican inside this body."[9] Meanwhile, as this occurs, Shame-man moves throughout the space fluidly shifting identities between "Indian showshiner," "janitor," and "diabetic Indian." He is caught vacuuming the diorama floor; at another point, he fills a syringe with insulin and shoots its contents into his stomach (Luna is diabetic).

Museum visitors gather in the hundreds to watch the performance unfold in a state of bewilderment while, situated directly adjacent to them, supposedly "real" dioramas represent an illusory vision of Indigenous culture existing in a vacuum, far removed from everyday historical and social realities.

When asked about the origins of the Shame-man, Luna replies:

> *My main source of inspiration is from observation and from media. The Shame-man began as a TV used car salesman (Cal Worthington) who had this country, down-home persona and used cheap jokes and bits in his sales pitch. This kind of humor is universal, so it allowed me to speak to some passionate issues [such as] the sale of our cultures, but also to use this opportunity to speak about and to our communities who are guilty of selling, which seemed like something nobody in our community wanted to speak to.*[10]

Shame-man is undoubtedly a sly punning of shaman—a spiritual healer—and attempts to satirize tropes of "dressing up" and "playing Indian" while also condemning those who exploit sacred rituals for non-Indigenous audiences and financial benefit.[11]

8. Allan J. Ryan, *The Trickster Shift: Humour and Irony in Contemporary Native Art* (Vancouver: University of British Columbia Press, 1999), xii.
9. Guillermo Gómez-Peña, "Multiple Journeys: A Performance Chronology," in *Perform, Repeat, Record: Live Art in History*, ed. Amelia Jones and Adrian Heathfield (Bristol: Intellect, 2012), 322–323.
10. James Luna, email message to author, May 23, 2017.
11. Carla Taunton, "Performing Aboriginality at the Venice Biennale: The Performance Art of Rebeca [*sic*] Belmore and James Luna," *Revista Mexicana de Estudios Canadienses* no. 13 (Spring/Summer 2007): 58.

Lori Blondeau (Cree-Saulteaux-Métis) and **Adrian Stimson (Siksika)**, ***Putting the WILD Back into the West: Belle Sauvage & Buffalo Boy***, 2008, performance, Kamloops, British Columbia. Photo: Henri Robideau. Image courtesy of the photographer, henrirobideau.com.

By staging works that insist upon the physical, real presence of the body in colonial space, Luna enacts a mode of decolonial resistance.[12]

Much like his seminal, durational performance, *The Artifact Piece* (1987/1990), Shame-man offers a terse challenge to Euro-American notions of cultural authenticity and performing "Indianness" by disarming preconceived ideas of indigeneity and taking back agency over representation. On the surface, he conducts himself as a hack healer who only sees green; yet, under the surface, he exposes the "commodification of indigeneity as consumable exotica."[13] In this way, Shame-man exists for Luna (or vice versa) as a persuasive means of rectifying economic and spiritual transgressions.

Belle Sauvage

MUCH LIKE LUNA, who mentored her during the 1990s, Cree-Saulteaux-Métis artist Lori Blondeau's flamboyant cowgirl alter ego, Belle Sauvage, also draws attention to the persistence of cultural stereotyping. Hers is a name that would fit comfortably in the Antebellum South, yet it pointedly critiques the settler colonial project today. Sporting a faux buckskin dress, two toy guns set in a holster, cowboy boots, and a Stetson hat, she offers a calculated response to popular tropes of the "Indian princess" perpetuated by Disney films and the derogatory use of *squaw* to describe Indigenous women and girls. Blondeau's alter ego emerged from a 1998 postcard project made for the Dunlop Art Gallery in Regina, Saskatchewan. She explains,

> *The Dunlop asked me to make a work responding to the show* Indian Princesses and Cowgirls: Stereotypes from the Frontier. *For me, this exhibition demonstrated once again that as a Native woman I could play only two roles in frontier narratives: one as the Indian Princess and the other as the Squaw. I saw this as my opportunity to create an Indian cowgirl.*[14]

Sauvage produces a critical narrative in response to a popular narrative that did not exist previously. She radiates a feeling of idolatry for Canada's pre-Confederation West through the lens of 1950s Hollywood films like *Calamity Jane*, which features a similarly androgynous cowgirl played by actor Doris Day. Others have made connections between her and Indigenous women who performed in Wild West shows, such as Molly Spotted Elk (Penobscot, 1903–1977) and Lost Bird (Lakota, 1890–1920), as well as the vaudeville circuit during the early 20th century.[15] Still, the charm of Sauvage is how she tackles complicated social and autobiographical histories under the pretext of tricksterism.

In one of her most memorable performances, *A Moment in the Life of Belle Sauvage* (2002), she stakes her claim to fame as a participant in the only gay Wild West show touring Europe and North America. Lit from behind by red lights on a white curtain—an obvious ode to the Canadian flag—Sauvage enters the space to Doris Day's song, "The Black Hills of Dakota," before parleying to her audience, whisky bottle in hand, about her life as an outlaw on the margins; about the men and women she has known and the Wild West show that treated her as the cowgirl she yearned to be.

Surrounded by objects like a plastic bullhead for roping practice and a life-size, black-and-white photograph of a young Indigenous bronco rider, she motions to his image and asserts, "He was a bronco rider who kept horses in the 1920s on the Gordon Reserve in the Touchwood Hills, Saskatchewan. It's a pity that he couldn't leave the reserve without a pass." The young man in the photograph turns out to be Blondeau's grandfather and signifies the political hegemony of Indian agents—acting on behalf of the Canadian government—who rigorously controlled the physical movement of individuals living on reserve communities by issuing off-reserve passes.[16]

The symbolic matrix of Sauvage's performance alludes to the enduring legacy of the Indian Act in Canada and its deep impact on Blondeau's personal experience of family and community. The pedagogical potential of Sauvage's performances can serve to decolonize colonial narratives, their autobiographical details serving as evidence and instruments of learning and understanding.[17]

Buffalo Boy

SAUVAGE AND HER CHUM Buffalo Boy have performed together on several occasions and share a similar fascination with the Wild West. Buffalo Boy is the alter ego of Siksika (Blackfoot) artist Adrian Stimson who fashioned Buffalo Boy in two stages, the first during childhood and the second as part of his master's program at the University of Saskatchewan:

> *While in my studio on [a] cold winter's day, I looked out the window and repeated Buffalo Bill, Buffalo Bill, then Buffalo Boy! Buffalo Boy was born and went on to do his/her first performance,* Buffalo Boy's Wild West Peep Show, *the intersection of constructed colonized indigenous identity with Two-Spirit identity.*

Adrian Stimson (Siksika) as Buffalo Boy, in performance at *Blood Memoirs*, 2013, Tweed Museum of Art, Duluth, Minnesota. Photo: Sharon Mollerus (CC BY 2.0).

> *The other story is that Buffalo Boy emerged when I was a child about 7/8 years old, when my personality split, where I became twins, Adrian and Adrianne. Adrian would be going to school at the Lebret Indian Residential School, and his twin sister would stay at home and only come out to play after school when Adrian went in. The signifier of the "change" from Adrian to Adrianne was a white fringed pleather jacket, similar to the fringe jacket that Buffalo Boy wears.*[18]

Buffalo Boy can often be found wearing fishnet stockings, a bison G-string, a buffalo corset, a buckskin jacket, and a cowboy hat—he's a two-spirit swindler in drag swag who desires to queer the Western Frontier. Yet in an unexpected twist, he himself maintains a fleet of alter egos, lithely swapping identities between military man, gay cowboy, shaman, businessman, priest, and powwow dancer. Similar to Duchamp's Rrose Sélavy, Buffalo Boy—and his additional personas—break down gender binaries into complex, erotic spectacles that deconstruct the American cowboy archetype and dress down the colonial project.

Not unlike Sauvage's caricaturization of Calamity Jane, Buffalo Boy also lampoons William "Buffalo Bill" Cody, who often theatricalized violent skirmishes between Indigenous tribes and cowboys. Take, for instance, the performative series *Buffalo Boy's Wild West Peep Show* or the one-off, *Buffalo Boy's Battle of Little Bighorny*, where Buffalo Boy reinterprets the "conquest narratives" surrounding Manifest Destiny,[19] which decades earlier informed Cody's productions and enthralled settler audiences. In many ways, Cody's expositions propagandized the European and American 500-year "Indian War," and in this light can be viewed as a sinister form of entertainment that dramatized the erasure of tribes, theft of lands, and exploitation of resources in American cultural memory.

That being said, the symbolic and spiritual gravity of buffalo to Buffalo Boy is seldom emphasized but remains an important part of his story. The etymology of the word *buffalo* derives

12. Truman T. Lowe, "The Art of the Unexpected," *James Luna: Emendatio*, ed. Truman T. Lowe and Paul Chaat Smith (Washington, DC: National Museum of the American Indian, 2005), 14.
13. Lynne Belle and Lori Blondeau, "High Tech Storytellers, Unsettling Acts, Decolonizing Pedagogies," *INDIANacts: Aboriginal Performance Art*, web.
14. Ryan Rice and Carla Taunton, "Buffalo Boy: THEN AND NOW," *Fuse Magazine* 32, no. 3 (March 2009): 18–25.
15. Ibid.
16. Belle and Blondeau, "High Tech Storytellers, Unsettling Acts, Decolonizing Pedagogies," web.
17. Ibid.
18. Adrian Stimson, email message to author, May 15, 2017.
19. Ryan Rice quoted in "Buffalo Boy's 'Do Not Feel the Buffalo: Moving Camp,'" *Modern Fuel* (2008), web.

Marcus Amerman (Choctaw), detail from ***Buffalo Man as James Bond***, 2006, digital collage. Image courtesy of the artist.

from European settlers who confused two species of Asian and African species of *bufello* with what is now known as American bison. The semantic bastardization of *bison* as *bufello*, which later became widely accepted as "buffalo," is symptomatic of colonialism's relationship with misrepresentation.

During the 19th century, bison were hunted by settlers to the point of extinction, as part of a systemic effort to destroy the food source of Plains tribes and because they were said to jeopardize agricultural farms and cattle economies. Today, listed at approximately 30,000, bison have partially recovered and are now listed by the International Union for Conservation of Nature (IUCN) as "near threatened."[20] From Alaska to northern Mexico, the lands which they once roamed, the existential significance of bison was intricately linked to clothing, housing, and sustenance, and to many Plains people, they signified the presence of life itself. Along these lines, Stimson's formation of Buffalo Boy emphasizes how bison represent "the destruction of the Aboriginal way of life, but it also represents survival and cultural regeneration.... The bison as both icon and food source, as well as the whole history of its disappearance, is very much a part of my contemporary life."[21]

Buffalo Man

STIMSON IS NOT ALONE in his treatment of bison/buffalo to personify his alter ego. Choctaw artist Marcus Amerman's alter ego Buffalo Man was imagined several years ago at a trading post when he exchanged a beaded bracelet for a tan buffalo head. Acting as both subject and model, Buffalo Man can be found cunningly appropriating emblematic images of Western popular culture including Leonardo da Vinci's *Last Supper*, James Bond film posters, and portraits of Yoko Ono and John Lennon in Amerman's photographic collaborations with Cara Romero (Chemehuevi). Amerman maintains his belief that the buffalo head chose him as a kind of puppet, forcing him to dance for the people almost at will.[22] Resembling Stimson's conceptualization of Buffalo Boy, Amerman asserts that "Buffalo Man reemerges into society when it has reached a critical crossroads. If that society accepts the Buffalo Man into it, it signifies hope and redemption for the culture. If, on the other hand, he is rejected by society, the society is doomed."[23] For Stimson and Amerman, Buffalo Boy and Buffalo Man respectively, buffalo inspires their alter egos and operates as a powerful metaphor, serving as a means of artistic exploration and as a sign of cultural renewal.

Conclusion

IN CONSIDERING THE USE OF ALTER EGOS in contemporary art, it is necessary to look back to previous manifestations of alter egos, particularly in terms of historical connections to settler colonialism. Taken a step further, one can argue that the attempts to turn Indigenous peoples into a status quo, Judeo-Christian society through forced cultural assimilation almost necessitates the creation of an alter ego as a deliberate strategy for survival. This idea can be applied to White Earth Ojibwe author Gerald Vizenor's influential explanation of survivance as a process of continuity and, as Stimson writes, "an active sense of presence."[24] When asked why artists choose to adopt alter egos, Stimson addresses this subject candidly by proposing that "to act like someone/thing else" in a social milieu ordered by racist thought and policy insists that one must "be someone else in order to succeed."[25] In nearly all the works mentioned, the alter ego functions as an entryway into thinking through cultural assimilation, racial discrimination, and social hierarchy. As follows, the very concept of alter ego is burdened with the history of European colonialism in North America and is indicative of its unyielding powers of corruption.

But while the alter ego may have emerged from this troubled history, it has also transformed into a persuasive mode of decolonial critique, of political resistance, and of course a little bit of fun.

20. C. Gates and K. Aune, "*Bison bison*," *The IUCN Red List of Threatened Species* (2008), web.
21. Lynne Bell, "Adrian Stimson: Buffalo Boy at Burning Man," *Canadian Art* (June 1, 2007), web.
22. Rice and Taunton, "Buffalo Boy: THEN AND NOW," 18–25.
22. Marcus Amerman, email message to author, May 15, 2017.
23. Judy Fleming, "Marcus Amerman: Choctaw," *Contemporary North American Indigenous Artists* via *Tumblr* (March 28, 2010), web.
24. Gerald Vizenor, *Manifest Manners: Narratives on Postindian Survivance* (Lincoln: Nebraska, 1999), vii.
25. Adrian Stimson formulates the connection between alter egos and racism directed toward indigenous peoples in his e-mail correspondence with the author.