Passing for an author: the strange case of J. T. LeRoy

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The photograph depicts a child—perhaps nine or ten years old—with bushy brown hair and bright, dark eyes that reveal a certain strong-willed ambition. In a portrait from the mid-1970s, the child wears a T-shirt emblazoned with the words ‘I want to be me!’¹ (Figure 1). It is a nice sentiment and one that reflects our modern interest in authenticity and the search for self. It would be unremarkable, except to a doting parent, were it not for the fact that the child depicted here grew up to be involved in one of the most convoluted cases of impersonation in recent history. In that light, ‘I want to be me!’ begins to take on a less inspiring, more desperate tone. How startling that a message on a T-shirt—the very *de rigueur* location for ironic sloganeering—should be not only such a prescient indicator of future events but almost too painfully appropriate in its irony.

Jeremiah ‘Terminator’ LeRoy was the son of a truck-stop prostitute. He was pimped out by his mother, lived rough on the streets of San Francisco, recovered from heroin addiction, contracted AIDS and was in the process of transitioning from male to female. LeRoy was remarkable not only for having lived through so much while so young; more remarkably, he had overcome this adversity to become an *enfant terrible*, admired by the literary and entertainment industries and a legion of readers. In 1999, his first novel, *Sarah*, the story of a child prostitute, was published to critical acclaim; within a year, LeRoy was the darling of a hip celebrity crowd. Madonna sent him books on kabbala; Winona Ryder, Courtney Love, Billy Corgan, Shirley Manson, Liv Tyler, Carrie Fisher and Gus Van Sant all counted him as a close friend. By 2003, LeRoy had graced the cover of *Vanity Fair* and had been compared with some of the twentieth century’s most important cultural icons—among them Andy Warhol, William Burroughs, Jack Kerouac and Truman Capote. He not only befriended rock stars, he lived like one: LeRoy wrote lyrics for his own band; he travelled with an entourage; he had a standing rider for every gig; and he always appeared in public heavily disguised.

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1 This photograph is the front cover of the *Paris Review* (Autumn 2006).

the PARIS REVIEW

Figure. 1

That was LeRoy's life, but his fiction was no less sensational: his stories were a commercially savvy blend of trauma, exploitation, dysfunctional family life, sex, drugs and mysticism—all set before the background of West Virginian truck-stops, flea-pit motels and white-trash dives. Although *classified* as fiction, the connections between the life of the author and the content of his stories gave his work the *feel* of memoir. There was little doubt that his own life experiences had a major impact on his writing.

Except that LeRoy never existed. The books were written by Laura Albert, the young child wearing the T-shirt in the photograph. Albert, a forty-something woman, had spent several decades drifting around the fringes of San Francisco's counterculture, writing stories and articles and performing music under a number of different names. The product of Albert's imagination, 'J. T. LeRoy' was a literary device that, she later explained, gave her the freedom to be the real her.² Writing as LeRoy, Albert drew on her experiences with sexual abuse, the punk underground, sex work and life on the streets. When, during the civil fraud trial relating to the hoax in 2007, Albert was asked to explain her actions, she testified: 'he [LeRoy] was my channel for air. To me, if you take my JT, my Jeremy, my other, I die.'³

How do we account for the identity known as J. T. LeRoy? Was it simply a case, as the civil courts found, of fraud? Is this another chapter in the long history of literary hoaxes? And what of his creator: how do we match the girl in the picture who wanted 'to be me' with the woman who explained LeRoy as her life source, a 'channel for air'? This essay will argue that the J. T. LeRoy hoax demonstrates the author as a collective identity, formed by writers, readers and the publishing industry acting in concert towards a common aim. Authors are made, not born, and their construction is an attempt to make over the messy consciousness of the individual into a fixed, productive (lucrative) ideal.

The twenty-first century has been an outstanding period for hoaxes, forgeries and heists. In 2006, James Frey was exposed as having invented parts of his memoir, *A Million Little Pieces*. In 2009, it transpired that *Love and Consequences*, Margaret B. Jones's memoir of growing up as a mixed-race, drug-running foster child in South Central Los Angeles, was the fabricated work of private school-educated, all-white Margaret Seltzer. Norma Khouri's story of the honour killing of her best friend, as recounted in the book *Forbidden Love*, was a bestseller until Khouri was outed as a con by Australian journalists. The public appetite for first-person stories of suffering, torment and grief is evidenced not only by the popularity of the memoir in publishing; it can be traced to the steady

2 Rich, Nathaniel 2006, 'Being JT LeRoy', *Paris Review*, Autumn, pp. 143–68.

3 Feuer, Alan 2007, 'At trial, writer recalls an alter ego that took over', *New York Times*, 21 June 2007, viewed 12 February 2009, <http://www.nytimes.com/2007/06/21/nyregion/21writer.html?_r=1>

growth of other forms of eye-witness media in our popular culture: reality television, blogs, YouTube, social networking services and even the use of newspaper headlines as inspiration for countless police procedural television shows such as *Law & Order* or *CSI*. Modern media and communications systems not only give us access to greater information about other people, they provide access to wider networks and communities with whom we might identify. This, combined with the accompanying boom in the representations of life and self in literature, media and popular culture, offers considerable freedom to live out alternative identities. In the case of the Internet, instances of online fraud are prolific. Brooke Kroeger describes cyberspace as ‘a borderless godsend for fabulists and fakers and not-so-harmless hoaxers, hustlers, and predators of every description’.⁴ Digital communication networks allow individuals to exploit the possibilities of a disembodied presence. Thomas Foster has referred to this state as a ‘tele-presence’: an existence that ‘disrupt[s] the distinction between inner and outer worlds. Virtual personae or body images become relatively more detached from any “internal fixity” or “locale”—specifically, bodies as material[ly] bounded spaces.’⁵ Such personalities are thus able to host web sites, write blogs and communicate with online friends via instant messages and email but cannot make any claims to existence incarnate. In ‘What is an author?’, Foucault maintains that the author and the writer are different functions of the ‘plurality of self’. The author does not ‘refer purely and simply to a real individual, since it can give rise simultaneously to several selves’.⁶ The complexities of literary identity (predicated as they are on the role of the medium in conferring a new self) might be understood as a precursor to the complex identity performance made possible in the digital age. Indeed, it was the Internet that not only made the LeRoy hoax possible, but played a key role in the eventual unravelling of the mystery: the *New York Times* journalist Warren St John used images found online to verify that an impersonator was employed to play the role of LeRoy in public appearances.⁷

We are often made aware that one can pose as anyone online—‘on the internet no one knows you’re a dog’, as the famous *New Yorker* cartoon goes—and yet, there is an almost instinctive human tendency to reconstruct a tele-presence in terms of a ‘default’ physical existence. As Laura Gurak notes, ‘[d]espite a growing understanding about online communication, people still seem to have a greater expectation that on the Internet, they are communicating with a real persona of

4 Kroeger, Brooke 2003, *Passing: When people can’t be who they are*, Public Affairs, New York, p. 5.

5 Foster, Thomas 1997, ‘“Trapped by the body”? Telepresence technologies and transgendered performance in feminist and lesbian rewritings of cyberpunk fiction’, *Modern Fiction Studies*, vol. 43, pp. 708–42, at p. 710.

6 Foucault, Michel 1977, ‘What is an author?’, in Donald F. Bouchard (ed.), *Language, Counter-Memory, Practice: Selected essays and interviews*, Cornell University Press, Ithaca, NY, pp. 113–38, at p. 113.

7 St John, Warren 2006, ‘The unmasking of JT Leroy: in public, he’s a she’, *New York Times*, 9 January 2006, viewed 14 April 2009, <<http://www.nytimes.com/2006/01/09/books/09book.html?scp=5&sq=warren+st+john+leroy&st=nyt>>

that name'.⁸ So, while we might be more adept at identity reformation, we are also, as a consequence, more susceptible to deception. The virtual space of the Internet offers the freedom to become something *other than* but it also invites us to fix others in terms of our own expectations of a specific, authentic, essential identity existing somewhere *out there*. This was certainly the case with J. T. LeRoy.⁹

The virtual space makes the separation of a public persona from the physical body possible and, as such, virtual presences can be understood in performative terms. Judith Butler writes in *Gender Trouble* of the dislocation of the public persona from the physical body, which is dramatised by gay performance styles such as drag and butch. These activities can reveal that sex and gender are not related as cause and effect and that sex and gender do not exist in one-to-one relation to each other.¹⁰ The LeRoy case offers a similar dramatisation: it demonstrates the performative possibilities of the identity known as 'author' or, following Foucault, what is known as the 'author function'.

Despite LeRoy's popularity and celebrity status, no-one had ever seen him out of his disguise. With her talents for improvisation and charisma, Albert handled the interest of the press and celebrities by insisting on phone, fax and email correspondence only. In this regard, she excelled—perhaps more so than with her writing. Since recluses were by no means unexpected in literary circles, LeRoy's initial reluctance to be seen in public was not unusual. Later, the elaborate disguises were just as easily accepted on the basis of LeRoy's floating gender identity: LeRoy talked of fear for his safety as he undertook a transformation from male to female and a more existential fear of losing himself to a hungry public.¹¹ LeRoy's revelation of his transition from man to woman, and his insistence on protecting his identity throughout the process by presenting an androgynous public front, demonstrates a very knowing 'performative consciousness' not unlike the enthusiastic Internet users for whom Foster coins the term tele-presence. I would argue that this obvious performative aspect of

8 Gurak, Laura 2001, *Cyberliteracy: Navigating the internet with awareness*, Yale University Press, New Haven, Conn., p. 39.

9 The expectation of a real young man behind the work attributed to LeRoy was certainly reasonable although the therapists, supporters, publishers and journalists who were captivated by his story seemed remarkably complicit in the dupe. In this way, these supporters were deeply involved and invested in continuing the existence of LeRoy, even when Albert began to realise the impracticality of her creation. This scenario is given a sensitive exploration in Armistead Maupin's novel *The Night Listener*, which details a case of literary hoax strikingly similar to the LeRoy case. Anthony Godby Johnson was supposedly a teenager with AIDS who endured years of childhood abuse until he was adopted by a social worker named Vicki Johnson. In the 1990s, he contacted the author Paul Monette, who was also dying from AIDS, and Monette put him in touch with editors. Maupin himself became personally involved via Monette and struck up a telephone friendship with Johnson. Eventually, after many thwarted attempts to meet Johnson, Maupin publicly voiced his suspicions that Vicki and Anthony were the same person. See Maupin, Armistead 2000, *The Night Listener*, Harper Collins, New York.

10 Butler, Judith 1999, *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the subversion of identity*, Routledge, London.

11 St John, 'The unmasking of JT Leroy'.

LeRoy's persona was designed to be 'read' as a cue to the greater performance taking place behind the disguise (that is, the performance of authorship). This was a reading that slipped through the cracks as LeRoy's fame grew. Fittingly, when Barthes begins his essay on the 'Death of the author', he uses the motif of the cross-dresser to make his point.¹² Examining a moment from Balzac's *Sarrasine* in which a castrato disguises himself as a woman, Barthes demonstrates that there are multiple interpretative possibilities for the voice of this figure. How are readers to know who is speaking? Is it the character of the castrato, or the character of the woman the castrato has assumed? What of Balzac? In this example, Barthes draws a parallel between passing and writing. Both acts rely on a reader to interpret the action (the narrative) and the actor (that is, the author). The LeRoy case demonstrates how we have abdicated our work as readers/interpreters on both counts. The presumed one-to-one correspondence of sex and gender that is disturbed by cross-dressing performance is similarly troubled by LeRoy's authorial presentation. There is a text, but the author's gender is left floating. LeRoy in public and LeRoy in print present us with a conundrum: who speaks? Though seemingly irrelevant to the enjoyment of the work, this question is central to audiences who wish to project a physical form on to the identity of the author. Despite the confusion of one-to-one sex/gender correspondence within the figure of LeRoy as author (the woman writing as a man), there is a strong one-to-one correspondence between LeRoy's purported real life and the content of his fiction: LeRoy's stories feature trans-gendered boys who turn tricks to make the money that will allow them the realisation of a full female body. This was also LeRoy's stated goal. The work of fiction and the life of the author can therefore be read as being in perfect agreement. LeRoy's art had imitated life and now with his supposed transition from boy to girl life would imitate art.

In reality, the long blonde wig, hat and dark glasses were all part of an attempt to cloud the fact that behind the costume was a real female body, although it was not Albert's; Savannah Knoop (Albert's sister-in-law) took on the physical representation of the mysterious author (Figure 2). This incarnation of LeRoy was a shy, near-silent mannequin who resembled no-one so much as a hyper-white parody of late-era Michael Jackson. This embodied performance of LeRoy dramatises the breakdown of the direct relationship between authorial identity and physical writer. While Albert writes and corresponds as LeRoy, Knoop attends public readings as LeRoy (a man who wishes to appear in public disguised as a woman). *She* who writes is not (*s*)*he* who reads. Indeed, the physical LeRoy (Knoop) became so terrified of speaking in public as LeRoy that Albert arranged to have celebrities read from the work instead. As such, there

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12 Barthes, Roland 1977, 'The death of the author', in Stephen Heath (ed.), *Image-Music-Text*, Hill and Wang, New York, pp. 142–9.

never was a public *he* or a *she*, only a 'we'. In interviews, Albert, pretending to be LeRoy's caretaker (known by the alias Speedie), promoted this idea of LeRoy as a collective:

The whole thing for all of us is hard, cos they want everyone to say 'Yes, it's all a hoax, I'm terribly sorry'...Our point is it's all useful conversation that's about gender, identity. It's about giving people a voice. It's about the JT community. I've answered emails as JT—we've all answered emails as JT—if it needs to be answered...Sometimes I'll take a photo and we'll credit someone who's trying to get into the industry. It's like a big family—if you recognise an artist with a purity of intent it's a sin if you don't try to help them.¹³

Figure. 2

To another interviewer, Albert as LeRoy explained that LeRoy was intended to baffle: 'it's easier if people decide it's not me, then I won't be held down. So many people have claimed me as their own, so I guess the best thing is to confuse them all.'¹⁴

Foucault writes of the advent of authorship as 'the privileged moment of *individualization* in the history of ideas'.¹⁵ Even before Albert hatched the plan to have a girl (pretending to be a boy who claimed to identify as a girl) stand

13 Albert (speaking as 'Speedie') quoted in Barton, Laura 2006, 'Who's that boy/girl?', *Guardian*, 4 January 2006, viewed 10 March 2009, <<http://www.guardian.co.uk/world/2006/jan/04/usa.books>>

14 Beachy, Stephen 2005, 'Who is the real JT LeRoy?', *New York Magazine*, 10 October 2005, viewed 12 February 2009, <<http://nymag.com/nymetro/news/people/features/14718/>>

15 Foucault, 'What is an author?', p. 101.

up in public and answer to the name J. T. LeRoy, readers assumed this authorial identity belonged to a real individual who had really been through many of the things about which he wrote. And yet, it was apparent from Albert's conversations with the press and her management of LeRoy's media appearances that she was ambivalent about keeping the complexity of LeRoy's identity secret. While she rejected in principle the literary industry's preoccupation with singular, fixed authorship and enjoyed confusing these expectations ('I won't be held down'), Albert was not ignorant of the advantages of the individualisation of the author function—not least the advantages of publicity and celebrity that came with a stable, visible identity.

Passing for an author

I want to argue for a consideration of J. T. LeRoy not as an elaborate hoax so much as Laura Albert's attempt to *pass* as an author. Passing has enjoyed a resurgence in academic studies and, like the proliferation of identity frauds and hoaxes, interest in the individual's negotiation of identity has broadened the field of activities that can be classified as 'passing'.¹⁶ Passing is about the act of creating, imposing, adopting or rejecting a given identity and the way society rewards people when they do. Although often associated with performances of hegemonic race and gender identities, the phenomenon of passing has broadened in recent years to move beyond instances of racial and gender passes into less explicitly political but still socially significant cases of identity reformation. For example, plastic surgery, clothes or hairstyles might allow one to pass as younger; in the current financial climate, one might wish to pass as 'redundant', 'freelance' or 'self-employed' rather than simply 'out of work'; there are also situations in which the able bodied and the healthy wish to pass as disabled or unwell.

At its most straightforward, passing is used to describe cultural performances in which individuals categorised by others as belonging to one group present themselves as belonging to another. Passing is a deception, predicated on a power imbalance that drives an individual to attempt to claim status and privilege falsely. Studies of passing have focused particularly on the political implications of pretending to be part of a privileged social subset—most often white and male. As Elaine K. Ginsberg notes in her study, passing is a movement from 'a category of subordination and oppression to one of freedom and privilege'.¹⁷

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16 Renfrow, Daniel G. 2004, 'A cartography of passing in everyday life', *Symbolic Interaction*, vol. 27, pp. 485–506.

17 Ginsberg, Elaine K. 1996, *Passing and the Fictions of Identity*, Duke University Press, Durham, NC, pp. 1–18, at p. 1.

The most famous instances of passing have involved those who have successfully managed to convince the outside world that they are other than themselves, and in doing so are able to pass through life (at least for a time) with greater ease.

In suggesting that Albert's inhabiting of the LeRoy persona is an attempt to pass as an author, I am conscious of the politics inherent in the term. I want to make a case for 'authorship' as an identity that, while not charged with the same historical legacy of oppression and abuse, can be usefully understood as a category that affords privilege and status to those who are able to use them. Ginsberg observes that 'critical to the process and discourse of "passing" in American history and in the American cultural imaginary are the status and privileges associated with being white and male'¹⁸ and, in light of the fact that whiteness and maleness remain integral to the composition of the Western canon, authorship can be understood as an identity for which one might hope to pass.

Albert's description of LeRoy as her 'channel for air' suggested that the identity was not merely part of an elaborate ruse to dupe the public but rather a personal strategy for dealing with the complexities of life as Laura Albert. Albert defended her actions during the fraud trial by explaining that, with a history of sexual abuse since the age of three and a childhood of schoolyard taunts ('Fat Albert' had been particularly stinging), she did not want her own name.¹⁹ Since then Albert had adopted other names and told stories in character in an attempt to manage her distress. While she earned a living as a phone-sex operator, she occupied her spare time by calling phone help-lines for troubled youth. Incapable of speaking as herself, she used the personas of troubled teenage boys, transposing her experiences and emotions on to these characters. According to Albert, being on the phone was about being in 'service mode' and, whether on the sex lines or on the help-lines, she found it advantageous not only to be something other than herself, but to give people what they wanted.²⁰ Through character improvisation on the phone, she told stories people wanted to hear. Clearly, identity play and performance were strong elements in Albert's life. The other strong compulsion she had was writing. For many years, she wrote professionally under a number of pseudonyms, one of which was J. T. LeRoy.

Pseudonymous authorship is one very obvious way to make 'a new name' for oneself and storytelling allows an individual to create or remake a world—

18 Ibid., p. 5.

19 Feuer, 'At trial, writer recalls an alter ego that took over'.

20 Rich, 'Being JT LeRoy', p. 157. It was through phone lines too that Albert had her first experiences with writing. An aspiring punk musician, Albert found that by posing as a male music journalist she could talk to her heroes and have them treat her seriously in an environment that was often 'hostile to girls'. Being a boy made her feel in control of the situation.

hence its popularity as part of a therapeutic process of recovery.²¹ During her phone-based therapy sessions with Dr Terrence Owens of the McAuley Adolescent Unit at St Mary's Medical Center in San Francisco, Albert (as LeRoy) discussed writing stories. Owens encouraged LeRoy's writing and when it became clear LeRoy had ambitions to be published, Owens offered to pass the manuscripts along to a neighbour involved in the industry. While the therapeutic dimension to Albert's passing deserves serious consideration, the focus of this essay is the cultural boundary Albert crossed in posing as LeRoy: her unlawful entry into the category 'author'. Bolstered by the success of the initial networking opportunities facilitated by Owens, Albert wrote as LeRoy to her heroes, the novelist Dennis Cooper and the poet Sharon Olds. Both were supportive and encouraging, offering advice and instruction. LeRoy maintained the correspondence and began to establish contact with other writers.

Like many stories of literary success, LeRoy's big break came as a result of word of mouth, industry networking and coterie favours. Passing as LeRoy gave Albert the opportunity to inhabit an idealised authorial identity. Although she had literary ambitions, Albert feared that her real identity would be unpalatable to the literary industry and to readers. According to her estranged husband, Garry Knoop, after having made contact with author Dennis Cooper, Albert became '[a]fraid he wouldn't be interested in talking to a 30-something woman', so she 'decided to approach him as a teenage boy'.²² The LeRoy persona was constructed by Albert in an attempt to 'pass' as the author she was fearful she could not otherwise be. By presenting herself as LeRoy, Albert gained access to the circle of authorship that might otherwise have eluded her. Inspired by the dark, often sadistic and sexual writings of authors such as Cooper and Olds, Albert was keenly conscious that these figures would be drawn to a kindred spirit. She realised too that to be a good writer she would need to learn as much as possible from those she admired. Using LeRoy, Albert was able to develop her identity as an author, nurtured by a collection of talented professionals already well established within the literary and entertainment industries. In this respect, Albert's passing as LeRoy gave her access to a privileged group among whom she was able to take advantage of a new-found status that provided contacts, diverse professional opportunities and eventually the trappings of celebrity. Had Albert presented herself to her literary heroes as herself, it was uncertain how many would have been interested in the work of a woman entering mid-life supposedly fantasising the grim life of a truck-stop hooker.

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21 L'Abate, Laura 1991, 'The use of writing in psychotherapy', *American Journal of Psychotherapy*, vol. 45, pp. 87–98.

22 Curtis, Kim 2006, 'Mystery of author "J.T. LeRoy" unravels', *Salon*, 7 February 2006, viewed 14 February 2009, <<http://www.salon.com/wire/ap/D8FK68H80.html>>

Life, writing and life-writing

Of particular interest in this case—and distinct from many literary hoaxes—is Albert’s decision to create a completely alternative identity rather than claim a fabricated life story as her own; Albert created a fictional author with a fictional ‘real life’ on which the fiction produced under this name would be based. In this regard, Albert might be linked to earlier literary experiments with identity and authorship more commonly found in meta-fiction. Unlike recent high-profile cases of memoir fraud such as Frey’s or Seltzer’s, Albert did not present a series of embellished events as her own real, first-person experience—nor did she invent LeRoy to be the author of a salacious memoir. Instead, LeRoy was established from the beginning in the minds of his early champions in the publishing industry, and later in public, as a young boy with serious ambitions to write *fiction*. Significantly, although being recognised as ‘an author’ was very important to the Albert/LeRoy identities, it was the promise of the *autobiographical* within LeRoy’s stories that gave him credibility and popularity in the public eye.

The results of literary fame, and indeed all kinds of known literary classifications such as ‘the author’, are to limit multiplicity in favour of certain legitimated knowledge that adheres neatly to classifications. The public expression of being a writer is a way to simplify one’s being in order to be part of the system. The author is, according to Foucault, ‘a certain functional principle by which, in our culture, one limits, excludes, and chooses; in short, by which one impedes the free circulation, the free manipulation, the free composition, decomposition, and recomposition of fiction’.²³ This is one of the cruel ironies for the writer since writing might be thought of as part of the valuable work of mapping out alternative ways of understanding the self: exploring the possibilities of the drive that leads us to assert, in whatever way we choose, ‘I want to be me!’. The writer’s work offers us a way to think about our complex selves outside the usual social frameworks to which everyday life adheres. The author function reinscribes these boundaries on the work.

In her book *Crimes of Writing*, Susan Stewart observed that legal and technological developments in the eighteenth century brought about the notion of literature as property (belonging to an individual) *and* commodity (available for ownership by many individuals). One consequence of this, Stewart notes, has been an innovation in literary forms such as ‘description, compendium, fragment, and dialogue’, all of which ‘emphasize the secondary or staged quality of literary discourse’.²⁴ Literature and, by extension, authorship must reckon

²³ Foucault, ‘What is an author?’, p. 274.

²⁴ Stewart, Susan 1994, *Crimes of Writing: Problems in the containment of representation*, Duke University Press, Durham, NC, p. 22.

with accountability along with the narrative task of 'providing an account'. Stewart offers Hobbes' discussion of authorship in Chapter 16 of *Leviathan* as an example of the change in thinking about the role of the author and the nature of his or her work:

A person is he, whose words or actions are considered, either as his own, or as representing the words or actions of an other man, or of any other thing to whom they are attributed, whether Truly or by Fiction...When they are considered as his own, then is he called a *Naturall Person*: And when they are considered as representing the words and actions of an other, then he is a *Feigned or Artificiall person*.²⁵

Most significant for my purposes is Hobbes' acknowledgment of the author of fiction as a distinct type ('representing the words and actions of an other') and, moreover, his characterisation of the fiction author as the 'Artificiall person'.

This was undoubtedly Albert's preoccupation as a writer: the stories she composed under the name J. T. LeRoy engaged with the idea that classifications by gender, age, race and class were always likely ultimately to unravel, revealing the instability of such concepts. Yet, if LeRoy is to be understood as a creative experiment with authority, authorship and performativity, it must be acknowledged that it has been far from successful. In the media and publishing industries, LeRoy was marketed in reference to his autobiographical back story. Countless interviews, magazine profiles and newspaper articles asked questions about LeRoy's gender identity, his status as white-trash southerner, as a drug addict and as a prostitute; it was only in the final months before Albert's unveiling that LeRoy's authorship came under any interrogation. For almost a decade, his existence as an author was taken 'as read'. This situation demonstrates the extent to which authorship is an *assumed* identity. The meaning here is twofold: readers *assume* that when one is published and authenticated as the producer of a work one has, inevitably, classified the self—'I wrote this, thus I am the author'. In taking on this second identity, 'author', the writer has *assumed* a new name. The LeRoy case simply makes these assumptions apparent. Albert's invention of the persona of LeRoy allowed her to continue to pursue her own identity ('I want to be me!') while still submitting to the 'functions' of the industry.

Such functions are undeniably motivated by commercial imperatives. Crucial to this story is Albert's anxiety regarding her identity as a middle-aged woman interested in a literary career. Demographically speaking, white middle-aged women are the *readers* of literary fiction and memoir *par excellence*.²⁶ While it

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25 Hobbes quoted in *ibid.*, pp. 7–8.

26 Gilmore, Leigh 1994, *Autobiographics: A feminist theory of women's self-representation*, Cornell University Press, Ithaca, NY, p. 15.

is often said that the marketable aspects of the author's identity shape book publicity, it is perhaps truer to say, as Kate Douglas does, that it is book publicity that plays a significant role in the formation of authorship.²⁷ The creation of LeRoy was influenced by Albert's recognition of the literary networks and the requirements of a successful publishing deal: an obviously autobiographically inspired story would sell better than one that was purely imagined. Making LeRoy a street kid who knew the vernacular of that life made him more credible as a fiction writer.

While Jannah Loontjens has argued that Albert's adoption of the LeRoy persona can be understood as an act of resistance to the literary industry's fetishisation of memoirs about women's trauma, I would propose that Albert's actions are not intended to confront the literary industry so much as to capitulate.²⁸ Although Albert refused to attach her own identity to her stories, her reasons were a complex mix of insecurity and calculation. Subsequent to the revelation of her authorship, Albert spoke at some length about the freedoms she enjoyed while writing as a young man: publishers and writers were interested in LeRoy because of promise of masculine authority and, she suggested, the promise of youthful sexual favours.²⁹ Sensing the inferiority of her position as a woman writer and the inevitable attention her own status as a (female) victim of abuse would attract, Albert believed that the LeRoy persona was a way of giving people what they wanted. As she explained after the revelation of the hoax:

Everything you need to know about me is in my books, in ways that I don't even understand. I think some people take it for granted to be acknowledged and not overlooked. *My experience was to be completely ignored and disregarded and disdained.* That's what I write about. [And yet in my writing and in my life] something gave me hope. This hope is in the books too and of course *the ultimate hope is that I can reveal myself and you won't go away.*³⁰

Ironically, it was this insecurity that accounted for LeRoy's popularity with his champions in the media industry. In her phone and email correspondence as LeRoy, Albert placed considerable emotional demands on her interlocutors. The writer Ayelet Waldman told of LeRoy playing back taped therapy sessions over the phone.³¹ Others reported fits of crying and impassioned threats of self-harm. Carrie Fisher hosted LeRoy's entourage while on tour in Los Angeles and Gus

27 Douglas, Kate 2001, 'Blurbing biographical: authorship and autobiography', *Biography*, vol. 24, pp. 806–26, at p. 806.

28 Loontjens, Jannah 2008, 'Resisting the author: JT LeRoy's fictional authorship', *Image & Narrative*, vol. 22, viewed 21 February 2009, <<http://www.imageandnarrative.be/autofiction2/loontjens.html>>

29 Rich, 'Being JT LeRoy', pp. 150, 157.

30 Ibid., p. 167; my emphasis.

31 Waldman, Ayelet 2006, 'I was conned by JT LeRoy', *Salon*, 11 January 2006, viewed 14 March 2009, <http://www.salon.com/mwt/col/waldman/2006/01/11/jt_leroy/print.html>

Van Sant took him for an expensive business lunch.³² These events demonstrated the degree to which LeRoy's celebrity supporters suspended disbelief. Paul Maliszewski, author of *Fakers: Hoaxers, con artists, counterfeiters, and other great pretenders*, posits that this degree of investment in LeRoy can be attributed to the celebrity's benevolent wish to pass on their own good fortune and help those whose talent is belied by circumstance. LeRoy demonstrated first hand the trauma ideal: a recuperation of hard luck via celebrity and its trappings.³³ Stephen Beachy, the journalist who first began the work of uncovering the LeRoy hoax, similarly observed:

For all its abuse and kinky sex, the JT story is really just another heartwarming rags-to-riches tale for the punk generation. But what if America isn't really the story of a place where a street urchin can charm his way to the top, through diligence and talent; what if instead it's the sort of place where heartwarming stories of abused children who triumph through adversity are made up and marketed?³⁴

Interestingly, given their familiarity with spin and hype, celebrities—particularly those who had battled their own demons—were drawn to LeRoy, empathising with his attempt to transform trauma via the continual public affirmation offered by the entertainment industry. Similarly, publishers and journalists were appreciative of LeRoy's ability to play to public tastes. LeRoy was a cardboard cut-out of southern white trash; his stories were furnished with truckers, hotel lots, Wonderbread and homemade hooch. In this regard, LeRoy *was* too good to be true and the publishing and media industries' unquestioning acceptance of such stereotypes demonstrated the existence of prejudices regarding race, class and sexuality in circles that usually prided themselves on their liberal identity politics. What Chris Lehmann, reviewer at the *Nation*, observed of Seltzer's faked memoir might just as easily be said of Albert-as-LeRoy: 'she trafficked skilfully in lies the literary establishment desperately wants to be told.'³⁵

'Skilful trafficking' is itself a useful way of understanding the act of identity passing. Deft concealment ultimately ends up with the revelation not just of 'the secret', but of the unstable ground on which all other identities are predicated. When passers are revealed and demonised, so too anxieties about status and hierarchy are revealed within the privileged cohort. Marjorie Garber

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32 Knoop's memoir of her time impersonating J. T. LeRoy documents her many encounters with celebrities but also covers the intensely close relationship she forged with Albert as they travelled and worked together to make up the 'complete' LeRoy. See, Knoop, S. 2008, *Girl Boy Girl*, Seven Stories Press, New York, p. 86.

33 Maliszewski, Paul 2009, *Fakers: Hoaxers, con artists, counterfeiters, and other great pretenders*, New Press, New York.

34 Beachy, 'Who is the real JT LeRoy?'

35 Lehmann, Christopher 2008, 'Victim "hood"', *Nation*, 25 March 2008, viewed 12 March 2009, <<http://www.thenation.com/doc/20080407/lehmann>>

has described this in terms of the 'hegemonic cultural imaginary' by which we 'guard against a difference that might otherwise put the identity of one's own position in question'.³⁶ As with other instances of passing, Albert's case illustrates the fragility of our common tropes of identity: if whiteness or maleness or victimhood can be performed then these identities are obviously unstable classifications. In the case of authorship, status and hierarchy are particularly delicate since the literary industry is preoccupied with its own fragility and near obsolescence. Authorship is one of the very few strategies remaining for the literary industry to guarantee its continued existence in its present mode.

In 'Writers, teachers, intellectuals', Barthes writes of the tension between the writer's own sense of self and the public's desire for a corporeal presence on which to focus their interest:

Imagine...I speak, endlessly, in front of and for someone who remains silent. I am the person who says I...I am the person who, under cover of setting out a body of knowledge, puts out a discourse, never knowing how that discourse is being received and thus forever forbidden the reassurance of a definitive image—even if offensive—which would constitute me.³⁷

The writer occupies dual identities—personal and professional—simultaneously, placing them in a necessarily insecure space governed by acts of disclosure, secrecy or duplicity (echoing Hobbes' 'Artificiall person'). To live this identity is to exist in a permanent state of exposure. Indeed, one might argue that all writers are passing for authors. Barthes imagines the writer's exposure as a tragicomic slapstick scene: the writer stands at the podium pontificating while wearing a large false beard; as the lecture goes on, the beard starts to fall away; the writer presses on as if nothing is happening. By the lecture's end, he has become nothing more than a clown, a joke, a con. This scenario, with its disguises and exposures, has shades of the whole LeRoy affair and ably demonstrates the instability of the writer's performance as 'the author' and the inevitability of his disguise being caught out. This is the anxiety of the pass. It is a state of constant insecurity. To pass is to risk a slip. Just as a disguise makes an inscription on the otherwise recognisable face, so too, the reader inscribes their own impression of the author on an otherwise disembodied text. The desire to read the personal into the professional might be thought of as the inevitable slip of the reader—a corollary to the writer's embarrassingly slipping disguise. The reader's slip in mistaking the author for a character—or simply conflating their own experience

36 Garber, Marjorie 1997, *Vested Interests: Cross-dressing and cultural anxiety*, Routledge, New York, p. 130.

37 Roland Barthes, 'Writers, intellectuals, teachers', in Heath, *Image-Music-Text*, pp. 190–215, at p. 194.

of the text with that of the writer's—is a case of mistaken identity that not only complicates the question of authorship, it has the secondary effect of creating an (imagined) intimacy between reader and writer.

Barthes' point is that writing is a complex system formulated around disclosure. Authorship is a professional requirement—a performative state, akin to acting. Little wonder then that Albert was drawn to it, or that celebrities were attracted to LeRoy. In interview, LeRoy regularly complained that the literary world seemed to be simply a different form of prostitution: everyone wanted a piece. When Barthes writes of the author's performance, he colours his language with phrases such as 'putting out' and 'exposure'. Such language signals the writer's metaphorical relationship with social transgression: all writers are wantonly putting out and exposing themselves. The persona of LeRoy very clearly makes this case: thematically, all the stories are preoccupied with wish fulfillment for self and other, duping and performing. In *Sarah*, for instance, Cherry Vanilla is a truck-stop prostitute who not only passes from boy to girl, in the process s/he becomes a celebrated messiah-like figure. S/he no longer needs to turn tricks to make money, instead presiding over the truck-stop as a born-again virgin queen, revered as a truckers' talis(wo)man. The free-floating identity and all-round adulation achieved by Cherry Vanilla are presented as a fantasy ideal that cannot last. With a prescient foreshadowing of Albert's fate, *Sarah* concludes with the revelation of the boy's true identity and his punishment at the hands of his coterie of pimps, johns and fellow working girls.

Transgression, punishment and value

When the LeRoy hoax was exposed in 2006, media coverage focused on Albert as a scheming self-promoter who cannily recognised that the persona of LeRoy would titillate readers and pave the way for unfettered access to the high life. The media particularly seized on the case, stating that hoaxes such as Albert's and Frey's only further demonstrated the disintegration of the publishing industry and eroded public faith in literature and authorship. Such a response neatly illustrates the reasons for Albert's resistance to using her own name to pen the works attributed to LeRoy. The outcome of the LeRoy/Albert revelation also confirmed Foucault's assertion that authorship served a primarily litigious function. Authorship—coming into existence at the same time as the historical construction of individuality and property rights (constructions that do not

allow for any indeterminacy of citation, origin and ownership)—Foucault writes, is required so that an identifiable subject (an author) can be punished for their transgressions.³⁸

Albert's punishments were symbolic and material. In 2007, Antidote International Films, which had signed a contract with Albert's company, Underdogs Incorporated, to transform *Sarah* into a movie, sued Albert for fraud. A jury found Albert guilty and ordered her to pay US\$116 000 in damages and US\$350 000 in legal fees.³⁹ In addition, many of her original champions expressed their fury that Albert had traded on sympathy by exploiting the issues of AIDS, homelessness, drug addiction and trans-genderism. Albert's creation of a victim identity in order to achieve fame and fortune was immoral, demeaning the experience of those who had really endured trauma. Allotting blame and questioning gullibility right up the publishing chain were the primary motivations for media reporting on the LeRoy case, yet a more profitable line of inquiry concerned the cultural attitudes that facilitated such an act of impersonation. At its most basic, Albert's story is a strangely wrenching tale of a woman wanting to occupy the role of the author but fearful that she will not be capable of holding the interest of the industry as herself—'*the ultimate hope is that I can reveal myself and you won't go away*'.

Sadly for Albert, many of her supporters *have* gone away. In her 2008 interview with Albert, Nancy Rommelmann observes that if LeRoy was indeed Albert's respirator (her 'channel for air'), she survives today only 'on thin air. *W* and *Vanity Fair* no longer come to call; it's the *New York Post*.'⁴⁰ Since Albert's 'outing', she has been largely ignored by the literary industry. The offers to write travel stories, review albums and collaborate on film and television scripts have all dried up. Although Albert's writing remains, her history is different. What the LeRoy case demonstrates most forcefully is that we find it extremely hard to separate a work of art from what we know, or think we know, or *want* to know, about its creator. What people wanted was not forty-something Laura Albert, but twenty-something Jeremy 'Terminator' LeRoy: street kid made good. More specifically, what they wanted was the 'imprimatur of authenticity' that LeRoy's life story gave to his fiction.⁴¹ Had Albert written about her own real-life trauma she might have found commensurate success but it was her inability to bear her own pain on the page, her perception that the experiences that had inspired a middle-aged woman to dedicate her life to writing and self-expression were not

38 Foucault, 'What is an author?', p. 108.

39 Feuer, 'At trial, writer recalls an alter ego that took over'.

40 Rommelmann, Nancy 2008, 'The lies and follies of Laura Albert, a.k.a. JT LeRoy', *LA Weekly*, 19 February 2008, viewed 13 March 2009, <<http://www.laweekly.com/2008-02-21/art-books/no-exit-plan/5>>

41 Waldman, 'I was conned by JT LeRoy'.

good enough for a public interested in the trauma and suffering of the young and her need to use LeRoy as a proxy that were her undoing. As Laura Barton explains:

[I]f JT LeRoy is not a drug-addled hobo hooker made good, we feel embarrassed because we've been conned, as if we paid full price for a Louis Vuitton purse only to find it was a fake? But nothing has been taken from us. The books remain: as startling and disturbingly beautiful as they ever were.⁴²

Beachy, the investigative journalist, explains that he was prompted to think seriously about the possibility of a hoax when he reflected on how 'stories of suffering might be used to mask other, less marketable stories of suffering',⁴³ and it is here that the murky complexities of human nature are exposed, and indeed illuminated, by contemporary acts of passing. Where once passing connoted the movement from the vilified to the liberated, the popularity of 'real-life' stories told in memoirs, homemade videos, talk-show appearances, blogs and message boards all demonstrate a revaluing of the Other. Albert herself suggests this when she explains her reliance on the LeRoy persona: 'if you take my JT, my Jeremy, my *other*, I die.'⁴⁴ Where once studies of passing examined those who moved from the disadvantaged to the privileged (from black to white, from female to male, from gay to straight), we now see studies of passing that reflect the new social value of being Other: passing as Native American or African American or Jewish Holocaust survivor. These instances of passing as Other are further complicated by online frauds involving support groups for the seriously ill, traumatised or grief-stricken, which dupe compassionate individuals into identification with other sufferers (or suffering Others).⁴⁵

Earlier work on passing assumes that the practice allows individuals to overcome obstacles or simply have fun with their identities.⁴⁶ Passing, however, is not inherently resistant to the complex systems of power that shape larger society. While individuals claim freedom to play with their identities, social forces shape these instances of everyday passing. Passing does not subvert systems of oppression but instead provides an alternative means for navigating them. Passing practices respond to the values of a given society: one passes to blend in, rather than stand out, to feel safe, to be 'part of' something bigger or something better. Passing is an act of intended social cohesion and it is this communal aspect

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42 Barton, 'Who's that boy/girl?'

43 Beachy, 'Who is the real JT LeRoy?'

44 Feuer, 'At trial, writer recalls an alter ego that took over'; my emphasis.

45 The Internet has given rise to a boom in cases of invented victim identity—what has been termed 'Munchausen's by Internet'. See Grady, Denise 1998, 'Faking pain and suffering in internet support groups', *New York Times*, 23 April 1998, p. G1; Shreve, Jenn 2001, 'They think they feel your pain', *Wired*, 6 June 2001, viewed 15 April 2009, <<http://www.wired.com/medtech/health/news/2001/06/44245>>

46 Goffman, Erving 1959, *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life*, Doubleday, New York.

to passing that is often overlooked as we focus our attentions on the intentions and ethics of the individual. Writing of Nella Larsen's ruinous involvement in a plagiarism scandal, Barbara Haviland observes a certain pathology in the authorial identity by which authors seek out their own likeness in others, and in so doing look to build solidarity:

Freud often claimed that there was a correlation between narcissism and a benevolent interest in the well-being of humankind (see 'On Narcissism'). A desire for a closer connection with those like one's (complex) self (such as Larsen felt for same-sex and same-text objects) might, under other laws and conventions, lead to community instead of catastrophe.⁴⁷

I would suggest that it was this community that Albert hoped to achieve. The LeRoy persona not only gave Albert the opportunity to enter the literary circles she admired, it offered her a space in which to present her strengths and vulnerabilities among kin. So too, in Albert's personal life, the LeRoy persona brought her into union with her sister-in-law as they shared the emotional and intellectual labour of being J. T. LeRoy. Albert told the court during her trial that the experience of being LeRoy was 'like a trinity. We experienced it. It was as if he would leave me and enter her.'⁴⁸ Albert's description of authorship as a mystic multiplicity of selves is reminiscent of Barthes' call for the death of the author, for the reinstatement of 'that neutral, composite, oblique space where our subject slips away, the negative where all identity is lost, starting with the very identity of the body writing'.⁴⁹ Barthes chides the modern society in which '[t]he explanation of a work is always sought in the man or woman who produced it, as if it were always in the end, through the more or less transparent allegory of the fiction, the voice of a single person, the author "confiding" in us'.⁵⁰ His words remind readers of their own role in the formation of the author; although it would seem to follow that new practices of writing, forms of self-expression and new concepts of performative identity are likely to correlate with or perhaps even to foster a different conception of subjectivity and subject/object relations than that which sustains the classical conception of the author, recent experience shows how this has not been the case. Authors are expected to be fixed physical entities who take responsibility for the texts that are attributed to them. Both Foucault and Barthes propose that authorship ought to be understood as a 'tool' for the writer, consequently having little reference to reality and even less to the meaning of the literary work; yet that is rarely the way in which books *are* read. In the same way that the body is taken as evidence for gender identity, the named existence of an author is taken as evidence for the origin of the work. Ultimately, it is not authors but *readers* who must take a

47 Haviland, Beverly 1997, 'Passing from paranoia to plagiarism: the abject authorship of Nella Larsen', *Modern Fiction Studies*, vol. 43, pp. 295–318, at pp. 311–12.

48 Feuer, 'At trial, writer recalls an alter ego that took over'.

49 Barthes, 'The death of the author', p. 147.

50 *Ibid.*, p. 148.

more active position, acknowledging their role in the formation of the author. Albert wanted attention, certainly, but she felt she had to attain it via LeRoy because LeRoy was what was wanted (by the doctors, by the publishers, by the writers).

By the time that childhood photograph was taken, Laura Albert had already decided she would rather have been anyone but herself; Albert attempted to pass for an author and in so doing erased herself. Evidently, however, she never stopped hoping that some day 'I want to be me!' might just be good enough: *'the ultimate hope is that I can reveal myself and you won't go away.'* The final sting in this whole affair is that Albert's erasure of her own identity has been too successful: even today, after the unveiling of the hoax, it is not the writer but the author who endures. The identity of J. T. LeRoy persists more strongly than that of Laura Albert. Film-maker Gus Van Sant, who worked closely with LeRoy on the script of his 2003 film *Elephant*, told a magazine that 'JT was a superclose friend...I would talk to him three hours a day...He became one of my anchors. [Even after the revelation of the hoax] I think I could still talk to JT, because I think he still exists.'⁵¹

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51 Van Sant quoted in Rommelmann, 'The lies and follies of Laura Albert, a.k.a. JT LeRoy'.