

Sophie McCall
Department of English
Simon Fraser University

Lori Blondeau and Margo Kane: Reinventing Cowboys and Indians

Inhabiting her persona of “Belle Sauvage,” Cree/Saulteaux/Métis performance artist Lori Blondeau saunters on stage wearing chaps and carrying pistols in front of a life-size black and white photograph of an Indian Cowboy—her grandfather, who was a bronco rider in the 1920s on the Gordon reserve in the Touchwood Hills in Saskatchewan. He was also a traditional dancer. Although Blondeau acknowledges that “he showed us that as First Nations people you can live in both worlds and still maintain your identity and beliefs as a First Nations person,” Belle Sauvage comments sardonically that “it’s a pity he couldn’t leave the reserve without a pass” (Bell 49). In recreating the historical figure of the Indian Cowboy through her grandfather, Blondeau is challenging the myths of the frontier that would assert a sharp opposition between “Cowboys” and “Indians”; yet Belle Sauvage, a transgressive, crossdressing, genderbending Indian-Princess-meets-Rodeo-Queen is also exploring the elision of Indigenous women’s history in narratives of the frontier. Historically, cowgirls (both Euro-Canadian and Indigenous) played a significant role in ranching and rodeo culture yet they also tend to get written out of history (Burgess 47). Belle Sauvage remembers and honours the histories of such Indigenous women as Molly Spotted Elk and Lost Bird, who performed in Wild West shows and vaudeville in the early twentieth century. She is also evoking her grandmother, whom she describes as “a skilled horsewoman who could outride the Indian agent” (Bell 50).

Building upon the ground-breaking work of Marilyn Burgess and Gail Guthrie Valaskakis in *Cowgirls and Indian Princesses: Stereotypes from the Frontier* (1994), this paper examines how Aboriginal women writers and performers have responded to these two romantic, vexing, seductive, and stereotypical figures, the cowboy and the Indian. I show how Blondeau, along with Métis writer and performer Margo Kane in her one-woman play, *Confessions of an Indian Cowboy* (2001), have challenged masculinist and racist ideologies that inform frontier myths, while reclaiming traditions of Indian cowboys, rodeo, and horse culture. Their work exposes the ugly side of Canada’s frontier narrative and the dreams of domination that the settler story of nation-building contains while at the same time revealing the little-known common ground that cowboys and Indians share. It is possible that this common ground is even more dangerous and disruptive of Canada’s sense of itself, and has been even more deeply repressed than has the story of violence that underwrites the takeover of land. Still another dimension to their performances is their constant interchange of gender identities. By adopting multiple personas in their one-woman shows—Kane, for example, plays six characters who range from a tomboy to an Indian Cowboy to Kokum to the “All Nations Galaxy Indian Rodeo Princess of 1965”—Blondeau and Kane reject sterile identity scripts and celebrate the possibilities of performance and theatricality. Both performances are a testament to Indigenous women artists who continue to transform the physical and discursive space of the stage to order to imagine a greater sense of autonomy for themselves and their audience.

Works Cited

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