

# “I Wonder Which of You is Real”

## The Indigenous Confidence Man in John Kneubuhl’s “The Night of the Two-Legged Buffalo”

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**ABSTRACT:** In response to Judith Yaross Lee’s introduction of a framework designed to probe the relationship between empire and American humor, this article analyzes John Kneubuhl’s “The Night of the Two-Legged Buffalo,” a 1966 episode of *The Wild Wild West* (1965-69). Kneubuhl (1920-92) was a Samoan American playwright who wrote for theater, television, and film. Like Mark Twain, he demonstrated a lifelong interest in the trope of the confidence man. In “The Night of the Two-Legged Buffalo” he depicts protagonists and antagonists alike in the US borderlands as con artists contending for power. While agents Jim West and Artemus Gordon emerge as cultural impersonators who serve the ideology of Manifest Destiny, the Prince of the South Sea Coral Islands, a Polynesian aristocrat, deploys American hegemony in Oceania. Kneubuhl draws on conventions of the *fale aitu*, a Samoan theatrical genre, as well as his association with Sam Amalu, a Native Hawaiian humorist and con man known for his elaborate pranks and swindles. As a site of contest between what Lee terms “neocolonial hybridity” and “postcolonial discontinuity,” “The Night of the Two-Legged Buffalo” exemplifies Kneubuhl’s unique trickster aesthetics.

**KEYWORDS:** confidence man, humor, imperialism, John Kneubuhl, Oceania and the Pacific, postcolonialism, Sam Amalu, television, tricksters, *The Wild Wild West*

“It’s good to be shifty in a new country,” recommends Captain Simon Suggs, the nineteenth-century literary antihero created by Johnson Jones Hooper.<sup>1</sup>

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1 Johnson Jones Hooper, *Adventures of Captain Simon Suggs: Late of the Tallapoosa Volunteers, Together with “Taking the Census” and Other Alabama Sketches* (Tuscaloosa: University of Alabama Press, 1993), 26.

In “American Humor and Matters of Empire: A Proposal and Invitation,” Judith Yaross Lee suggests that Suggs’s dictum resonates with American comic texts ranging from Mark Twain’s *A Connecticut Yankee in King Arthur’s Court* (1889) to the Bob Hope and Bing Crosby “Road” movies (1940-62) and Trey Parker, Robert Lopez, and Matt Stone’s musical *The Book of Mormon* (2011). Lee associates this “shiftiness” with both the “bumbling American naïf” that evolved from classical eirons and “sharp-witted” European picaros.<sup>2</sup> Talk of Simon Suggs and picaros also brings to mind the confidence man, another stock character central to the development of American literature and culture. Writing on Herman Melville’s *The Confidence-Man*, an anonymous 1857 reviewer comments, “One of the indigenous characters who has figured long in our journals, courts, and cities, is ‘the Confidence Man’: his doings form one of the staples of villainy, and an element in the romance of roguery. Countless are the dodges attributed to this ubiquitous personage, and his adventures would equal those of Jonathan Wild.”<sup>3</sup> As Matthew Seybold argues, Melville stands as the foremost literary interpreter of the confidence man figure, a position rivaled only by Mark Twain. *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* (1885), Seybold suggests, reads as “a behavioral handbook for conning, replete with impersonations, seductions, larcenies, evasions of prosecution, and thoughtful justifications of each.”<sup>4</sup>

Hooper, Melville, and Mark Twain, respectively, contributed to the mythos of the confidence man as an American archetype. Although we might well be tempted, along with Melville’s 1857 reviewer, to label the confidence man an “indigenous character,” it would be more appropriate to recognize this figure as a site of contest among metropolitan, settler, and native cultures. In terms of Lee’s paradigm, the confidence man lies at the intersection of colonial continuity—that is, “comic traditions drawn from those of previous European imperial powers in the Americas”—and postcolonial discontinuity, “comic traditions . . . marked by anti-imperialist and anti-aristocratic ideologies grounded in the

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2 Judith Yaross Lee, “American Humor and Matters of Empire: A Proposal and Invitation,” *Studies in American Humor*, ser. 4, 6, no. 1 (2020): 8-43; 8.

3 “Boston *Evening Transcript*, 10 April 1857,” in *Herman Melville: The Contemporary Reviews*, ed. Bill Higgins and Hershel Parker (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009), 489.

4 Matt Seybold, “Tom Sawyer Impersonates ‘the Original Confidence Man,’” *Mark Twain Journal* 52, no. 2 (2014): 136-42; 137.

American Revolution" (8). As developed by Hooper, Melville, Mark Twain, and other writers, the confidence man emerges as an adaptation of mythic, classical, and European pretexts, though one amplified by the entrepreneurial culture of capitalism.<sup>5</sup> The nineteenth-century literary confidence man reads as a critique of American market rapaciousness, on one hand, and an attempt to recognize autochthonous New World traditions that might distinguish colonial culture from that of the metropolis, on the other.

But what of the truly Indigenous confidence man? As John Wharton Lowe suggests, "For much of our history, that stern unyielding profile of the Indian that used to grace our nickels has dominated the popular imagination. The feathered, tearful Indian . . . on an interstate who starred in a modern ad against littering is a contemporary example."<sup>6</sup> Of course, Iron Eyes Cody (né Oscar Espera de Corti), who played the role of the Indian in this ad, was himself a Sicilian American actor cast in the persona of the noble savage for many film and television roles. Impersonators such as Iron Eyes Cody and Edgar Laplante (1888-1944), also known as Chief White Elk, show how the settler con artist might pose as a Native American. Such figures recur throughout "the conflictive history of the North/South dialogue and the multicultural debate," as Guillermo Gómez-Peña observes: "Americans and Europeans have often performed involuntary colonialist roles. . . . They often unknowingly become ventriloquists, impresarios, *flaneurs*, messiahs, or cultural transvestites."<sup>7</sup> To deem the American confidence man an "indigenous character" is to risk complicity with a settler con game. However, we might also think of Gerald Vizenor's many fictional Native American tricksters—especially Almost Browne and Harold of Orange—both of whom use their narrative wiles to bamboozle the settler establishment. Here, I turn our attention to another Indigenous artist, a dramatist who made extensive use of the con artist motif. Samoan American John Kneubuhl

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5 Jeffrey Sklansky, "The Elusive Sovereign: New Intellectual and Social Histories of Capitalism," *Modern Intellectual History* 9, no. 1 (2012): 233-48; 244.

6 John Wharton Lowe, "Coyote's Jokebook: Native American Humor and the Dismantlement of Empire," keynote address, 2020 Quarry Farm Symposium, Elmira, NY, October 2, 2020. Video available at <https://marktwainstudies.com/events/2020-quarry-farm-symposium>.

7 Guillermo Gómez-Peña, *The New World Border: Prophecies, Poems, and Loqueras for the End of the Century* (San Francisco: City Lights, 1996), 215.

(1920-92) studied drama at Yale, wrote for stage and screen, and inaugurated an Oceanic modernism that integrates metropolitan avant-garde technique with Polynesian cultural practices. After offering a broad overview of Kneubuhl's con artist characters, I analyze his most elaborate dramatization of the Indigenous confidence man in "The Night of the Two-Legged Buffalo," a 1966 episode of the television series *The Wild Wild West* (CBS, 1965-69). "The Night of the Two-Legged Buffalo" captures Kneubuhl's lifelong engagement with postcolonial thematics as well as Indigenous Polynesian and metropolitan comic traditions, including experimentation with the Samoan *fale aitu*, a comic performance genre that directs irreverent humor against the status quo, and a celebration of the historical Kānaka Maoli (Native Hawaiian) con artist and humorist Sam Amalu. Kneubuhl's "The Night of the Two-Legged Buffalo" thus exemplifies Lee's argument that "the transnational context of humor and empire posits the US as an imperial center that absorbs and adapts other cultural practices and . . . recognizes distinct minority humors as hybrids that belong to the larger, messier, transnational whole" ("American Humor and Matters of Empire," 12). And yet Kneubuhl also captures the ways in which an artist of the colonial periphery might reverse this polarity by subordinating metropolitan forms and conventions to Indigenous cultural practices.

Born and raised in Leone, American Samoa, Kneubuhl attended Honolulu's Punahou School and matriculated to Yale, where he studied under Thornton Wilder and other luminaries of modern drama. During World War II, Kneubuhl completed the intensive course of study at the US Navy Japanese Language School in Boulder, Colorado. Following service with naval intelligence, Kneubuhl was named associate art director for the Honolulu Community Theatre. He wrote a number of groundbreaking plays in the late 1940s, including *This City Is Haunted* (1947), the first literary work to feature Hawai'i pidgin.<sup>8</sup> He also wrote and directed the biopic *Damien* (1950), which is considered the first cinematic feature to have been produced by a Polynesian filmmaker. In 1950, Kneubuhl moved to Los Angeles, where he worked for almost twenty years as a freelance screenwriter, contributing teleplays to many programs, including *Boris Karloff's Thriller*, *The Fugitive*, *Gunsmoke*, *Star Trek*, and *Ironside*. Returning to Samoa

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8 Jackie Pualani Johnson, afterword to *Think of a Garden and Other Plays*, by John Kneubuhl (Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 1997), 251-66; 254.

in 1968, Kneubuhl served as an educator in American Samoa, Hawai'i, and Tonga. During this time Kneubuhl wrote his most celebrated stage dramas: *Mele Kanikau: A Pageant* (1975), *A Play: A Play* (1990), and *Think of a Garden* (1992), which was named Production of the Year at New Zealand's Chapman Tripp Theatre Awards. According to Jackie Pualani Johnson, Kneubuhl's dramas foreground "the retelling of historical truths, a passionate belief in the majesty of Polynesian culture, and . . . themes of alienation, spirituality, and allegiance to family" (Afterword, 256). The gravitas of Kneubuhl's writing also depends on and reflects his lifelong appreciation for the clowning tradition of *fale aitu*. As Otto Heim suggests, Kneubuhl was deeply concerned that this cultural form, which exerted a profound influence on his dramatic technique, was in danger of being lost.

Given his admiration for what Heim describes as the "shapeshifting clown" of the *fale aitu*, it is little wonder that Kneubuhl consistently returned to the figure of the confidence man—both as villain and trickster hero.<sup>9</sup> Con artists are central characters in Kneubuhl's early plays *Saint Mac* (1941) and *The Moon and I* (1942) as well as in his teleplays for the TV series *James A. Michener's Adventures in Paradise* (ABC, 1959-62), to which Kneubuhl contributed six episodes. "Touch of Genius" (1961), for example, features two nefarious art swindlers (John Abbott and Warren Stevens) reminiscent of the king and the duke in *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*. Not surprisingly, Kneubuhl's TV westerns also foreground con artist characters. "The Magician," a 1963 episode of *Gunsmoke*, finds Marshall Dillon (James Arness) sidelined as the prime mover of justice in *Dodge City* by Jeremiah Dark (Lloyd Corrigan), a patent medicine salesman and cardsharp who uses theatrical illusion to seek justice for his wronged family. Kneubuhl's 1965 *Wagon Train* episode "The Isaiah Quickfox Story" likewise celebrates the spectral drama staged by the titular Native American trickster (Frank DeKova) that illuminates his tribe's decimation at the hands of murderous settlers. With its climactic excursion into a dangerous cavern, the episode in some ways reads as a critical recasting of Tom Sawyer's confrontation with Injun Joe. As suggested by their biblical names, these figures operate as jeremiadic prophets who decry the violence and oppression inflicted on Native Americans by the community at large, an idea that also informs Kneubuhl's script for "Strangers in Our Own

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9 Otto Heim, "Samoan Ghost Stories: John Kneubuhl and Oral History," *Shima: The International Journal of Research into Island Cultures* 12, no. 1 (2018), 35-47; 43.

Land" (1968), the first post-pilot episode of *Hawaii Five-O* (CBS, 1968-80). This rewriting of Elmer Rice's 1923 play *The Adding Machine* revolves around Benny Kalua (Simon Oakland), a Native Hawaiian nightclub owner infuriated by colonization of the Hawaiian Islands. While entertaining tourists at his tiki bar, Benny cons others into murdering key developers and assimilationists.<sup>10</sup> Here again, the names are symbolic—Benny's last name, Kalua, the Hawaiian word for "double stranded," suggests his duality as a con artist as well as the alienation of the Indigenous subaltern.

Although Kneubuhl experimented with fictional tricksters in many dramas, his most sustained treatment of the Indigenous con artist may be his *Wild Wild West* episode "The Night of the Two-Legged Buffalo." Kneubuhl wrote eight episodes for the innovative series, which brings the TV western together with the spy story and steampunk science fiction. The frame narrative of *The Wild Wild West* revolves around the exploits of nineteenth-century Secret Service agents Jim West (Robert Conrad) and Artemus Gordon (Ross Martin), personally charged by President Ulysses S. Grant with troubleshooting threats to a precarious American empire. Kneubuhl created the program's most celebrated villain, mad scientist Dr. Miguelito Loveless (Michael Dunn), a Californio dispossessed in the wake of the US-Mexican War. In his first appearance in the episode "The Night the Wizard Shook the Earth" (1965), Dr. Loveless points on a map to a tract of Southern California land and declares, "All this once belonged to my grandmother—Doña Maria Concepcion de Vega—and to her brothers and to their wives. I am the only one of her descendants left. The Spanish Crown took it and now that the State of California owns it, I want it back. But the state refuses to return it to me. Piracy!"<sup>11</sup> As Kneubuhl explains in an interview with Jon Enright, Dr. Loveless was inspired by his own life experiences:

I'm half Samoan and I thought it would be funny if I teased myself, a no-account half-caste, and made Michael Dunn half Mexican and half, what? European? White anyway. . . . His mother was a landed patrician lady, Californian . . .

10 Stanley Orr, "'Strangers in Our Own Land': John Kneubuhl, Modern Drama, and *Hawai'i Five-O*," *American Quarterly* 67, no. 3 (2015): 913-36; 913, 928.

11 *The Wild Wild West*, season 1, episode 3, "The Night the Wizard Shook the Earth," directed by Bernard Kowalski, written by John Kneubuhl, aired October 1, 1965, on CBS.

Spanish extraction; and his father, the exploiter, the plunderer, the colonialist, the imperialist . . . robbed him of all his lands, and his heritage and his culture.<sup>12</sup>

As Sarina Pearson argues, Dr. Loveless emerges as a postcolonial insurgent who uses his considerable intellectual and creative powers to oppose American manifest destiny as well as European imperialism.<sup>13</sup> While dramatizing his own experience in the character of Dr. Loveless, Kneubuhl similarly “teased himself” in “The Night of the Man-Eating House,” a 1966 episode of *The Wild Wild West*.<sup>14</sup> In this episode, Tejano Lawrence Liston Day (Hurd Hatfield) abandons his efforts to assimilate and so sheds his colonial mimicry, declaring, “Me llamo Díaz! Díaz, do you hear, not Day. Díaz! Day—that was the name my grandfather chose, because he wanted to belong to the gringos’ way of life.”<sup>15</sup> As with Benny Kalua and many of Kneubuhl’s other characters, Day/Díaz is compelled to adopt the stratagems of the con artist in order to perform a dual identity. “The Night of the Two-Legged Buffalo,” however, offers a different interpretation of this insurgent figure, one that is even more dependent on the confidence man motif.

Together with Kneubuhl’s *Adventures in Paradise* and *Hawaii Five-O* teleplays, “The Night of the Two-Legged Buffalo” exemplifies the dramatist’s persistent gravitation toward Oceanic subject matter and themes. In this episode, West and Gordon escort a Polynesian dignitary, “the Prince of the South Sea Coral Islands” (Nick Adams), from San Francisco to Washington, DC, where he will sign a treaty on behalf of his regal father. The treaty will ensure favorable US relations with the island kingdom, which has long hosted a group of influential American missionaries. Ignoring the advice of his escorts, the prince insists on stopping

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12 Interview with John Kneubuhl, *The Wild Wild West: The Complete First Season* (Burbank, CA: Warner Home Video, 2007), DVD.

13 Sarina Pearson, “Hollywood Westerns and the Pacific: John Kneubuhl and *The Wild Wild West*,” *Transformations* no. 24 (2014), n.p.

14 Stanley Orr, “Welcome to the Fabled South’: John Kneubuhl’s Global Southern Gothic, 1959-1966,” in *Small-Screen Souths: Region, Identity, and the Cultural Politics of Television*, ed. Lisa Hinrichsen, Gina Caison, and Stephanie Rountree (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 2017), 203-20; 214-15.

15 *The Wild Wild West*, season 2, episode 12, “The Night of the Man-Eating House,” directed by Alan Crosland Jr., written by John Kneubuhl, aired December 2, 1966, on CBS.



at a luxurious health spa in the southwestern desert, an outré setting in which con artists flourish, and, indeed, one that perpetuates its own kind of flimflam. According to Kneubuhl's script notes for "The Night of the Two-Legged Buffalo," the episode opens with an establishing shot of an "exclusive resort . . . fronted by a most unprepossessing adobe wall that has a grille gate in it. Arid, rocky country—a crumbling forgotten corner of the American Southwest." Within the "Main Hacienda," however, "we are treated to a surprise: here are flowers, exotic greenery, fountains, all in fairytale contrast to the arid outside world, and a rather astonishing assortment of people, all of them very, very wealthy."<sup>16</sup> Complete with guest-room haciendas, Native American attendants, and a "South Seas style" suite for the prince (Kneubuhl notes, "It looks, frankly, as if Trader Vic had been let loose in the place" [4]). The property recalls borderlands resorts such as the Mission Inn in Riverside, California, and Harvey House properties such as La Posada in Winslow, Arizona. Within the walls of these "Spanish fantasy" heritage hotels, as Carey McWilliams labels them, cultural transvestites such as the Southern California boosters Frank Miller and Charles Fletcher Lummis impersonated Franciscan monks and Mexican vaqueros, respectively.<sup>17</sup> Indeed, in Kneubuhl's variation on this theme, no one is quite what they seem.

As West reaches this "grand hotel," his wagoner asks, "This place charges two hundred dollars a day for room and board and taking a mud bath?" He replies, "Yeah, but it's very special mud. And besides they don't allow any tipping."<sup>18</sup> In keeping with this ironic ("eironic") remark, throughout the episode, West demonstrates his interest in exposing the pretenses and deceptions he encounters at every turn. Discussing *The Wild Wild West* frame narrative, Pearson contends that "the handsome and heroic James West" symbolizes "whiteness, American colonial authority, and effortless physical, sexual and social masculine mastery"—this in contrast to his partner Artie Gordon, who prefers disguise and subterfuge ("Hollywood Westerns and the Pacific"). That said, even West operates

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16 John Kneubuhl, "The Night of the Two-Legged Buffalo," January 8, 1966, *The Wild Wild West*, Broadcasting Collection, American Radio Archives, Grant R. Brimhall Library, Thousand Oaks, CA, 1.

17 Carey McWilliams, *North from Mexico: The Spanish-Speaking People of the United States* (Santa Barbara, CA: ABC-CLIO, 2016), 21.

18 *The Wild Wild West*, season 1, episode 23, "The Night of the Two-Legged Buffalo," directed by Edward Dein, written by John Kneubuhl, aired March 11, 1966, on CBS.



here as a con artist who takes on multiple guises. He checks into the resort as “Roger Colby,” a member of the prince’s entourage. And, in a larger sense, West’s imperial persona depends on practices of cultural appropriation and transvestism. Like the historical Lummi, Jim West adventures through the borderlands in caballero togs—bolero jacket, form-fitting pants, and high-heeled cowboy boots. Commenting on his donning of this Mexican wardrobe, West reflects, “You know, I’ve always thought that I might have made a decent matador. In fact, during some of my time in Spain I actually studied some flamenco dancing. I also studied martial arts and used those in my fights with the dance and martial art stances and postures. I would just put all those things together.”<sup>19</sup> West’s frame-narrative character is even more dependent than the Roger Colby persona on cultural impersonation. His mercurial identity underscores the ways in which, to return to Lee’s analysis, “the US as an imperial center . . . absorbs and adapts other cultural practices and has colonies both at home and abroad” (“American Humor and Matters of Empire,” 12). West, therefore, represents something of a contradiction within the universe of the western; he is ostensibly a direct man of action and few words who, in keeping with the cowboy archetype, privileges reality over representation, yet he also engages in manifold con games that we might associate with more loquacious figures such as his partner Artie Gordon.<sup>20</sup>

Kneubuhl discovers in Ross Martin’s character an ideal vehicle for exaggerating the con games and cultural impersonations latent in Jim West. When the prince is spirited away by kidnapers, Artie takes his place, donning South Sea Coral Islands ceremonial garb (a pastiche recalling various historical Polynesian styles). Although he comes to feel that West has “conned” him into the role (another nod to West’s own stratagems), Artie sees his cultural transvestitism as the lynchpin of their plan to maintain the American colonial presence in the South Sea Coral Islands:

Look, you know as well as I do that king may happen to like Americans now, but he’s only been civilized for the past twenty years. Now, that’s a very thin crust; underneath, he’s still a savage. If anything happened to his son during his visit here, he’ll revert. He’ll massacre every missionary, every man, woman and child on that island.

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19 Craig Reid, “Wild Wild West TV Retrospective” *Cinefantastique* 31, no. 8 (1999): 47-54; 47.

20 Jane Tompkins, *West of Everything: The Inner Life of Westerns* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1992), 51.

Kneubuhl here puts some very significant words in Artie's mouth: the ascription of savagery to Pacific Islanders as part of the foundational myth of European empire building in Oceania. "The wholesale condemnation by Christian missionaries of Oceanic cultures as savage, lascivious, and barbaric," writes Epeli Hau'ofa, "has had a lasting and negative effect on people's views of their histories and traditions. In a number of Pacific societies people still divide their history in two parts: the era of darkness associated with savagery and barbarism; and the era of light and civilization ushered in by Christianity."<sup>21</sup> Propounding this racist, ethnocentric rationale, Artie nevertheless assumes the identity of the prince and struts about the resort spouting Briticisms in lavalava and feathered cape. Blending chicanery, buffoonery, and colonial rhetoric worthy of a character in a G. A. Henty novel, Artie's impersonation of the prince amplifies and illuminates the cultural appropriations otherwise naturalized in the character Jim West. It is a parodic gesture that has its roots in Kneubuhl's Samoan upbringing.

In Kneubuhl's "The Perils of Penrose," a 1961 episode of *Adventures in Paradise*, an amoral British con man poses as a Melanesian shaman in order to loot the natives' burial caves. Throughout this episode, Kneubuhl uses comic motifs such as pratfalls, outlandish costumes, and mistaken identity motifs to expose the manifold outrages of Westerners in Oceania. As I have argued elsewhere, Kneubuhl inflects "The Perils of Penrose" with allusions to the Samoan *fale aitu* genre.<sup>22</sup> "The Night of the Two-Legged Buffalo" does not necessarily include these explicit *fale aitu* cues, but it does likewise harken back to the "house of the spirits" dramas that Kneubuhl experienced as a child in Samoa (Heim, "Samoa Ghost Stories," 43). Beginning as *po'ula* ("teasing night") rituals in which men and women would gather in the "house of the spirits," the *fale aitu* evolved into itinerant troupes performing "satirical and irreverent" sketches. Led by the *fa'aluma*, a ritual clown licensed by spirit possession, the *fale aitu* may ridicule chiefs and other authority figures, such

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21 Hau'ofa, Epeli, *We Are the Ocean: Selected Works* (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 2010), 28.

22 Stanley Orr, "Diving-Dress Gods: Modernism, Cargoism, and the Fale Aitu Tradition in John Kneubuhl's 'The Perils of Penrose,'" in *New Oceania: Modernisms and Modernities in the Pacific*, ed. Matthew Hayward and Maebh Long (New York: Routledge, 2020), 190-209.

as ministers, doctors, government officials, and world leaders.<sup>23</sup> According to Caroline Sinavaiana, the *fale aitu* deploys “caricature, hyperbole, and satire” against the establishment: “In the sketches, normative status roles are reversed: the high are made low and the world momentarily ‘turned upside down,’ as found in carnival traditions elsewhere.”<sup>24</sup> “The Night of the Two-Legged Buffalo” similarly presents the confidence man as a Western impersonator who appropriates native garb as part of a larger scheme to exploit and manipulate Pacific Islanders. Perpetrated in the name of US hegemony in the Pacific, Artie’s cultural transvestite ruse fails on many levels and in a burlesque fashion. Once he arrives at the resort, Artie begins to regret his disguise. When Jim compliments him on his “very colorful” attire, Artie jokingly laments the scantiness of his blue feathered cape: “I’ll die of pneumonia. . . . Feather capes! It’s a wonder every bird in the world hasn’t frozen to death.” In short, Artie is made to look ridiculous; the gravity of his pronouncements about Polynesian savagery ill comports with the tableau of the bare-chested Secret Service Agent shivering in the cold. Kneubuhl, therefore, lampoons Artie as a bumbling agent of empire who attempts to further US interests through impersonation. In “The Night of the Two-Legged Buffalo” heroes and villains alike are con artists on the make.

Kneubuhl achieves a similar effect in “The Night of the Two-Legged Buffalo” to that of “The Professor’s Yarn,” a story recounted in chapter 36 of Mark Twain’s *Life on the Mississippi* (1883). In this tale of ubiquitous swindlers and card sharps, what results from “a perversion of the ideal of interpersonal trust,” Sami Ludwig argues, is “a manipulation of a reliable sense of reality into patterns of an exploitative confidence game.”<sup>25</sup> Likewise, Lady Beatrice Marquand-Gaynesford (Dana Wynter), the seemingly genteel woman, is in reality “Bea,” the hard-bitten ringleader of a trio of European criminals posing as aristocratic guests. While exchanging public pleasantries about apéritifs and mineral water, these ruthless pretenders indulge sotto voce in murderous conspiracies and speculations about their ill-gotten

23 Victoria N. Kneubuhl, “Traditional Performance in Samoan Culture: Two Forms,” *Asian Theatre Journal* 4, no. 2 (1987): 166-76.

24 Caroline Sinavaiana, “Comic Theater in Samoa as Indigenous Media,” *Pacific Studies* 15, no.4 (1992): 199-209; 202.

25 Sami Ludwig, *Pragmatist Realism: The Cognitive Paradigm in American Realist Texts* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 2002), 21.

gains. Bea, who immediately sees through Artie's impersonation, directs Count Vittorio Pellagrini (Paul Comi) and Count Claude Duchamps (Robert Emhardt), an English adventurer posing as a French nobleman, to kill West and kidnap the prince for ransom. The con games intensify as the episode reaches its apex; it is revealed that the prince's kidnapping was a ruse on the part of Colby/West, who arranged the abduction in order to protect his charge from harm. But even this revelation gives way to another disclosure, as we learn that the prince himself is in league with the Europeans. With the help of Bea and her confederates, the prince sets the stage for a drama in which West and Gordon will die in an effort to save him from bandits. He intends to embarrass the Americans, provoking his vengeful father to wipe out the missionaries. "All my life," he complains, "my dear papa and his missionary friends have told me what to like and what not to like, as if I didn't have any mind whatsoever of my own." With the meddling foreigners out of the way, the prince will be able to inherit the kingdom and claim his autonomy: "I shall be king to do whatever I want without influence from the outside!" Ultimately, the prince stages a buffalo hunt with Jim and Artie standing in for the eponymous game. "Somewhere I heard of hunting buffalo from horseback with a lance," the prince muses. "I think I should like that. Diverting, don't you think?"

Not surprisingly, West and Gordon foil the prince and his unscrupulous accomplices. Indeed, in yet another plot twist, Bea attempts to double-cross the prince and make off with his jewels. Holding the prince at gunpoint, she denigrates his home, referring to it as a "rotten island" and taunts him. "Do you think I care about that silly comic opera kingdom of yours and your childish dreams of glory?," she asks. Bea has little in common with Secret Service agents West and Gordon, but all of these Westerners share a disdain for Oceanic civilization. It is worth noting that "The Night of the Two-Legged Buffalo," alongside many of Kneubuhl's other contributions to *The Wild Wild West*, upends the "reverse invasion" motif central to American humor. As Lee points out in "American Humor and Matters of Empire," "Reframing the dominant tradition of vernacular humor, with its eirons and reverse invasions, as an expression of postcolonial ideology both invites reconsideration of the genteel traditions descended from European models and recognizes distinct minority humors as hybrids that belong to the larger, messier, transnational whole" (12). US reverse invasion plots often feature an American eiron or eironic duo who find themselves pitted against corrupt locals; the

misadventures that ensue “uphold US hegemony by affirming their American heroes . . . and the democratic values that they embody and pursue” (9). With their jokes and gags, West and Gordon at times recall ironic buddies of the reverse invasion motif; their juxtaposition with corrupt aristocrats certainly resonates with this pretext. And yet “The Night of the Two-Legged Buffalo” also presents a world of multiple invasions, a milieu in which conventional distinctions collapse. The prince and his European confederates have invaded America, just as the prince’s incursions have been provoked by US missionaries who have infiltrated his homeland. At one point, the prince complains to Artie that he is only allowed to wear jewelry when he is away from home: “You see, jewels are a sign of vanity and your American missionaries have quite filled my poor papa’s head with preachments against vanity. Ah, what a relief it is to be human again!” Kneubuhl’s *Wild Wild West* episodes not only frequently document the Spanish and Native American presence throughout the US borderlands but also posit West and Gordon as invaders—an implication elaborated in the Dr. Loveless episodes as well as in “The Night of the Man-Eating House.” In its reliance on con games and invasions, “The Night of the Two-Legged Buffalo” clearly emerges as a hybrid work blending the imperial/colonial genre of the Western and Indigenous traditions such as the Samoan *fale aitu*, within what Lee identifies as “the larger, messier, transnational whole” (12).

Jim and Artie make short work of Bea’s gambit and finally resume their trip to Washington. In the interest of the treaty, however, they must turn a blind eye to the prince’s shenanigans. In the episode’s denouement, the prince enjoys his delicacies while Jim and Artie vent their frustrations:

**PRINCE:** Delightful. Pâté à truffles, my favorite.

**WEST:** Do you have any idea how lucky you are?

**GORDON:** By all rights you should be in jail.

**PRINCE:** Come now, gentleman. Divine right of kings and all that rot, you know. Besides, I couldn’t sign a treaty in jail, now could I?

**WEST:** You tried to double-cross your own father, kill me, and—Artemus, you tell him.

**GORDON:** Oh no! Not me! It’d take me all day!

**PRINCE:** Trivia, trivia, gentlemen. After all, I am a barbarian. What do you expect?

**WEST:** I expect a treaty, signed, sealed, and delivered.

**PRINCE:** The treaty, the treaty, such a bore! All right, your government shall have a treaty.

**GORDON:** Your Highness, don't you even feel a little remorse?

**PRINCE:** For what, my dear Artemus? For doing what comes naturally to a half-naked savage from the South Seas? You're lucky I didn't try to cook you as well as kill you.

**WEST:** I wonder which of you is real, the gourmet bon vivant or the jolly lancer on horseback.

**PRINCE:** I haven't decided yet, James; but when I am king, as I soon shall be, we can decide then. You will come and visit me, won't you? We can even hunt together.

When James asks what they will hunt, the prince replies, I wouldn't dream of telling you now. I do adore a surprise ending, don't you?" In an audio interview on "The Night of the Two-Legged Buffalo," Kneubuhl opines that actor Nick Adams, third in line (behind Red Buttons) to play the role of the prince, "did very well in his own way despite the fact that he was not a comedian." Adams is, of course, best remembered for his starring role as Johnny Yuma in the TV western *The Rebel* (1959-61). Showcasing Adams's comic performance, this scene offers a fit summation for the episode as a whole—a veritable festival of con artists in which every character enjoys at least two personae. West here returns to his role as Secret Service agent and continues to search for the "real" prince, whom he thinks can be reduced to either the "gourmet bon vivant" or the "jolly lancer on horseback." Interestingly, in the original script for the episode West refers to the prince as "the jolly lancer on horseback spearing your own long pig" (E-61-62). Of course, "long pig" is the nineteenth-century Pacific pidgin term for human flesh consumed through cannibalism.<sup>26</sup> In other words, West can only understand the prince as a civilized connoisseur or a savage cannibal. But the prince will not gratify West's positivism. According to Kneubuhl's script notes, the agents exchange "helpless glances. He hasn't changed. He will never change" (IV-59).

That is, unlike many of Kneubuhl's Indigenous con artists, who struggle to reconcile their native and subaltern subject positions, the prince revels in his multiple identities. For this trickster, the "barbarian" and "half-naked savage

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26 Ian W. Toll, *The Conquering Tide: War in the Pacific Islands, 1942-1944*, vol. 2 of the *Pacific War Trilogy* (New York: Norton, 2016), 191.

from the South Seas” are Western stereotypes that he might deploy alongside his persona of “gourmet bon vivant.” Indeed, after the fashion of the bricoleur, the prince amalgamates these personae as he pleases; “the jolly lancer on horseback spearing . . . long pig” integrates European/Euroamerican violence with the Polynesian threat of cannibalism to inspire terror among enemies.<sup>27</sup> Hence the conspicuous title of the episode replaces “long pig” with “two-legged buffalo” and the military figure of a lancer—all too common among Euroamerican forces in the age of empire. All of these categories and stereotypes become unmoored in the prince’s trickster discourse. Neither barbaric nor noble savage, the prince emerges as a rascal, to be sure, but an operator no more or less shady than the other principal characters with whom he jockeys for advantage in a struggle for geopolitical advantage.

Kneubuhl drew on his own bicultural life and experience in order to create the characters of Dr. Miguelito Loveless and Lawrence Liston Day. In writing “The Night of the Two-Legged Buffalo,” however, Kneubuhl derived the protean energy of the prince from an acquaintance with whom he studied at Punahou School in Honolulu. In his audio interview, Kneubuhl recalls brainstorming ideas for the episode with TV producer Michael Garrison:

I immediately thought of a Hawaiian friend of mine, he’s passed on now, but he’s very famous in the Hawaiian Islands, and he was a great poseur, check forger, con man, federal prisoner; his name was Sam Amalu. And I thought to myself, wouldn’t it be funny if I spoofed that kind of tradition by characterizing Sam Amalu in one of these shows. And it would be brilliant if someone like Zero Mostel would play it because it’s that same glandular, huge, large and yet oddly prissy, careful, kind of comic masque and mannerism.

In his remarks, Kneubuhl provides a window into his transnational aesthetic, which integrates personal experience of Oceania with Western traditions and conventions. In this case, Kneubuhl brings together Zero Mostel’s “glandular” comedy stylings with the pranks of a *kānaka maoli* poseur. Boasting descent from Hawai’ian royalty, Samuel Crowningburg-Amalu (1917-86) graduated from Honolulu’s prestigious Punahou School in 1935. Throughout his checkered career, Amalu assumed many personas, ranging from US Army

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27 Geoffrey Sanborn, *The Sign of the Cannibal: Melville and the Making of a Postcolonial Reader* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1998), 61-67.



officer to Indian maharajah. His culminating role was that of representative for a Swiss presidium offering to purchase several Sheraton hotels in Waikiki alongside large tracts of land on Molokai and in leeward O'ahu. The deal evaporated when Amalu was arrested in Seattle and ultimately incarcerated for passing bad checks in California. While serving time at Folsom and for years after his release, Amalu wrote a column for the *Honolulu Advertiser* called "The World of Sammy Amalu." The column was initially published as letters that Amalu sent to newspaper editor Thurston Twigg-Smith, another Punahou classmate. It was temporarily suspended when Sammy began criticizing prison conditions and then restored after Twigg-Smith appealed to Governor Ronald Reagan and Amalu promised to abstain from commentary about his incarceration. Whatever his medium (that is, journalism or con game), Amalu conducted himself as an Indigenous performance artist who "provided his audience with a measure of distraction to alleviate the crashing boredom of their days," as he put it in one column, and who did so in a way that challenged the machine-like operations of US capitalism and imperialism.<sup>28</sup> Following Vine Deloria, Stephanie Nohelani Teves, Lilikalā Kame'eleihiwa, and other scholars, Dean Itsuji Saranillo describes Amalu as a "kolohe" (mischievous) trickster who mocked US colonization of Hawai'i:

Instead of challenging the violent structures of economic and settler development head on, Amalu appropriated the language of capital to expose how the economic benefits that statehood and tourism seemingly promised the working class actually helped Hawai'i's elite insulate themselves and expand their economic power. Amalu stated, "With authority, you can prick, you can needle, but you must never bludgeon."<sup>29</sup>

Like Amalu, Kneubuhl needled authority with small-screen fictions that used popular generic conventions to dramatize the traumatic legacy of empire building throughout the US borderlands. As a wily Polynesian aristocrat bent on destabilizing American hegemony in Oceania, the Prince of the South Sea Coral Islands provides an example of Kneubuhl's *kolohe* TV aesthetic and an homage to a kindred spirit who shared his postcolonial vision.

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28 Sammy Amalu, "What, Another Amalu?," *Honolulu Advertiser*, March 16, 1972, 51.

29 Dean Itsuji Saranillo, *Unsustainable Empire: Alternative Histories of Hawai'i Statehood*. (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2018), 168.

According to Lee, “Rhetorical and thematic matters of empire give American comic rhetoric what Edward Said calls a contrapuntal harmony, weaving discernable restatements, inversions, and modulations into a rich and complex whole” (23). “Contrapuntal harmony” is an apt term to describe Kneubuhl’s stage and screen aesthetics, which refuse simple adaptation to and absorption into the neocolonial culture industries of the metropolis. Though not literally exiled, Kneubuhl lived an exilic life that encourages what Said terms “plurality of vision.” As Said suggests in his 1984 essay “Reflections on Exile,”

Most people are principally aware of one culture, one setting, one home; exiles are aware of at least two, and this plurality of vision gives rise to an awareness of simultaneous dimensions, an awareness that—to borrow a phrase from music—is *contrapuntal*. For an exile, habits of life, expression, or activity in the new environment inevitably occur against the memory of these things in another environment. Thus both the old and the new environments are vivid, actual, occurring together contrapuntally.<sup>30</sup>

This exilic “plurality of vision” then gives rise to two additional contrapuntal practices. The “restless” and “unsettled” experience of exile, of seeing the entire world as a foreign land, argues Said, has enabled writers ranging from Joseph Conrad to Mahmud Darwish to effectively dramatize estrangement and homecoming. But the condition of exile may also foster a contrapuntal critical vision: Said credits his sense of dislocation as the source of his ability to recognize the metro-colonial dualities embedded in the Western literary canon. Hence, for Said, novels such as *Mansfield Park* and *Jane Eyre* partake of the same imperial project, its “structure of attitude and reference,” that drives *Heart of Darkness* and *Kim*.<sup>31</sup>

Like Said’s exiles, Kneubuhl experienced “both the delights and the pressures of being a child of two different worlds . . . [who] naturally learned to form cultural bridges, but at the same time felt lonely and unable to ‘belong’ in any one place. Alienation would later become a

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30 Edward W. Said, *Reflections on Exile and Other Essays* (London: Granta, 2012), 186.

31 Edward W. Said, *Culture and Imperialism* (New York: Vintage Books, 1993), 94-95.

major theme that he explored repeatedly through his work.”<sup>32</sup> This gloss on Kneubuhl resonates with Said’s reflections on the affinities between exile and contrapuntal art and criticism. A lifelong outsider, Kneubuhl not only dramatized various forms of alienation and dislocation but did so by countering the dramatic conventions and frame narratives of the television programs to which he contributed. Reflecting on his mid-1960s television writing, Kneubuhl explains, “I’ve always gone against the grain, simply because the grain is a cliché.” Kneubuhl further recalls that he was commissioned to rejuvenate programs such as *The Wild Wild West* and *Hawaii Five-O* because these series were “all grain”—stultified by overreliance on shopworn conventions.<sup>33</sup> True to Said’s paradigm, however, Kneubuhl did not simply acquit himself as an avant-gardist interested in challenging the aesthetic status quo for its own sake. With an exilic “plurality of vision,” Kneubuhl defamiliarized the hackneyed gestures and the imperial imaginary on which the “vast wasteland” of midcentury television relied. This contrapuntal aesthetic is nowhere more clear than in “The Night of the Two-Legged Buffalo,” in which confidence games and reverse invasions proliferate, overwhelming our received notions of self and world.

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32 Victoria N. Kneubuhl, “John Alexander Kneubuhl and His Contribution to the Arts in the Pacific,” in *Damien: Teacher Resource Guide* (Honolulu: Pacific Resources for Education and Learning, 1991), 29-30; 29.

33 John Kneubuhl, interview with John Enright, transcribed by Marisa DeWees, *American Samoa*, 2002, 120.