

The Missing Body of JT Leroy

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Not much remains of the body of JT Leroy. To start with, it is a body first and foremost made of words. Over the course of debut novel *Sarah*, short story collection *The Heart Is Deceitful Above All Things* and the novella *Howard's End*, this body is portrayed as highly attuned to the sensual qualities of the mostly grim world it inhabits. It endures extremes of physical torture, from a disciplinarian grandfather's whipping to sexual abuse from mother Sarah's boyfriends. It registers the ultra-specific smells that pervade its low-rent environment, from the Naugahyde upholstery of car seats to the overwhelming, eye-searing odour of freshly cut ramps, a kind of wild onion native to West Virginia. The reader's ability to empathise with this damaged body — to vicariously feel the impact of the drugs, sex and violence that it is subjected to — is at the heart of the entire project. And yet for all the power of these descriptions to conjure the intensity of lived experience, the actual existence of this body has only ever been fragmentary at best, dispersed across telephone calls, emails, stand-ins and other evasive manoeuvres.

We first spoke to JT, as many had at the time, over the phone. He was charming, articulate and very sweet as he tried to help us get to grips with the mystery of how a barely educated street kid from an impoverished background might possess the lit-

erary skills in evidence in his artfully composed novel, which borrowed from the Southern legacy of writers like William Faulkner and Harry Crews, combining an ear for dialect with biblical references. JT described the biblical writing exercises assigned by his religious grandfather and his own childhood street preaching as the training ground for this ability, and whilst we remained sceptical of the autobiography, we were deeply impressed with the writing itself and stayed in touch, even asking him for a story for a publication we made later that year. Three years later, we met in a hotel lobby for a press junket on the occasion of the release Asia Argento's film of *The Heart Is Deceitful Above All Things*. Despite the reassurances of the Foyles' representative, we wrote, 'even now, having met JTLeRoy in a posh hotel in London, seen him sans wig and sunglasses, we still feel that the lucid dream of a narrative he has crafted in his three slim books is somehow more real than the man himself'.¹ He appeared very feminine, but explained that this was due to gender reassignment. More bizarrely, he did not seem to remember details from our earlier conversation and correspondence, and overall seemed a lot more withdrawn and far less able to elaborate on the ideas expressed in the writing. It turned out this was more than just a case of extreme shyness.

As is well known by now, Jeremiah 'Terminator' Leroy was the invention of Laura Albert, a middle aged New Yorker who had worked as a telephone sex operator and porn writer, whilst pursuing a musical career with her partner Geoffrey Knoop in the band Daddy Don't Go. Adept at using her verbal skills in creating fantasy narratives, she crafted the persona of the traumatised teenage sex worker whose sordid life as an Appalachian 'lot-lizard' became the subject of several books and used it to promote the writing. Using a fake Southern accent over the phone, she gained the support of established writers like Dennis Cooper and Mary Gaitskill and quickly rose to the kind of

1 Pil and Galia Kollektiv, 'King of the Street', *Plan B Magazine* 6 (June–July 2005): 86–87.

stardom that had so far eluded her but that also required in person appearances. Albert employed a series of avoidance tactics, before settling on her partner's sister, Savannah Knoop, forever in wig and dark sunglasses, as the incarnation of the author's body and posing as his friend/minder, a cockney punk rocker called Speedie:

No one had ever met him in person, and there were starting to be rumors that he was not real, so I knew I needed to supply a body. I made a date to meet Mary [Gaitskill], and I decided to hire someone to play JT. But I didn't know anybody who matched my physical description of JT. So Geoff and I got in the car and started driving up and down Polk Street, and I saw a boy I'd never seen before. He was nineteen and he was slight, blond, blue-eyed—perfect. I said to him, You want to make fifty bucks, no sex? He said, Sure. I just told him not to talk, just say hello to a woman named Mary, get freaked out, and leave. I took him to the café. Mary Gaitskill was sitting there. The kid walked up to her, said, Hi, I'm Terminator, and he handed her some vinegar and chocolate—things I brought to give her as gifts. She said, Hi, glad to meet you, and when the kid ran off, I sat down. I was there as Speedie, and we talked.²

It would be easy to dismiss the hoax, as many have done, as an exercise in celebrity. Many of Leroy's initial supporters ended up disavowing any merits they originally identified in his writing once Albert's identity as the writer behind the stories was confirmed. Cooper in particular, insisted on the importance of the truth value of the story, which was odd considering the role the construction of literary fantasy takes in his own writing in relation to transgressive sex and violence:

2 Nathaniel Rich, 'Being JT Leroy', *The Paris Review* 178 (Fall 2006), <http://www.theparisreview.org/miscellaneous/5664/being-jt-leroy-nathaniel-rich>.

'He' originally seduced me and a number of other writers with his misery and horror filled autobiography and his seemingly remarkable ability to not only have survived that life but to have such a bright future ahead of 'him' due to 'his' inexplicable talent as a writer and the courage 'he' showed in using art as a weapon to face down all that abuse. All writers who believe writing is important want a reason to believe, because there aren't many reasons out there these days, and JT Leroy was a reason, a real flesh and blood, authentic reason to believe writing remained a very important medium.³

But why was it so important for Leroy's body to have experienced this misery and horror? Is the writing only validated by bearing testimony to this corporeal suffering? What can we learn from this broken body, scattered across texts, impersonations and media encounters?

In an interview for *The Moth*, Albert explains that 'one reason JT was so shy was because JT didn't have a body'.⁴ And yet, for someone whose body was missing in action, JT had a surprisingly strong physical presence. Despite never having properly existed, JT Leroy had an ear. Speaking at the Public Theater in 2003, Winona Ryder described an improbably first meeting with JT when she saw him listening in to the opera house a decade earlier, a street kid with his ear to the wall.⁵ Despite never having properly existed, JT Leroy had a disfiguring skin condition that, at least for a while prevented him from making public appearances: a photograph of George Miles, Dennis Cooper's childhood friend and muse, became another proxy.⁶ Despite never

3 Dennis Cooper, 'A JT Leroy riff', *Dennis Cooper's* (blog), 28 October 2005, <https://web.archive.org/web/20061027194405/http://denniscooper.blogspot.com/2005/10/jt-leroy-riff.html>.

4 'Laura Albert at The Moth "My Avatar & Me"', *YouTube*, 24 November 2010, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=oxAHHXEoHOW>.

5 'Winona on JT Leroy', *YouTube*, 16 September 2011, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=iCfMIItHhJU>.

6 Stephen Beachy, 'Who Is the Real JT Leroy?: A Search for the True Identity of the Literary Hustler', *New York Magazine*, n.d., 5, <http://nymag.com/nymetro/news/people/features/14718/index4.html>.

having properly existed, JT Leroy had sex with Asia Argento, excusing the ace bandage covering his breasts as a post-op way of protecting privacy.⁷ Despite never having properly existed, JT Leroy had a lung, a mutant part of her own body, which Albert claimed to share.⁸ In several statements following the exposure of the hoax, she refers to this need for a corporeal manifestation:

He felt very trapped in my body. For me it was a relief being able to find a body where he could rest, where he was able to move into my own body.⁹

He wanted his own body. He so wanted to be out of me. I wanted this other child I had to be out in the world. He didn't like being inside me. He could talk such smack about me.¹⁰

There were parts missing:

...in person, the body had no eyes. Behind the wig and the sunglasses was a stand-in, an avatar, an enactment, a living mask.¹¹

Even more significant were the anatomical absences that photographer Mary Ellen Mark observed when she was invited to create a portrait of the author:

Over the course of two days in April I photographed JT in Knoop's house and at various other locations. To me, it was

7 Savannah Knoop, *Girl Boy Girl: How I Became JT LeRoy* (New York: Seven Stories Press, 2008), 19.

8 Rich, 'Being JT Leroy'.

9 'Laura Albert talks with dot429', *YouTube*, 9 November 2011, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Tofr401Xtkc>.

10 Alan Feuer, 'Writer Testifies about Source of Nom de Plume', *New York Times*, 20 June 2007, <http://www.nytimes.com/2007/06/20/nyregion/20cnd-writer.html>.

11 See 'Remembering Mary Ellen Mark', *Laura Albert*, 28 May 2015, <https://lauraalbert.org/remembering-mary-ellen-mark/>.

obvious right away that JT was biologically female. She didn't have an Adam's apple and she had pretty, beautiful skin.¹²

So what are we to make of this recasting of the fictionalised autobiography of JT Leroy as a work of pure fiction? Are we to disregard the author's identity altogether? Re-reading the novels with this knowledge is inevitably ironic. When Sarah says, 'most anything you want in this world is easier when you're a pretty girl',¹³ it is hard not to think about the woman who authored these words, by now a bit too old to be that pretty girl, trying to pass for a boy and then casting a girl to be that boy becoming a girl. But rather than trying to rise above this information to perform some kind of abstracted reading of the text as emanating from an ethereal, universalised non-body, we would argue that there is a lot to be gained from considering it within the tradition of the extensive literature of passing. What is at stake in the strange case of JT Leroy goes beyond the ambiguous gendering of the writer's body. Many women have, of course, assumed masculine pseudonyms to facilitate a career in publishing, from George Sand to George Eliot, but in some ways Laura Albert has more in common with Boris Vian, the white Frenchman who pretended to be a black man to write a novel about a light skinned African American passing for a white man and seeking racial vengeance. Vian was spurred to write *I Spit on Your Graves* by a bet with a publisher friend that he could write a best seller in 10 days. He was revealed as the author of the controversial book when it was banned for obscenity, but in performing this double bluff, he exposed the essentialist views of race that prevailed at the time, a lethal cocktail of stereotypes from virility to violence. Whether as a side-effect of his unmasking or in keeping with his anti-essentialist views, in raising the possibility of passing and then embodying this himself, Vian

12 Diane Pernet, 'Laura Albert with Mary Ellen Mark's portrait of JT LeRoy at SF Camerawork', *A Shaded View on Fashion*, 2 June 2015, <http://ashadedviewonfashion.com/blog/laura-albert-mary-ellen-marks-portrait-jt-leroy-sf-camerawork>.

13 JT Leroy, *Sarah* (London: Bloomsbury, 2000), 10

questioned the mapping of race onto identity as an easy binary of white and black.

It is in comparison to Vian's project that Laura Albert's ruse is best interrogated, because JT Leroy isn't merely a (transgendered) male body that serves as a vehicle for the (still subaltern) female author. That quote from Mary Ellen Mark continues:

She didn't look like someone from an impoverished background. She was kind of classy, educated, and smart — not a person who was a victim of real poverty. She was nice and sweet, very cooperative, and incredibly theatrical, so I played along with it.¹⁴

The body of JT Leroy is encoded not only through gender but also, crucially, through class: punky hairstyle and scrappy attire aside, it does not 'read' sufficiently like the body of a poor person. A closer reading of JT Leroy's writing reveals this incongruity to be the crux of the matter. Sarah in particular is dense with descriptions of gourmet food. The conceit is that the truck stop diner where the lot lizards ply their trade is staffed by a former male prostitute who had been offered a way out by his pimp if he trained as a chef and served the tricks the kind of memorable meals that would guarantee repeat visits. Bolly Boy serves flam-béd pecan soufflé, Appalachian fois gras apple pie and a 'surprisingly tasty tomato and ramp sorbet with mayonnaise crème'.¹⁵ Playing on the expectations the reader might have of a 'white trash' writer, the novel at once relies on all the stereotypes of trailer park poverty and Christian fundamentalism, while at the same time undermining these through an urbane culinary vocabulary that belies this kind of upbringing. The hyper-sensitive body of JT Leroy is primed for the most horrendous torture. We can readily accept that like his young uncle Aaron, he might be

14 Pernet, 'Laura Albert with Mary Ellen Mark's portrait of JT LeRoy at SF Camerawork'.

15 Leroy, *Sarah*, 52.

locked for hours in a punishment box, its floor covered in dried peas that will leave little deep round craters on his knees.¹⁶ But this body is not meant to have consumed or even tasted such arcane delights as French shallots in a saffron-infused lobster-reduction sauce.

Far more interesting than the misery memoir Laura Albert worked so hard to market, the case of JT Leroy, in light of the revelation of the 'hoax', turns out to be an investigation of authenticity, so fundamental to the great American narrative. The strong need for firm and correct semiotic link between cultural narrative and corporeal carrier is nowhere more apparent than in the recent case of the Rachel Dolezal, the American activist and professor of Africana studies whose parents accused of misleadingly 'passing' as black. A tangible sense of anxiety is attached to any deviation from this semiotic function. This anxiety is not coincidental and reflects more than a racial nervousness that white America feels towards the globalised world it inhabits.

There has been much discussion in critical theory in recent years about the way in which the production of subjectivity has become a site of value extraction for post-Fordist workers. Extending beyond the creative industry, the demand to produce the self as a commodity is apparent throughout the service sector, an unending performance of the self through customer relations, social media interactions and an increasingly vague boundary between friendship and networking. Work in the west today is organised around the display or voicing of subjective, social, cognitive and linguistic skills through constant and repetitive actions: liking, sharing, posting, rating, commenting and caring and communicating in general. Since this neoliberal transformation of the social into a field of economic production is done with words, stories and opinions, one would expect a

16 JT Leroy, *The Heart is Deceitful Above All Things* (London: Bloomsbury 2001), 78.

lax attitude towards the malleability of identity. After all, it is constructed everyday through work, extracted way beyond its shell of subjective 'authenticity'. And indeed in the early days of the communication technologies that made this mode of production possible, this was sometimes celebrated as a potential form of liberation: on the internet nobody can tell if you're a dog (or, more likely, a cat). But this early attitude has changed into reactionary re-emergences of the authentic self, armed with a matching body, 'real-life' name and a corroborate-able life story. This is because, despite the infinite flexibility and expansion of neoliberal and post-Fordist work, the self is still the Achilles heel of the system. The flurry of economic activity has to be tied to an individual in order to generate value. In the same way that liquid capital is exchanged and multiplied at the speed of light only to be re-solidified in the form of property, the only possible investment of the neoliberal age, so is the incessant chatter of post-Fordist work captured in the inviolable authentic subject.

In the context of industrial labour, class distinctions were closely related to occupation and to the body: whether your collar and your face were dirty or clean determined what social group you belonged to. But with this new kind of social labour, the tools of the trade seem increasingly identical. If we are to see the self as the new factory, the place where value is created from the raw material of the human, then perhaps we might need to start looking at class as a question of our access to that means of production that is our subjectivity. Possession of the cognitive skills that enable us to consciously construct our 'selves' is not equally distributed. The ability to access education or therapy, the means to buy Adderall or retrain to attain new skills, the capacity to play with identity without violent repercussions, these may well be the new markers of distinction.¹⁷ In other words, the

17 The latter is neatly demonstrated in Judith Butler's essay about the film *Paris Is Burning*, where she considers the different fates of Venus Xtravaganza and Willi Ninja: "[Venus] 'passes' as a light-skinned woman, but is — by virtue of a certain failure to pass completely — clearly vulnerable to homophobic violence; ultimately, her life is taken presumably by a client who, upon the

self becomes a loose fictional anchor, an investment portfolio that securitizes the value of acts of communication against a measurable and rigid ‘belonging’ to a particular social group.

In this respect, JT Leroy’s body is not just a site of over-production that spreads across several identities and (physical and fictional) forms. The ‘Other’ of the elastic neoliberal subjects who remodel their bodies and minds with ease (in the gym, through drugs or through flexible international educational frameworks) is not only the immobile and inactive subject, unable to keep producing the self (because of police restrictions, border control or the inaccessibility of transformative platforms). It is also the missing body, the one that disappears without a trace in the failed crossing of the Mediterranean or the one that collapses under the burden of being a site of production. ‘Natoma Street’, the story that closes *The Heart Is Deceitful Above All Things* is a beautiful illustration of why Leroy’s books are a powerful exploration of this theme as they fuse together the literary body as a subject and as a form. The young protagonist in the story buys a potentially life threatening sadomasochistic sexual act with no ‘safe word’. Just before the narrative delves into the predictable torture scenario, it is abruptly disrupted and the reader is confronted with another, earlier, scene in which Sarah allows and even encourages a shop keeper to humiliatingly punish a younger version of our teenage protagonist. Here, the graphic lacerations are conspicuously absent from the story, more missing fragments of a missing body. This elliptical structure acts of course as a psychological explanation for why a teenage boy would seek and even pay for torture — an obvious psychoanalytical site of trauma that reverberates later in life. But it is more

discovery of what she calls her “little secret,” mutilates her for having seduced him. On the other hand, Willi Ninja can pass as straight; his voguing becomes foregrounded in her video productions with Madonna et al., and he achieves post-legendary status on an international scale. There is passing and then there is passing, and it is — as we used to say — “no accident” that Willi Ninja ascends and Venus Xtravaganza dies.’ Judith Butler, *Bodies That Matter: On the Discursive Limits of ‘Sex’* (London: Routledge, 2011), 89.

than that. Subversively, the protagonist here wishes to disappear, to gain pleasure from the reduction of and damage to his body, to author his own torture scene. The gap between the two parts of the story doesn't really explain anything, as neither narrative has priority or more 'authentic' status. We don't even know whether the second part is a hallucination, a memory or simply another parallel short story contained within the first, and considering the magical realism that pervades Leroy's Southern Gothic fantasy, any of those is plausible. But the key difference between the two narratives is that in the first one, the character merges a little with the author by designing his own harm: casting the role of the tormentor, choosing specific devices of torture, providing whispered instructions.

That Laura Albert was able to author a fiction that seems unlikely for a real 'JT Leroy' to have written isn't merely a testament to the prejudices of the publishing industry and the reading public. It is also emblematic of the deep social gaps that run through American society. In the wake of her discovery, Albert, who was sued by the film company that had optioned Sarah for signing a contract under a false identity, attempted to claim back some of the authenticity of the story by stating that she had experienced street life and abuse. But the parts of the story that don't add up, that refuse to confirm the demand that one writes what one knows, are far more compelling in terms of their implications. Albert was able to move fluidly between genders, ages and accents, drift between hired bodies and trade in the different voices she could project, in a way that a less well-travelled Appalachian transgendered prostitute might have struggled to do. But in doing so, she has forced the question of the role authenticity plays in the construction of human capital. What is this thing we are supposedly born with, but that we are then also meant to invest in for meritocratic gains? If we are the owners of our human capital, that quality we are meant to promote and monetise as entrepreneurs of the self, why can we not get rid of it? What would it mean to truly be free to construct a self? This

is the utopian horizon of the horror story that is the biography of JT Leroy.