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Coming to Terms with Bizarro

Superman is perhaps the most recognized costumed superhero ever. As such, it is
not surprising that he has been interpreted and discussed in many forms through the
years. The character's status as the first costumed superhero has allowed him to be used
in many mediums and various studies discussing and referencing the genre, from Jerry
Seinfeld to Umberto Eco, the latter noting that "he can be seen as the representative of all
his similars" (Eco). Created during the Depression, he is the epitome of visible
invisibility: he is a normal human (Clark Kent) and he is not (Superman). Superman's
dual identity is a necessary part of his heroism in order to be uniquely American: half
where he came from, half where is now. In this way, he is the ultimate 'American' since
he is a resident, and a blue and red-wearing icon, but also an immigrant. He thus
becomes the ultimate and ideal 'immigrant'. It's interesting and perhaps provocative to
note how his more public persona, Clark Kent, is the more American of his identities
while the defender of the U.S. and the 'American Way' is the alien Kryptonian one.
Superman does wear the colors of red and blue, however, when Superman is in his own
private home, his fortress of solitude, it can be argued that his immigrant self is more
expressed.

Its also important to note that Superman's role, during the real-life reign of Al Capone in the 1930's, is to fight crime and uphold the law. In this way, perhaps, he mirrors the perceived needs of society from a superhero—if the police can't uphold the law, Superman can. Is it a wonder then that in the next decade, Superman fights Nazis and sells war bonds, while in the 1950's anthropologists have argued that he is a placeholder for our feelings on the Cold War.

The Pulitzer-winning American cartoonist, editor and author Jules Feiffer argues that Superman's real innovation lies in the creation of the Clark Kent persona, noting that what "made Superman extraordinary was his point of origin: Clark Kent." Feiffer develops the theme to establish Superman's popularity in simple wish fulfillment, (Feiffer) a position Superman creators Jerry Siegel and Joel Shuster themselves support—Siegel commenting that "If you're interested in what made Superman what it is, here's one of the keys to what made it universally acceptable. Joe and I had certain inhibitions... which led to wish-fulfillment which we expressed through our interest in science fiction and our comic strip. That's where the dual-identity concept came from" and Shuster supporting that as being "why so many people could relate to it".
This essay will concern itself with the various dual-identities of Superman himself—not so much as in the Clark Kent/Superman personas (and I'll discuss why below) but especially in the dichotomous divide between Superman and Bizarro Superman. In this way, we'll look at what identity itself may be and certain cross-cultural variations when it comes to perceptions of what it is. In this endeavor, I'll focus on the development in the

last 100 years of our understanding of identity and personality in the fields of psychology

and anthropology. However, before we get into the social sciences, let's take a closer

look at the origin of the superhero identity, generally.

Caped Crusaders & Costumed Perverts

The origin of costumed heroes can perhaps be first found in Baroness Orczy's

hero, the Scarlet Pimpernel written in 1903, itself an inspiration for Johnston McCulley's

Zorro (1919). Both are independently wealthy men with secret identities they maintain

by the use of fantastic costumes, while in public life appearing as politically irrelevant

dandies, only to draw away unwanted attention. In their hero disguises both characters

endeavor with superior fighting prowess and reasoning for justice and fairness, in a field

in which the state is too incompetent to act. But Superman, first created in 1932 (but not

published until 1939) is the first of these "costumed perverts" (to steal a line from Cory

Doctorow), that transcends his depiction in comic books, TV series, radio shows, film,

and video games, to become a fable. In this way, Superman goes beyond authorial

reference to become public property. He is ours now. He has transcended to become

myth.

As myth, Superman certainly holds a unique place among the legions of

superheroes. Much of Marvel's X-Men costumed superheroes are about marginalized

minorities and the loss of connection inherent in our shift towards an urbanized,

increasingly anonymous society. Other superheroes typically reflect our own fears and misgivings about advancing technology—some are the byproducts of Cold War nuclear horrors, playing out a Derridean deconstruction of the uncertain nature of the new science: nuclear power and genetic engineering. These heroes inhabit worlds that are decidedly chaotic and inherently dangerous. In contrast, Superman's world seems rather ordered. The government is uncorrupted and the newspapers are filled with hard-working journalists dedicated to the truth and so Superman's role is seemingly about maintaining that order. He is the maintenance manager; where Batman is similar to the hardened beat cop, Superman is more like a hall monitor or boy scout. He protects us from the occasional failed dam or impending earthquake, and perhaps more provocatively, from the rare non-conformist who cannot or will not fit in.

Neil Gaiman, who has written much on the nature of heroes and myth, takes on "The Myth of Superman" with Adam Rogers in *Wired* magazine from May 2006. Gaiman and Rogers track the appeal of Superman, the mythic quality, to the "internal war between Superman's moral obligation to do good and his longing to be an average Joe"— a tug-of-war between doing the right thing and playing along, embodied respectively in Superman and his milquetoast alter ego, Clark Kent. This is also echoed in Quentin Tarantino's "Kill Bill Vol. II" movie (2004), and while I'm not sure if Tarantino is the source of this idea, it is—as is typical of Tarantino, an insightful and memorable piece of dialogue :

"**Bill**: As you know, l'm quite keen on comic books. Especially the ones about superheroes. I find the whole mythology surrounding superheroes fascinating. Take my favorite superhero, Superman. Not a great comic book. Not particularly well-drawn. But the mythology... The mythology is not only great, it's unique. Now, a staple of the superhero mythology is, there's the superhero and there's the alter ego. Batman is actually Bruce Wayne, Spider-Man is actually Peter Parker. When that character wakes up in the morning, he's Peter Parker. He has to put on a costume to become Spider-Man. And it is in that characteristic Superman stands alone. Superman didn't become Superman. Superman was born Superman. When Superman wakes up in the morning, he's Superman. His alter ego is Clark Kent. His outfit with the big red "S", that's the blanket he was wrapped in as a baby when the Kents found him. Those are his clothes. What Kent wears - the glasses, the business suit - that's the costume. That's the costume Superman wears to blend in with us. Clark Kent is how Superman views us. And what are the characteristics of Clark Kent. He's weak... he's unsure of himself... he's a coward. Clark Kent is Superman's critique on the whole human race.

As interesting an idea this is, especially with regards to the darker analysis of Superman's paternalistic and condescending attitude towards those he helps and protects, I'm not sure I agree with its thesis. What sets Superman apart from most superheroes is not, I think, his connection with his *supposed* alter ego in Clark Kent but rather the nature of his own *super*ness. Other superheroes became what they are whereas Superman's *super*ness is part of his natural and inherent make-up. He didn't need victimized parents to spur him on to fight crime, he didn't need a radioactive spider to give him superpowers. He *is* Superman. Likewise, its important to note that while villains like the Joker taunt Batman with the darker aspects of his own personality, or Peter Parker oft wrestles with his burden/power, Superman's weakness just seems to be kryptonite—an accident of his natural superlative. This is what Lex Luthor and other villains use to attack him. And in this, Superman is more like a god than a prophet, and indeed a trailer fro the recent Superman 3 film hinted at his divinity with messianic overtones: "Krypton's last son sent to protect us". There seems to be a theme in Superman that one can also find in Pixar's "The Incredibles"—being special is a birthright, not something

that can be attained by one's own efforts. One of the more memorable quotes from "The Incredibles" is "If everyone is special, then nobody is special."

Indeed, in listing (by comparison to other superheroes) Superman's rather bland arch-enemies—villains like Luthor and Brainiac—we shouldn't miss perhaps the greatest and most underrated super-villain in Superman's world—Superman himself. Or, rather, more precisely, the negative potential inherent in anyone so far removed from the ordinary human realm, embodied by Superman's *other* alter ego, arguably his more *true* alter ego: Bizarro Superman. It is in battling Bizarro and not, say bald blandly human Lex Luthor that Superman struggles with his own darkness. And by establishing Superman's real nemesis, his alter ego in Bizarro, we can now start getting into Superman's identity.

(Bizarro) Culture & (Bizarro) Identity

British-born, but Americanized anthropologist Gregory Bateson first coined the word *schismogenesis* in the 1920's, when studying the *Iatmul*, a people indigenous to New Guinea. Bateson wanted to understand the process by which individuals take on a personal identity in a larger social dynamic. He observed that when one of the Iatmul men showed off (which was apparently often), other Iatmul men would also. At the same time, there was an inverse correlation with regards to the behavior of Iatmul women—the

more boastful and loud Iatmul men became, the more serene and watchful the Iatmul women became.

Bateson, who knew nobody reached a conclusion without first jumping to it, quickly argued than any behavioral action would provoke either a parallel or a complementary reaction in others and that this would generate a schismatic process, with individuals taking on either one identity or the other—but always in relation to each other. Soon after, other anthropologists began talking about schismogenesis in all sorts of rituals from the dynamic of the family to politics, etc.

Bateson himself, however, understood that there must be more than just schismogenesis going on. For the business of action and reaction, whether competitive or complementary, is not a process that could go on forever. If my behavior continuously arouses the same or opposite behavior in you, then at some point this cycle can and will lead to dangerous excesses. And also, if behavior was made in this way alone, then our personal range of experience would be almost binary (in a way) and very limited indeed. So, Bateson did not name his work on the Iatmul, "schismogenesis". He called it *Naven*. Naven is the name of a set of Iatmul rituals practiced at regular intervals. What's significant is that in Naven, the mormal patterns of appropriate behavior are reversed! Iatmul men must dress up as women and Iatmul women must dress as men. Likewise, Iatmul women take on aggressive postures, becoming loud and boastful while Iatmul men take on submissive, passive demeanors, even submitting to simulated anal rape. For our purposes, it is this ritual that is significant and Bateson suspected that it was this release

of pent up aggression and frustration through role reversals—both on the part of women *and* men—in safe, controlled and predictable conditions that allow the normal strict roles to stay in place.

It is all too easy to see something of the same thing going on in Superman/Bizarro. Superman *needs* Bizarro Superman to release his frustrations, or to at least see them released. We the reader need Bizarro to better deal with the demigod-hood and goody goody-ness of Superman. Systems of order are often reversed in play and comic books, after all, all have more than an incidental element of play. Bizarro, the most extreme opposite of Superman's "enemies" (he sometimes tries to ally with Superman!) first appears in the Superman comics in 1959. Bizarro is Superman's monstrous imitation, at the same time having all the superpowers of Superman, but lacking the character that make Superman a superhero. In this way, Bizarro's flaws highlight Superman's strengths. But, Bizarro also highlights darker and yes, foreign, aspects of the Man of Steel. For example, Bizarro has poor 'immigrant' grammar, saying things like "Me am Bizarro", while Superman speaks in fully articulated sentences as is expected of a native-speaker of English. Superman is handsome whereas Bizarro is, well, bizarre-looking. While Superman has a seemingly year-round tan, Bizarro is depicted as having very pale flesh and black hair, stereotypical of Eastern European immigrants. It may be significant to point out here that "Eastern European" is often used as a euphemism and the creators of Superman are both of Jewish descent.

The most significant Bizarro characteristic however must be his backwards sensibility. Perhaps Bizarro's problems are in part due to him inhabiting the alien planet called *Htrae* (Earth backwards), where everyone behaves backwards (and foreign?). So, on Htrae, people congratulate each other for their ugliness, children are rewarded for misbehaving, popular films are terrible and boring ("The Slowest Gun in the West"). However, Bizarro does get the upper hand on his own alter ego in that he consummates his relationship with Bizarro Lois. This Bizarro is created when Bizarro kidnaps the real, or better yet, the original (?) Lois Lane for himself and this Lois focuses the replicator gun on herself, creating Bizarro Lois *for* Bizarro. In comparison, our poor Superman, like a Saint, may never spoil his virginity, not even for the love of his life.

Me Am Bizarro

In 1897, W.E.B. Du Bois, writing for an article in *the Atlantic Monthly*, first coined the term, "double consciousness", an idea he'd later expand upon on in his 1903 collection of essays "The Souls of Black Folk". The concept of Du Boisian double consciousness describes how the self is understood through the eyes of others, specifically with regard to the plight of African-Americans. Double consciousness itself is the awareness of one's self as well as an awareness of how others perceive that self, or person. The danger of double consciousness Du Bois writes, is in conforming and or changing one's identity to that of how others perceive the person.

A few years later, in 1899 (though postdated to 1900 by the publisher), Sigmund Freud published his "Interpretation of Dreams". This work introduces *the Ego* and describes Freud's theory of the *unconscious*, and goes on to argue that the "self" is in fact often in conflict with it*self*. And though much of Freud's original work is no longer in scientific fashion, his insight into the divided "selves", or how we may be driven by motives that are not always entirely clear to ourselves is the crown jewel in modern psychology.

These and other sociological studies lead to a body of thought devoted to the duality of the self. It is after this era, but in this context that Jerry Siegel and Joe Shuster created the legend of Superman. Again, when seen this light, Bizarro becomes simply the other side, the darker side, of Superman's identity.

In 1971, a team of researchers led by Philip Zimbardo of Stanford University conducted the now infamous "Stanford prison experiment", designed to be a psychological study of the human response to captivity, and specifically with regards to the effects of imposed social roles on behavior. In this effort, undergraduate volunteers were asked to take on the roles of either prison guards or prisoners and live in an ersatz prison in the bowels of the Stanford psychology building.

As the "official" website of the experiment (!)—http://www.prisonexp.org/, illustrates, the problem was that "guards" as well as "prisoners" quickly came to identify with their randomly assigned roles, going beyond what had been asked of them in their identification. This soon lead to dangerous and psychologically damaging situations,

where a full 1/3 of guards exhibited "genuine" sadistic tendencies, to the point that the experiment was soon terminated.

This idea of positional identity, that is, that our personas and identities may be significantly directed by what we believe society expects from our role in it fits well within the superhero genre and especially Superman. In the M. Night Shyamalan's 2000 work, "Unbreakable", the author and director demonstrates a world in which the villain's identity, "Mr. Glass" is formed by his relationship to the hero with the super abilities, "David Dunn".

In Mark Millar's 2003 graphic novel, "Superman: Red Son", Millar asks the question, what would have happened to Superman had the rocketship carrying his infant body crashed, not in the U.S. of A., but in the Soviet Union? Of course, the "red" Superman is a champion of the Soviet state and perhaps, just as importantly, we find that without Superman's influence on Lex Luthor, Luthor grows up to become a successful American scientist, and the husband of Lois Lane.

Again, this idea of "positional identities" and "double consciousness" are fully compatible. When I am teaching my class, for example, that is—my identity as *instructor* is not the same as my identity of say, younger son to my mother. My role as teacher, or son, is determined in part by what I think a teacher or son is, but also by what I believe my audience expects from a teacher or my mother expects from a son. I am *and* I am not the same person in both those contexts.

Alexis C. Bunten, currently a post-doctorate at the University Of California at Berkeley has observed indigenous tourism practices, focusing on the conventional and innovative ways in which Southeast Alaska Native people like the Tlingit, reincorporate commercial art objects (originally intended for non-Native consumption) into their everyday and ceremonial lives. Her work turns the idea of what is authentic, or who is authentic, on its head.

The conclusion we are getting at is this: identity itself may be best thought of a construct. It is something that you have, but importantly, it is a plurality. You are different people to different people. You are different people in different contexts. Which, if any, is the "real you" is up to you.

Take the recent surge in online gaming—games like *Everquest* or *World of Warcraft* have legions of admirers, the latter, with just over 8 million (according to the administrators of ibold.net) subscribers can boast a population larger than some countries! Many of these millions of people identify with their online personas *more* so than their mundane 'real-life' ones. It's like the old song by *Loverboy*, "Everybody's Working for the Weekend", where the lyrics describe a nation of grudging workers, going about boring and unexciting tasks, just so they can have the ritual of the weekend, a time they can be free to just be themselves.

Moreover, there's evidence that the construct of "identity" varies across cultures. The term, *fundamental attribution error* (also known as correspondence bias or overattribution effect) was first coined by Lee Ross after experiments in 1967 by Edward

E. Jones and Victor Harris. It describes the tendency for people to over-emphasize dispositional, or personality-based, explanations for behaviors observed in others while under-emphasizing situational explanations. In more plain English, it demonstrates that many people have an unjustifiable bias to presume that a person's behavioral actions depend on the kind of person one is rather than on the social and environmental forces that influence the person. However, psychologist Geoffrey Miller, from the University of New Mexico has demonstrated evidence to support the contention that cultures which tend to emphasize the individual over the group (Western "individualistic" cultures) tend to make more dispositional attributions than do the "collectivist" (Eastern) cultures. So, in a very general way, Western cultures tend to assume that identity and behavioral actions are driven by content—that a kind of homunculi exists in us that tells us what to do and that when this content is different, we see different actions—whereas many Eastern cultures may do the opposite and assume that identity and behavioral actions are driven by context (social and economic pressures, etc.).

In many ways, our own American bi-partisan politics reflect a kind of analogous microcosm. Traditional Republicans are supposed to believe in the "pulling yourself up by the bootstrap" mentality, where they assume that success, for example is attainable by all, except that we differ in content of our characters. Democrats on the other hand are supposed to assume that our successes and our failures are driven by the advantages we had or the disadvantages forced on us. Much of the disagreements on domestic and

foreign policy that our parties have may have their origin, at least, in part, on the kind of

errors or assumptions individuals make.

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