

**“I’m not a fucking hoax” – Problemizing Identity, Gender and Corporeality via J.T. LeRoy’s Transgressive Fiction**

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Tarkastelen pro gradu –tutkielmassani kieltä, diskursiivista valtaa ja voimaannuttamista sekä identiteetin käsitettä yhdysvaltalaisen kirjailijan J.T. LeRoyn lyhytproosan kautta, jonka määritän lajiltaan transgressiiviseksi. Syvennän käsitteitä analysoimalla kielellisesti tuotettua valtaa ja identiteettien rakentumista identiteettipolitiikaksi postsrukturalistisessa viitekehäksessä l. kielellisesti ja sosiaalisesti tuotettuina keskittyen sukupuoleen, ruumiillisuuteen, sosiaaliseen luokkaan ja kokonaisvaltaisiin kulttuurisiin ylä- ja alakäsityksiin, siis kulttuurimme hierarkkisiin merkityksellistämistäjärjestelmiin. Lähestymistapani on poikkitieteellinen; analysissani yhdistyvät feministisen sosiolingvistiikan, queer-/sukupuolentutkimuksen ja kirjallisuustieteen näkökulmat, joiden teoriakonteksteissa problematisoin identiteetin rakentumisprosesseja sekä tarkastelen transgression käsitettä ja transgressiivista fiktiota selvittääkseni, mitä niiden avulla voi paljastaa ja millaista kumousvoimaa niihin sisältyy. Lopulta jälleenrakennan J.T. LeRoyn representatiivisena, translokationaalisenä, kumouspotentiaalisenä queer-identiteettinä transgression poetiikan ja politiikan avulla.

Totean, että transgressiot – sääntöjen rikkominen tai niiden ylittäminen – paljastavat hierarkkisoimisprosessit poeettisen ulottuvuutensa avulla tuomalla esiin sen inhon, pelon ja houkutusdynamiikan, jolla valtakulttuuri rakentaa käsityksenä itsestä yöpuolensa, marginaaliensa, alemman Toisen kautta. Paljastaminen ei kuitenkaan yksin riitä vaan siihen tulee liittyä muutosstrategioita, transgression politiikkaa. Transgressio tulisi ymmärtää paitsi ajatusrakennelmana myös voimaannuttamisstrategiana, jonka tarkoitus on löytää vaihtoehtoisia maailmanjärjestyksiä, jotka horjuttavat vallitsevaa epäoikeudenmukaista sosiaalista järjestystä, estetiikkaa ja kulttuurihierarkioita.

Asiasanat: gender, class, the body, transgression, transgressive fiction, intersectionality, identity politics

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## Introduction

In this thesis, I discuss language, discursive empowerment and the concepts of identity via J.T. LeRoy's short fiction which I note to be transgressive by genre. I further scrutinize how these elements of power and identity politics operate within the poststructuralistically produced i.e. linguistically and socially constructed fields of gender, corporeality (the body), social class and our cultural sense-making hierarchies of high and low on a comprehensive scale. My multidisciplinary approach includes literary theory, sociolinguistics in feminist theory and gender/queer theory by which I discuss the processes and limits of identity construction, what do transgressions and transgressive fiction reveal and further, what subversive potential do they imply.

But who or what is J.T. LeRoy? Let me tell you a story.

At the dawn on the new Millennium, a prolific publishing house embarked on a precarious venture by engaging to a short novel entitled *Sarah*. The author, J.T. LeRoy, was a stranger in the eyes of the mainstream literary world. His previous accomplishments as a writer were slender: his novella about a boy who dresses up as a girl and seduces his mother's lover had been published 1997 in the Grove Press anthology *Close to the Bone: Memoirs of Hurt, Rage and Desire*. Despite the lack of earlier exposure, the manuscript of *Sarah* was accompanied by praising letters of recommendation from such prominent transgressive fiction writers as Mary Gaitskill and Dennis Cooper. All the initial conditions implied the book would appeal to the same small yet passionate cult audiences as the aforementioned writers, although zeitgeist implied that with proper marketing, the story – of a young cross-dressing boy prostitute desperately looking for love from the most unusual places as its protagonist – had the possibility to attract some temporary, necrophagous media attention.

*Sarah* however, became much more: it became a cult, a phenomenon: it became almost magical. During the launch of his second book *The Heart is Deceitful Above All Things* (both titles originally published in 1999 in the United States), he revealed the themes of child abuse, addiction, prostitution and transgenderism – *Sarah*'s Sam wants to become a famous 'lot lizard' (prostitute soliciting at truck stops) and renames herself She-Ra after the cartoon character HeMan's female spin-off – to be autobiographical (e.g. Karisto 2004). The beautiful, haunting tales of the survival of the spirit making compulsive yet disturbing reading, LeRoy was now perceived not only as a talented writer but also as a survivor.

Imperceptibly, through interviews and public appearances which constituted J.T. LeRoy 'he' transformed himself from a teenaged prostitute and a junkie into a glamorous, angelic figure to inspire all of those who believed in salvation through art. Some, however, saw him in a more grim light as he was accused of rubbing elbows with celebrities, selling his book and his tragic personal story in order to obtain media exposure; in fact, he had the tendency to fawn over anyone he saw as having enough visibility or contacts to improve his sales. His work itself was questioned when there were speculations of his talent; in the light of the statistics, with his tragically disadvantaged background it is extremely rare to succeed in the literary world like he did.

Rumours became reality in October 2005, when journalist Stephen Beachy's article in *New York* magazine revealed J.T. to be a joint project of three different persons: Laura Albert, Savannah Knoop and Geoff Knoop. Laura Albert was the master mind who wrote everything published by J.T. while Savannah Knoop played J.T. in public when needed; Geoff Knoop participated occasionally in the writing but was mostly involved as Albert's husband, rendering paternal force to the newly-found family bliss and complementing Albert's role of the benevolent, supportive mother J.T. allegedly never had.

In 2006, in an article featured in *Vanity Fair* magazine Geoff Knoop gave yet another detailed account on the arrangement of the collaboration, stating he no longer talks to Albert except via lawyers and openly expressing his willingness to write a book and/or a movie script about project J.T. (apparently now in the making). When asked about Albert's initial motives to conduct the hoax, he stresses how deeply she feels about J.T. "Laura feels like J.T. is a part of who she is .... she's been writing in that voice all her life, and maybe telling stories in that voice all her life" (Handy 2006: 111). Alongside to suggesting Albert's life history has been similar to J.T.'s in terms of violence and sexual abuse, the article also includes part of a conversation Albert had had with a representative of *the London Observer* as J.T. (Handy 2006: 113)

If people want to say that I don't fucking exist then they can do that. Because in a way I don't. I have a different name that I use in the world, and maybe J. T. LeRoy doesn't really exist. But I'll tell you one thing: I'm not a hoax. I'm not a fucking hoax.

Despite the moral ambiguity surrounding the author's identity, LeRoy's writing was highly acclaimed by professional authors, literature critics and readers alike, I included, in which regard the 'real' identity of the author is irrelevant. It is however, ironic in hindsight, that the review of *Sarah* in *the New York Times* quoted on the cover of the novel's British volume (2000) stated that the book "turns the tawdriness of hustling into a world of lyrical and grotesque beauty, without losing any of its authenticity....his language is always fresh, his soul never corrupt."

Praised for its humour, personal language, eerie allure, structural eloquence and emotional sensitivity, the writing still speaks for itself, regardless of the identity of the author. As the genre is usually neglected by the mainstream due to its 'disturbing' subject matter, LeRoy definitely was the *sine qua non* of early 21<sup>st</sup> century transgressive fiction. Further, both J.T. LeRoy's public image and his writing encapsulated something we seldom see in the public eye: an openly transgendered writer and an abuse-surviving artists who found salvation through literature. Personally captivated by the story, I

explore in this thesis which narrative and performative elements construct his identity in his writing and can those elements remain legitimate when we acknowledge there never was a J.T. LeRoy *per se*.

The first section of this thesis discusses the narrations of J.T. LeRoy to further introduce him and the subject matter of his writing, subsequent to which I problematize fiction, non-fiction, autobiography and the entire concept of solid identity through postmodern theory. I then move on to discuss corporeal aspects of gender, sexuality and social class focusing on linguistic identity building blocks reflected on the body in constructing gendered and socio-economical arrangements of identities. This section also features a translation analysis of LeRoy's texts in regards to characters' linguistic resourcefulness, serving as case-in-point examples of identity political power play. As I find these bodily representations to be hierarchal in composition and that the hierarchy can be challenged through the concept and tradition of transgression, I explore carnivalism and symbolic inversion as methodological tools to discover alternative cultural sense-making strategies in the context of transgressive fiction. I aim to resurrect J.T. LeRoy as a representational, performative, translocational, potentially subversive identity fuelled by the politics of queer and ultimately, by the poetics and politics of transgression.

## **1. Narratives of J.T. Leroy**

Alongside the real J.T. story of ruse and circuitous betrayal, the parallel narrative as reminisced and reconstructed in countless interviews by the people involved but mainly by J.T. himself must be seen as paramount to contextualize his writing.

### **1.1. Lady and the wonderboy**

According to the narrative reiterated, for example, by Bruce Handy in his article (2006), in 1993, Jeremiah (or Jeremy, depending on transliteration)

was 13 years old, living on the streets of San Francisco. Originating from West Virginia, a state persisting as one of the most rural in the U.S. South, he had been travelling across the country with his mother, a prostitute and a drug-addict, ever since she had reclaimed him from the custody of his loving foster parents when he was five. His life had become a downward spiral: he had been through severe physical, emotional, and sexual abuse from his mother, her boyfriends and his extremely religious grandparents to whose cold-hearted large house he was occasionally whisked away when his mother was nowhere to be found by the indifferent authorities. In San Francisco he was living on the street and working as a prostitute to support himself; an HIV positive teenager with a heroine addiction who resorted to severe self-mutilation by cutting and burning himself and indulging in extremely violent sadomasochistic sex acts to alleviate his psychological pain, in between unsuccessful overdose attempts. “I didn’t dare to kill myself ‘coz I was sure I’d go Hell; basically, I was just looking for someone or something to kill me,” he described later in a radio interview, “Until one day, I just didn’t care anymore.” On that day, he started wandering mindlessly amidst the traffic, trying to get run over.

Curiously enough, salvation did come that day; though not as an assisted suicide, but in the form of a woman who pulled him onto the curb just before it was too late. The woman, Laura Albert, opened her heart to the boy who introduced himself first as Terminator, a name he had earned from the other hustlers and his clients as a tribute to his skills as a prostitute, in addition to describing his overall personality. Albert took him to a homeless shelter and encouraged him to get off heroine and into therapy. Ultimately, the two became so close that Albert invited J(eremiah) T(erminator) to move in.

J.T. began to write when his therapist suggested it might bring some continuity between sessions and to keep his mind off drugs. The therapist had also noticed the boy was very articulate, often speaking in metaphors and using almost poetic rhetoric. When asked about the origins of his writing on the commentary track of the movie adaptation of *The Heart the*



*Deceitful Above All Things* directed by Asia Argento, J.T. said, “The first story I ever wrote was Baby Doll. After I’d finished it, I curled up and cried my heart out.”

Consequently J.T. began to write, and the stories transpired to be sad, horrendous and hauntingly beautiful. He was able to capture both the inner realms of an abused child and the subtle mechanics of empowerment every victim has, to a certain extent at least, so eloquently that the text had merits beyond therapeutic purposes. The stories entailed complex characters and quite a lot of humour, which allowed the reader occasionally to laugh through the tears, making the work more approachable despite the horrors in his subject material. The therapist showed a story to his next-door neighbour, who happened to be a literary agent, and he encouraged J.T. to keep on writing. The positive feedback preponderated over J.T.’s shyness and encouraged him to present his work to his favourite writer, Dennis Cooper, who was more than willing to mentor the troubled young artist and help him along the literary chain of his friends in the business until, at the age of 17, J.T. acquired a book deal.

So the miraculous writing talent of J.T. LeRoy, despite the fact that he had never finished even grammar school and had spent most of his life getting either raped or abusing various substances, soon became the adopted son of the cultural elite, and also, the new celebrity pet. He attended galas, walking the red carpet behind Angelina Jolie. *The Heart Is Deceitful Above All Things* the movie was released, featuring Winona Ryder and Marilyn Manson. He had dinner with Liv Tyler. He exchanged regular emails with Madonna. Curiously enough, though, when appearing in public, he was always in disguise, wearing a wig and sunglasses. When confronted about his masquerade like appearance, he explained he was pathologically shy and extremely uncomfortable around people. This was also the reason, he said, why his ‘new family’, Geoff Knoop and especially Laura Albert, never left his side.

When the story unravelled, it became clear why J.T. wanted to hide as much as possible, since the person who posed in pictures and attended readings was Savannah Knoop; people were forced to accept the fact they had talked, helped and touched a complete stranger. J.T.'s email address was printed at the back of his books, and he expressed on many occasion that he wanted to be available to his fans. Albert herself handled most of the phone interviews and email exchange, but when J.T. became larger than they had anticipated, she was forced to get external help: some trusted family members were handed meticulous notes on punctuation and word usage and then told to reply or contact people as J.T. LeRoy. Some remain in contact with him even today, even though they know he is not real, and are soothed by his words; although available for a restricted group of members only, it is rumoured that J.T. LeRoy still has a working and active MySpace page with many friends.

Narratives of LeRoy, both those by him and those who is him, continue to allure, provoke and inspire. He is simultaneously fiction and non-fiction in a confusing web assimilating those two categories which conventionally are considered, if not indeed polar opposites but nonetheless discrepant (e.g. Bruun 2012). Can J.T. LeRoy persist as a “cognitive consciousness through which make sense of a narration, its confusion, unbalance and contradiction” (Hyvärinen 2010)? Does the fact that, as Albert wrote in her email as J.T., he does not “really exist,” make him completely void in meaning and reader responsiveness? Insisting that “I’m not a hoax, I’m not a fucking hoax”, and being able to touch those familiar with the subject matter of his writing on level of personal experiences, can Albert’s arraignment of J.T. sustain without losing the most appealing of his traits judged by reader response: emotional commitment and emotional integrity?

1.2. An author’s autopsy: Problemizing fiction, non-fiction and postmodern identity

Looking at the narration that is J.T. LeRoy through the historical context of literary theory, we must start by discussing the Aristotelian concept of mimesis. A highly debated concept both in terms of adaptability and contents, the term has the relationship between art and truth at its core. Does fiction rest purely in the realm of the imaginary, escaping and irrelevant to factual claims about ‘reality’ or ‘the real world’, or does all art imitate reality, at least in the sense of offering alternative presentations of the self? Even though this Aristotelian approach has been criticized in (post)modern thought, according to Dolezel (1998), Aristotle’s mimesis persists as the most influential semantic model for fiction both inside and out the academia. As Auerbach (1946) influentially pointed out, debate around mimesis and the rise of Modernist<sup>1</sup> literature should not, however, be interpreted as the latter being ignorant of realistic representations or indifferent to truth; more accurate is to say that Modernism subscribed to a different world view and formal/stylistic characteristics. Thus Modernist mimesis and fiction reflect a new world view and sense of self: time and place become flowing and confused, fragments of experience and emotion replace empiric arraignment of reality.

To Dolezel, however, the Aristotelian model of mimesis allows fictive entities to be considered as drawn, i.e. stemming, from reality, from the history of the actual world. Mimesis can also be interpreted to its logical extreme as pervasive in the sense that fictive beings are inextricably linked to their respective actual prototypes. The latter approach provokes fiction to be read as referential, discussing reference points between fiction and actuality. This eliminates the acknowledgement of representation as active and creative sense-making which cultivates text elements to meet the aesthetic cohesion of the complete text. Dolezel insists fiction to be read as fiction; further, he promotes ontological independence of fictive characters and things in their respective text worlds. In this sense, J.T. LeRoy is indeed ontologically independent yet also representative in his individual writing voice telling his autobiographical tales through Laura Albert.

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<sup>1</sup> Capitalized for clarity, i.e. ≠ modern as contemporary

Indeed, Auerbach's notions of fragmentarism overpowering empiric arraignment of reality considered, J.T. can be resurrected against the backdrop of Modernist mimesis.

So J.T. LeRoy is not real in the conventional sense of the word i.e. the components of the fictional world he is apart of are not compatible with the actual world even though his world bares resemblance to the actual world; yet his world forms a coherent whole with all of its components compatible within the world. Seemingly paradoxically, the world of fiction is complete and true in itself, although both positive and negative connotations can be assigned to it, the former including the notion of fiction as highly imaginative and the latter focusing on its fallible nature (Ryan 2001). Still, no other story or narration, neither fiction nor non-fiction, can shatter or question 'the reality' of a fictional world constructed within a text (ibid.). On this note, the reality of J.T. LeRoy in the realm of fiction remains unchallenged. However, what happens when we scrutinize the concept of autobiography? If LeRoy's writing is to be considered, as Albert has methodically insisted, autobiographical<sup>2</sup> i.e. true to an identity in his/her world, opposed to being motivated by a malicious hoax, do the conventions of that genre change the ways we can make appeals to LeRoy's identity?

Let us start by discussing the terms fiction and non-fiction. I subscribe to a definition of fiction as fabricated texts which construct their own respective imaginary worlds and sense-making systems, although those imaginary worlds can not be completely separated from the reader's experiences in and regularities derived from the 'actual' world. Non-fiction, then, applies to texts which are not fabricated texts in the sense that they do not create their respective worlds but formulate representations of elements existing in the actual world by referring to those elements and making claims about those elements. Thus the divider between fiction and non-fiction is the construction of their worlds: non-fiction can only refer to our collective

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<sup>2</sup> Within the scope of literary theory LeRoy would be categorized as autofiction rather than autobiographical fiction; in retrospect, perhaps accurately so. Albeit a genre also questioning the borderline between lived truths and the imaginary, LeRoy/Albert did not characterize the writing as autofiction, hence it is not discussed here.

actual world and our shared knowledge of it, whereas fiction fabricates a world demarcating the actual world or by denouncing it. (Bruun 2012.)

In a postmodern context labelled by fragmented identities and fluid sense-making systems, however, how plausible or accurate is it to consider any world a collectively shared mindset? Dreams or childhood memories are not collectively shared but neither are political views nor is academic knowledge which both manipulate and manifest in any written piece. Should we denounce all texts which include subject matter outside everyday observations and easily validated natural laws, e.g. gravity, as fiction? At the extreme end of the continuum of postmodern thought, the logical answer would be yes. However, this would make any collective endeavours or indeed everyday discussions impossible since they would be so void of meaning they would become nonsense. Thus perhaps the more appropriate and productive question would be not to focus on categorizing texts as fiction or non-fiction but to explore the guidelines under which we allow and accept a text as fiction or non-fiction and why do readers feel betrayed – hoaxed – if the borderline between the two is interrupted, which indeed was the case with J.T.

I applaud the notion that nearly all so-called non-fiction characteristically features a writing voice reflecting itself and its unique sense-making system under which the writer processes the actual world. In this sense, all writing, including historical and biographical material, is subjective and personal even when it is disguised as objective and impersonal. Biographical writing can not be comprised solely by the fabricated nature of the protagonist, but moreover by the factual/fictive nature of the narration (Bruun 2012).

In LeRoy's *Sarah*, the protagonist named Sam who LeRoy later claimed as his alter ego, occupies a world baring resemblance to the actual world but is so warped with its phantasmagoric narration it becomes fabricated. Stylistically little changed in his second book *The Heart is Deceitful Above All Things*, yet it was considered 'more' autobiographical and after the author's identity in the actual world was revealed, it was considered more

obscene and morally questionable than *Sarah*. This can be explained through the concept of biographical contract: the reader and the biographical writer operate in an agreement of the latter relaying reliable information to the former, thus there is a limited allowance of fabrication (Bruun 2012). Savannah Knoop posing as J.T. in events of the actual world is unproblematically in breach of that contract, and so is Albert speaking as J.T. in private phone conversations with publishers and benefactors. But Albert writing as J.T., I claim, is not as an unproblematic breach.

If biographical writing has a limited allowance of fabrication, autobiographical writing *is* fabricated. A writer-narrator of non-fiction can only credibly access one consciousness – one’s own – and even then there is plenty of room for fabrication (Cohn 2006). Memories can only be validated to a very limited sense of positivistic satisfaction; as they only apply to external factors, their weight as evidence when applied to emotional processes through which we construct ourselves is unsuccessful and nonexistent; further, regardless of their ambiguity in terms of ‘the truth’ subjective experiences can seldom be evaporated based on facts. Thus autobiographical writing is narrating a selected arraignment of personal events and experiences based on one’s subjective memory and narrative ability (ibid.). This makes autobiographical writing the most problematic genre to place in the binary of fiction/non-fiction, yet it seems to be placed by the general reading audience into the latter category more often than to the former.

Bruun (2012) suggests that similarly to the concept of biographical contract, the reader and the autobiographical writer operate in an agreement of the latter relaying reliable information to the former; moreover, an autobiographical fiction reader has to be able to believe that the writer and the narrating voice (including the protagonist) are ‘the same’. But how should we understand this ‘sameness’?

Kaarto (2001) argues that to place writers as the ultimate meaning-carrying authorities of their writing is subscribing to the Romantic author conception

of the 19<sup>th</sup> century which failed to identify many aspects of the process making the piece meaningful to the writer himself or to other readers: interpretation. Without interpretation, characters remain empty. The characters (letters, punctuation marks etc.) which the text consists of are intersubjective by nature and can be reproduced in different contexts and by different identities – alter-egos, if you will – calling themselves ‘I’, yet still remaining meaningful to the ‘me’. A mundane example: when I write myself a shopping list, I have to be able to understand it in the grocery store after I have forgotten the context in which I wrote the list in. Thus the person who ‘sent’ the list is not the same as the ‘recipient’ of the list, even though they have the same name and are identities of the same ego –the characters are bridges between alter-egos/identities of different contexts. I question Kaarto’s notion that the same name is the ultimate cohesive sense-making apparatus between the identities, since names, too, can be thought to be mere characters which get their meaning through interpretation instead of objectively attaching the name to a certain identity; Peter is just one of the peters, like a coffee pot is one out many coffee pots, and the signifiers in the process of making a peter into Peter are more cognitively complex than naming.

I find Bruun’s demand on sameness creating a genre of autobiographical non-fiction rather than defining the genre autobiographical fiction as I subscribe to a stance of fiction as fabricated texts which construct their own respective imaginary worlds and sense-making systems, although those imaginary worlds can not be completely separated from the reader’s experiences and regularities derived from the ‘actual’ world. Adding the notion that one’s sense of self is fabricated, subjective and constructed, I suggest the sameness of the identities should be understood as cohesion and integrity of experience and emotion, not as sameness demanded by the logical rules of the actual world, this integrity being judged by reader response. Reader response i.e. personal involvement in regards to a piece of literature is most significantly established via stylistic devices – metaphor, alliteration, rhyme, inversion, irony etc.– since these key elements capture attention, unsettle conventional meanings and evoke feeling (Louwerse and

Kuiken 2004). Thus, one could suggest the facts of the actual world only become significant when their distortions engender moral ambiguity in the actual world; however, these distortions *per se* do not necessarily affect personal involvement.

Postmodern thought shattered identity as a static category and subverted the concept of collectively shared worldview. According to McHale (1987), instead of focusing on the epistemological as the Modernist mind did, a postmodern position is to ask ontological questions. What constitutes a world? How do we construct worlds? Who am I? Where am I? Postmodern fiction then by definition disarranges different stages of consciousness, realms of reality and world concepts in order to explore where am I, how am I constructed and where do I belong, which are questions unequivocally raised by J.T. LeRoy both in his writing and by his/her identity. Autobiographical writing being fabricated as opposed to non-fabricated by nature, I find the narration that is J.T. LeRoy to sustain as postmodern autobiographical identity.

## **2. Bodies That Matter: Discourses under Your Skin**

Corporeality, the body with the complex emotional and power-related discourses assigned to it, is one of LeRoy's central themes. His depictions of beaten, bruised, intoxicated, abused and molested bodies are analyzed in this section as eminently representative and ultimately subversive through the concept of abject, yet I also discuss how marginalization and oppression operates through the body. By definition, there is a link of potential between transgression and subversion which will also be proposed in this section. Further, I wish to introduce an intersectional concept of identity.

Intersectionality is a key notion in postmodern thought to construct and refer to the relationships among multiple dimensions and modalities of social relationships and subject formations (McCall 2005; Anthias 2005).



Intersectionality suggests – and seeks to examine how – various biological, social and cultural categories such as gender, race, class, ability, and other axes of identity interact on multiple and often simultaneous levels, contributing to systematic social inequality. Intersectionality holds that the classical conceptualizations of oppression within society, such as racism, sexism, homophobia and religion-based bigotry do not act independently of one another; instead, these forms of oppression interrelate, creating a system of oppression that reflects the ‘intersection’ of multiple forms of discrimination. (McCall 2005). From the poststructuralistic viewpoint, as the sociolinguistic analysis of LeRoy’s texts demonstrated, discriminatory, ostracizing and degrading conceptions are constructed and reconstructed. In unravelling this system of oppression, gender is pivotal to LeRoy.

### 2.1. From gender to transgender

Gender is an integral part of not only the stories of LeRoy but also, the stories that are LeRoy. The concept of gender came into common parlance during the early 1970s as it emerged as an analytical category to demarcate the biological sex differences and the way these are used to inform behaviors and competences, which are then either assigned as ‘masculine’ or ‘feminine’. The purpose of affirming a sex/gender distinction was to argue that the actual physical or mental affects of biological difference had been exaggerated to maintain a patriarchal system of power and to create a consciousness among women that they were naturally better suited to ‘domestic’ roles. In a post-industrial society, those physiological sex differences, which do exist, became arguably even less significant, and childbirth as a hindrance to women has been substantially lessened by the existence of effective contraception and pain relief in labour. Moreover, women are generally long outliving their reproductive functions, and so a much smaller proportion of their life is defined by such issues. (Liljeström 1996: 111–112; Pilcher and Whelehan 2004: 56.)

Moving beyond the everyday bodily experience of and repercussions for being a woman, Jane Pilcher and Imelda Whelehan (2004: 56–58) find Ann Oakley's *Sex, Gender and Society*, published in 1972, to lay the ground for further exploration of the construction of gender. Oakley noted how Western cultures seem most prone to exaggeration of gender differences and argues that the social efficiency of our present gender roles centers round women's role as housewife and mother, and that any tampering with these roles is considered alarming by the patriarchal social strata. However, as Pilcher and Whelehan note, two decades before Oakley, Simone De Beauvoir explored the distinction in *The Second Sex* by making clear the ways in which gender differences are set in hierarchical opposition, where the masculine principle is always the favoured norm and the feminine becomes positioned as 'Other'.

According to Pilcher and Whelehan, the majority of feminists in the 1970s seemed to embrace the notion of gender as construct. Nevertheless, Pilcher and Whelehan analyze, recent writings on sex and gender suggest that feminism has relied upon too great a polarisation of the sex/gender distinctions, observing that the meanings attached to sex differences are themselves socially constructed and changeable, in that we understand them and attach different consequences to these biological 'facts' within our own cultural historical contexts. Perhaps controversially, modern gene research and research on transgendered individuals implies that biology does contribute to some behavioral characteristics.

Since it seems obvious that gender is not completely immaterial, Pilcher and Whelehan draw upon Moira Gatens to make the point that evidence of the male body and the female body having a quite different social value and significance which cannot be prevented from having a marked effect on male and female consciousness. Furthermore, they concur that masculinity is not valued *per se* unless being performed by a biological male; hence, the male body itself is imbued in our culture with the mythology of supremacy, of being the human norm. However, it is Judith Butler's theorization about

gender that I wish to focus on, which introduces the notion of performativity.

In her book *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* (1990), Butler created a ground-breaking way to theorize gender. She insists upon making a distinction between the concepts of sex and gender based on the processes by which they are constructed. Sex has its justification from biological facts, such as what kind of reproductive organs one has or what kind of hormones the body produces, whereas gender is socially created based on the sex as we interact with the world, i.e. function in a social context in which gender is interpreted and reproduced. To offer a tangible everyday example of this process, every time a little girl is given a doll and a little boy a car to play with by default, regardless of the child's preferences, we are in fact teaching the child how to live up to being a proper girl/boy. Thus, we produce gendered identities in terms of how to act as a boy/girl.

In addition to being a powerful tool of suppression in promoting and demanding stereotypical roles, the concept of gender versus sex is in fact empowering due to its non-essential nature. To Butler, gender is primarily a performance, a dynamic social narrative. She states that expressing gender has little to do with a solid gender identity, because it is indeed expressiveness that constructs the identity interpretation, which makes the entire concept of gender *performative* (1990: 68). Butler analyzes drag-shows as the most explicit gender performances, not only because drag-queens imitate femininity, but also because it is easier to see through the stereotypical exaggerations in realization of how 'real' (biological) women imitate femininity, too (1990: 89). The same mechanic of revelation applies to transgenders. If it is possible for a man to live and *pass as* – to be treated and labeled as – a woman, what has sex ultimately got to do with what we imagine/construct as gender (1990: 91)?

Pilcher and Whelehan (2004: 58) describe Butler's conception of gender as perhaps the most radical of all, taking as she does a Foucauldian model –

discourse analysis – and asserting that all identity categories are in fact the effects of institutions, practices, discourses with multiple and diffuse points of origin. Butler argues further (1990: 6) that the sex/gender distinction suggests a radical discontinuity between sexed bodies and culturally constructed genders. Assuming for the moment, she continues, the stability of binary sex, it does not follow that the construction of ‘men’ will accrue exclusively in the bodies of males or that ‘women’ will interpret only female bodies. This approach, Pilcher and Whelehan conclude, questions the entire way we make appeals to identity; the concept of gender as performance suggests a level of free play with gender categories we enter into socially. Thus, Butler’s subversive and performative concept of gender can be found in the core of both postmodern feminism and queer theory.

As established in section one, JT quickly became somewhat of a pin-up-boy/girl for transgenderism. He addressed the topic in several interviews, but also in his work, particularly in the short story “Baby Doll” (2001). I will next analyze the story by using Butler’s theory of sex and gender performativity

In the story, written in the first person as are all J.T.’s works discussed in this thesis, depicts an approximately ten-year-old Jeremiah dressing up his in mother’s nightgown and seducing her boyfriend, Jackson. When Sarah catches him, Jackson tries to explain himself to her, “I thought he was you, I swear to God...He looked just like you” (2001: 156). Interestingly enough, Jeremiah himself thought he was her, too.

When Jeremiah puts on the ruffled, lacy Baby Doll nightgown and make-up, he is neither a boy nor a child; he portrays the idolized femininity he has extracted from his mother who, in his eyes, is the ultimate woman. The seduction is just another part of being a good woman, an act of passing as, if you will; it becomes explicit that he does not have any sexual interest in Jackson, and is scared and hurt afterwards. Thus, Jeremiah is performing a gendered identity called Sarah. This does not mean his mother *per se*, but an identity different from its physical idol which he himself later on names

Sarah: in other connections, J.T. (2000) calls the feminine representation She-Ra or Cherry Vanilla.

The question then is can this reading sustain itself when Laura Albert is introduced into the equation? If one of the merits of JT's writing, as claimed by many, is its ability to depict the confusion and turmoil transgender individuals feel, can it be taken seriously when coming from a person who is biologically and socially a woman? It seems to be plausible. Firstly, the experience one has when reading a piece of literature is always a subjective collage of personal meanings in terms of which the actual identity of the author is irrelevant. Secondly, in the same way as Sarah could be interpreted as the performed gender identity of Jeremiah, I see JT LeRoy as the performed gender identity of Laura Albert.

Next, the implications of the Butlerian treatment of gender has on language are explored.

## 2.2. Gender, language and identity

Lia Litosseliti (2006: 11) discusses the shift in the paradigm in theorizations of the distinction between sex and gender in linguistics. She insists that in the field of language studies, we also have to ask more complex questions about the processes of gendering; questions of agency in these processes and questions around gender ideologies. She shares the Butlerian approach in stating that in addition to discussions of gender as context-dependant, i.e. socially constructed, gender-based differences in language use should not be considered as reflections of different sets of traits characterizing women and men. Recently there also has been discussion of sex as a less clear-cut dichotomy. Furthermore, one could also add the critical treatment of dichotomies or oppositional binary hierarchies as thought categories *en masse*.

Litosseliti (2006) identifies the view of gender described above as third-wave feminist linguistics, obviously arising from the wider academical context of postmodern/poststructuralist thought. Thus, it is concerned with the diversity, multiplicity, performativity, and co-construction of gender identities within specific contexts and communities of practice, and on the politics of power construction and subject positions. To encapsulate, feminist linguistics aims to theorize gender-related linguistic phenomena and language use, and to explicitly link them to inequality or discrimination, on the assumption that linguistic change is an important part of overall social change. This type of linguistics ultimately asserts that people produce their identities as social interaction, in ways that sometimes follow and other times challenge dominant beliefs and ideologies of gender. Furthermore, Litosseliti determines, as new social resources become available, language users enact and produce new identities, themselves temporary but produced in a historical context, which assign new meanings to gender.

Litosseliti's approach, similar to other poststructuralist/postmodern positions, is most often criticized for its lack of pragmatics and methodology (e.g. Monro 2005: 73). In an effort to formulate a more pragmatic approach to feministic linguistics, Christine Christie (2000) reminds us that it is crucial to recognize both the relativity of linguistic strategies and the way in which interpretation of utterances is a site of conflict, which allows issues of power to be addressed in very context-specific ways. She underlines that this is not to say that gender relations have to be seen as inevitably an issue of power in all contexts, that gender relations have to be seen as static an unchanging, or that they have to be explained in terms of men and women having different conversational goals. Christie discusses how feminist approaches to the problem of identity can build on the insights offered by pragmatics to explore the linguistic construction of gender, which is revisited in this subsection. What needs to be derived from Christie's analysis as crucial, however, is the notion of power.

It is worth explicating how similar the view of linguistics labeled as feministic is to that promoted by sociolinguistics. According to Hudson (1996), sociolinguistics, both empirical and theoretical in methods, was one of the first disciplines to explore linguistic items as representative of the speakers themselves in a social context as people tend to use speech to derive also non-linguistic information about the speaker, such as their social background and even personality traits, like intelligence or toughness (cf. ‘street talk’). Although feminist linguistics does include prongs of study dedicated to female-sensitivity, i.e. positioning based on gender, it is crucial to differentiate the variety within the field of 21<sup>st</sup> feminist linguistics from the ideological roots of the historical women’s movement: the empowering implications and politics of the performativity theory cannot be reduced to debates on women’s rights even though the discipline does historically stem from – and owe to – the movement.<sup>3</sup> By deconstructing and reconstructing gender to rise above the dichotomy of binary oppositions (man-woman; body-soul, etc.) and to allow, as Litosseliti crystallized, the diversity, multiplicity and co-construction of gender identities within specific contexts and communities with the politics of power construction and subject positions in its focus, gender becomes a dynamic, analytical power tool. Hence, the political aspects related to gender are the same as those related to class or race positions, and to acknowledge the power struggles subjects face – when identified with these social positions – can be recognized only by locating where there is resistance. Let us look at an example of linguistic resistance in LeRoy’s story “Disappearances” (2001) and its Finnish translation (2005).

Throughout the interrelated stories in *The Heart is Deceitful Above All Things*, Jeremiah’s mother Sarah is very resourceful in shifting her speech register to meet the occasion; one could say she has internalized the notion people attach negative and positive personality traits to linguistic elements and then project them onto speakers as stereotypical tendencies to use the same linguistic elements in certain social categories. Albeit now a drug

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<sup>3</sup> Not all scholars of the field subscribe to this position; see e.g. Matero (1996) on feministic epistemology and political strategies.

addict and a prostitute, Sarah was brought up in a strictly religious environment by her second-generation German-immigrant parents, who also occasionally took in Jeremiah when he was a child and Sarah abandoned him; although a high-school drop-out, Sarah has been subjected to the Bible and other appropriately deemed religious literature enough not only to learn it by heart but also to build up quite an eloquent and extensive vocabulary that she utilises when needed. Yet, however, Sarah is just as fluent in ‘street talk’, spitting out curses to punctuate her sentences constructed in unconventional grammar using the right euphemisms when negotiating the price for her sexual services (‘turnin’ tricks’) with a customer (a ‘john’). This change in discourse is even further amplified when Sarah is confronted by authority figures. In the following passage Sarah and Jeremiah are asleep in their car pulled over to the side of the road as a police officer approaches them (2001: 33–34; 2005: 40)

‘Ma’am, ma’am, you okay, ma’am?’ ....  
 ‘Fine, I’m fine, just dandy, sir.’  
 ‘Don’t mean to startle you, but you can’t camp here, ma’am. You in need of assistance, ma’am?’ ....  
 ‘No, no...Just on my way to Florida; see, some of the family got a little tired...’ Her keys rattle and turn in the ignition.  
 ‘Sorry, ma’am, there’s a cheap motel up a ways...’  
 ‘Oh, I will check it out... Well, thank you, sir’  
 ‘Yes, ma’am, have a safe trip.’ The car pulls on the road. ‘Righty-right, see ya...’ Her hand taps a goodbye. ‘Motherfucker,’ she mutters.

“Rouva, madam, onko kaikki hyvin, madam?” ....  
 ”Oikein hyvin, loistavasti, hyvin pyyhkii, sir.”  
 ”Ei ollut tarkoitus pelästyttää, mutta tähän ei saa leiriytyä, madam. Tarvitsetteko apua, madam?” ....  
 ”Ei, ei... Floridaan tässä vaan oon menossa; kato, perheen pienin tossa väsähti...” Hänen avaimensa kilisevät ja kääntyvät virtalukossa.  
 “Pahoittelen, madam, vähän matkan päässä on halpa motelli...”  
 ”Aha, mä käyn kattomassa.... No, kiitoksia vaan, sir.”  
 ”Kiitos, madam, turvallista matkaa.” Auto kääntyy tielle. “Joopa joo, nähdään...” Hänen kätensä rummuttaa hyvästiksi. ”Vitun mulkku”, hän mutisee.

To compare and analyze the above passages by using the language variation model of Basil Hatim and Ian Mason (1990: 45–51), Sarah has a variety of



registers (geographical, social, non-standard/standard) out of which she chooses the standards governing her speech act based on the field and tenor of the discourse she is contributing her speech act to. In the model, *field of discourse* refers to the situation itself – i.e. ‘what is going on’ – or, simply, to the field of the activity. *Tenor of discourse*, then, relays the relationship between the addresser and the addressee, which may be analyzed in terms of basic distinctions such as polite vs. colloquial or intimate, on a scale of categories ranging from formal to informal. Thus, in the situation above, Sarah’s register is standard and her tenor polite and formal, albeit feign, since she only wants to avoid getting arrested. Both speakers are Southerners, which Sarah portrays by using the expression ‘just dandy’ and the police officer by using the expression ‘up a ways’. What is interesting is that the police officer can use an informal expression without fragmenting his authority (as noted, we tend to form opinions about speakers based on their grammar): he is in a position of power regardless, whereas Sarah’s position is much more vulnerable, hence she tries to be even more polite – this is obvious in English but fails to manifest in Finnish. It is also worth noticing that both speakers use ‘Ma’am’ and ‘Sir’ throughout their dialog, which strongly implicates the geographical/regional element regulating their communicative transaction and registers.

When analyzing the two passages by comparing the source text (ST) to the target text (TT), we find that TT does not comply with Sarah’s register in ST. Explicitly, Sarah only ‘lowers’ her register once she is out the situation (‘Righty-right, see ya...Motherfucker’) i.e. she did not confront the officer or verbally abuse him within earshot; in fact, until she starts the car and drives off, her register is even more sensitive to formality than his is. Yet in the TT, the roles are vice versa: even when the officer’s grammar is dubious in English (‘You in need of assistance, ma’am?’), he is overwhelmingly correct in Finnish (‘Tarvitsetteko apua, madam?’) whereas Sarah’s Finnish is colloquial and informal, almost coarse, through out the conversation regardless of the ST (particularly ‘Oh, I will check it out’ cf. ‘Aha, mä käyn kattomassa’). Thus, the TT not only fails to portray Sarah as a resourceful language user but also seems to treat her as incapable of analyzing the

discourse she participates in, both in terms of field and tenor; furthermore, she is wrongly portrayed as possessing only one (low) register. This unfair linguistic stereotyping diminishes the complexity of the characters and implies insensitivity in translating different styles in individual speech acts and in the entire piece. Also, as Litosseliti and Christie argued, Sarah is in a subordinate position to the police officer not only due to his profession, but also due to her low socioeconomic status and inherently due to her gender, both of which positions she is trying to escape by portraying her range of linguistic ability in the ST but is denied from it in the TT.

Neither was Sarah's context-specific way to address her issues of power recognized nor was her linguistic performability. According to Barbara Johnstone (2008) the idea of performance can also be used in understanding how social positions or categories are indeed connected to discourse; further, performativity explains how subjectivities or identities are constructed. Even in the context of everyday interaction, such as a homeless white woman being questioned by a policeman, it is required to produce performances of selves that are strategically geared to the interactional demands at hand. The term identity can be used to describe these performances and in this sense, identity refers to the outcome of processes by which people index their similarity to and difference from others, obviously sometimes as a matter of habit but also, more significantly, sometimes self-consciously and strategically, i.e. in situations when it is important to project personal identity. Similar to the temporary social identities we adopt or are positioned in, our sense of a perduring personal identity is both represented and reinforced in discourse, by means of choices about linguistic consistency from situation to situation and through the process of narrating our lives, in all of which teleological processes Sarah was denied ownership in the Finnish translation.

Laura Albert never strayed from the linguistic consistency of J.T. LeRoy, i.e. never used linguistic traits and stylistic devices contradicting his personality, even outside his published works. In fact, she insisted on this consistency vehemently by providing her trustees who occasionally

answered J.T.'s emails with meticulous grammar rules in writing, covering his whole repertoire from punctuation to lexicon (Handy 2006). Thus J.T.'s life narrative existed not only in his 'autobiographical' books but was also implemented in real-life communiqués.

In addition to evoking personal involvement with questions of gender and identity, LeRoy's public and private persona, the latter manifesting through his writing, reverberated discursive resistance in the sense that can be understood as gender politics (Monro 2005). Further, transgendered identities such as J.T.'s reveal the gendered structure of our collective cultural mindset both intimated and intrigued by anomaly, which I address next.

### 2.3. Melancholic desires: Corporeality of objects

Butler (1997; Morland and O'Brien 2004) utilizes Freud's concept of melancholy in suggesting that gender is melancholic *per se*. She theorizes subjectivity as an effect of melancholy through which homosexual desires are processed to become gendered identifications. Prohibited by heterosexist culture, these original homosexual attachments must be lost, yet they are grieved by being secreted inside the subject to constitute the repudiated ground of gendered identity (1997: 135). In Butler's neo-Freudian account, the burial ground of homosexuality is the plot of land on which heterosexuality is constructed: "The straight man *becomes* .... the man he 'never loved and 'never' grieved", argues Butler, and "the straight woman *becomes* the woman she 'never' loved and 'never' grieved" (1997: 147). For Butler, heterosexual melancholy is culturally instituted as the price of stable gender identities and homosexual desire within the heterosexual matrix causes interim system failure i.e. panic. This panic or disturbance is what queer studies in literature explores: one prong of study for 'queering' is to unravel the mechanics of heterosexual matrix as fictional characters are unproblematically perceived to repeat and maintain it without

acknowledging the melancholic affect of denouncing alternative scenarios of desire. (Kekki 2004: 37–39)

According to Butler (1993), heterosexual subject formation needs identifications that are normative yet ultimately phantasmal. A type of these identifications is abject bodies which are bodies labelled as unidentifiable; bodies which rather did not exist but which are of pivotal importance since normal and desirable are defined through them as opposites. Abject bodies in our Western culture could include, e.g., hermaphrodites, the bearded lady and other iconic circus freaks imprinted in our minds through historical carnival tradition, a transvestite male lesbian, a body riddled with AIDS (Kekki 2004: 41) or that of a child prostitute. J.T. LeRoy was a publicly self-claimed from-male-to-female transgender; simultaneously albeit polemically, one could suggest that Laura Albert also has a transgendered identity manifesting as of J.T., but since she has never publicly addressed such a notion, this is perhaps more a theoretical pun than a serious argument. Be that as it may, LeRoy's was a very abject body in public: several people who had been in contact with J.T. either in person, via phone or through his writing before his 'real' identity was exposed noted sensuality in his presence and were perplexed by his titillating appeal quite unusual to their sexual orientation. Amongst the confused was Ilkka Karisto (2004), a Finnish journalist who wrote a praising article for *Image* magazine based on a phone interview with J.T. As Karisto describes his emotional response to J.T. varying from pitiful to sexually suggestive, Karisto's reactions relay the underlying melancholic reaction to the dysfunction caused by the abject body in the heterosexual matrix.

To avoid socio-economic system failure, I find mechanics similar to heterosexual melancholy applying to the relationship – to constitute the disturbing Other without which the 'normal' Us could not sustain as a marked and distinguished category – between social classes, especially

between middle class<sup>4</sup> and ‘underclass’ often derogatorily referred to as white trash when the subjects are Caucasian. Class signals and markings are reflected in everyday life on bodily representations as theorized in the highly influential Pierre Bourdieu’s (1977) *sociology of practice* which identifies inequalities as the result of an interplay between embodied practices and institutional processes together generating far-reaching inequalities of various kinds (e.g. Devine and Savage 2005). Hence let us next dissect the socio-economics of flesh.

#### 2.4. Classified bodies: Socio-economics of the flesh

LeRoy’s character gallery of prostitutes, strippers, pimps, junkies and street hustlers occupies the lower end of the social strata; *ipso facto*, prostitution and striptease are very concrete examples of how we put price tags on bodily acts and on bodies themselves. The characters’ lack of material resources causes them to clash with middle class society, a society they often confront with aggressive pride and manipulate with their wit, linguistic capacity (the gift of the gab, if you will) and street smarts. Despite their resourcefulness and abilities other than material, they can not escape the stigmatization of being low in the eyes of those representing social order. As the encounter between Sarah and the police officer exemplified, despite her silver tongue and polite manners, in the eyes of the officer Sarah remained a pariah for sleeping in her car with her child. Another example of how Sarah tries to manipulate her identity positioning can be found in the story “Meteors” (2001).

As discussed, throughout her tumultuous life, Sarah has occupied in various different culture circles each with their own respective registers and social norms. Albeit equipped to navigate realms of urban culture considered

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<sup>4</sup> This is not to say that the concept and construction of middle class is unproblematic; see e.g. Devine (2005) on middle class identities in the United States.

hostile such as sex work and drug abuse, she originates from a religious Southern household appreciative of reading and manners; thus, Sarah can successfully manipulate various cultural sense-making systems. Distinctly, communication culture in the U.S South still evokes many of the elements stemming from the antebellum social structure (e.g. Tindall & Shi 2007) that implemented politeness and manners, especially in interactions between sexes so that the man, if he takes any pride at all in his Southern Gentleman ancestry, is always required to maintain an even higher level of courtesy towards a woman than she is: even upon pending arrest, as discussed introduced by the policeman in subsection 2.2., ‘a lady’ is being referred to as ‘Ma’am’.

In “Meteors”, Sarah takes full advantage of the Southern Belle stereotype when portraying herself as a damsel in distress in need of gallant male assistance as she tries to gain attention from a ranger who gave them a tour around Death Valley, Nevada, and is now showing the group some of the small meteors found from the area. The ranger has just finished talking when Sarah emerges from the tourist center restroom, wearing lumps of hastily applied lipstick, her hair gelled up under the hand dryer, her T-shirt slightly damp to show off her bosom and her nipples “squeezed out” (2001: 214; 2005: 219)

‘It’s the wet T-shirt trick’, she once told me. ‘No guy can resist a girl that looks like she just won the contest. Did I squeeze my nipples enough? Are they out?’

‘Do you think we will get hit by a meteor?’ she called out before the bathroom door had even swished shut behind her.

He turned and looked surprised, then pleased that someone had anything to ask him. It took him a few seconds to realize who was asking, and when he fixed the voice to the rapidly approaching body, he blinked like someone was waving a hand too close to his face.

‘I’m afraid I’ll get hit by a meteor.’ Sarah had chosen the Southern ladies’ society accent. She fanned around her head with her hands, making the gelled hair clumps flutter like tentacles. He stopped blinking and turned to a box and fished around inside it. ‘I have a Mbale chondrite in here somewhere.’

“Märkä t-paita tehoaa aina”, hän oli kerran kertonut.

”Ykskään kundi ei voi vastustaa mimmiä, joka näyttää kuin se olis just voittanu miss märkä t-paita –kisan. Joko mä puristin tarpeeks? Onks mun nännit törröllä?”

”Luuletko että meihin osuu meteori?” kailotti Sarah ennen kuin vessan ovi oli ehtinyt viuhahtaa kiinni hänen takanaan.

Mies kääntyi ja näytti yllättyneeltä, sitten tyytyväiseltä, että jollakulla oli kysyttävää. Kesti pari sekuntia ennen kuin hän tajusi, kuka kysyjä oli, ja kun hän sai yhdistetyksi äänen nopeasti lähestyvään kroppaan, hän räpytteli silmiään, ikään kuin joku heiluttaisi kättään liian lähellä kasvoja.

”Minä pelkään, että minuun osuu meteori.” Sarah oli valinnut etelävaltioiden hienostoleidin aksentin. Hän tuuletti kasvoja käsillään ja sai muotoiluvaahdolla käsitellyt hiuskiehkurat heilahtelemaan kuin lonkerot. Mies lopetti räpyttelyn ja kääntyi penkomaan kehikkoa. ”Minulla on täällä jossain Mbale-kondriitti.”

On a linguistic note, looking back to the interaction Sarah had with the police officer and how the TT version failed to transmit the variety of her registers, here Sarah is capable of formulating clauses in standard Finnish, perhaps much due to the fact that her register, “the Southern ladies’ society accent”, is explicitly uttered in the body text. Thus, when there unequivocally is more than one register to Sarah, the strategy consistently used throughout the previous TT excerpt represents Sarah’s linguistic repertoire unjustly and serves as a gross manifestation of stereotypical identification and linguistic ghettoizing.

Sarah’s linguistic efforts to be perceived as – in Butlerian terms, her efforts to pass as – an upper class Southern Bell are in stark contrast to her performativity of femininity which is overtly sexual and adapted by observing wet T-shirt contestants. The ranger is appalled rather than appealed by Sarah due to the fact that her performance transgresses the conventions of appropriate behavior for upper class. Despite the efforts she made in a public restroom to look appealing in the eyes of the ranger, she chose the wrong register of gender performance (low) to go with her class performance (high). Due to their juxtaposing nature, these clashing elements failed her in the context of a middle class tourist attraction and only gained her confused albeit polite contempt; again, she was denied access outside her socio-economic position of underclass.

Sarah's unsuccessful class toggle and shifting identification processes illustrate how classes are conceptualized through the trinity of field, capital and habitus originally introduced by Pierre Bourdieu (Devine and Savage 2005: 13–15). Fields represent themselves as structured spaces of positions whose properties depend on their position within these spaces and which can be analyzed independently of the characteristics of their occupants. However, fields are relatively fluid in that they only delineate stakes and interests between competing groups. The actual outcomes of the struggles depend on the actions of individuals and may lead to a transformation or modification of the field itself. Fields only operate when there are skilful people, interested in the stakes that field can offer, who are prepared and able to make it work. People have to be competent operate these fields; further, people's competence to participate in fields is critically related to their habitus. Thus, issues of class, culture and identity can be seen as complex interplay between habitus, reflexivity and identity, and as Sarah's failed attempts to make herself worthy of the ranger, competence in other fields can be foiled by incompetence in only one field, i.e. lower class signs related to habitus exceeded linguistic components in determining her status of the social strata. Nevertheless, as I agree positioning to be based on involvement, and as fields themselves are open to transformation, I do also concur that this schematic account welcomes ambivalence, contradictory and complex values, identities and forms of awareness without the renunciation of class/positional consciousness.

However, awareness of positioning and involvement should not dispel and hence subliminally promote the construction of false collective identities. Floya Anthias suggests (2005: 41–43) that narratives of location (i.e. positioning) are still structured more in terms of a denial, through a rejection of what one is not rather than a clear and unambiguous formulation of what one is, and such narrations involve dualistic, bipolar imaginaries of Us and Them. Akin to Butler's construction of the heterosexual matrix, Anthias argues that the insertion of identity into debates of social inequality fails to deliver an understanding of the contradictory, located and positional aspects of constructions of belonging and otherness. She finds there to be



particularly contradictory positions which construct *translocational* positionalities. These translocational positionalities are those where there is an uneven placement in different collective imaginings or social divisions, as in occupying a higher position in one, e.g. being white, but a lower in the other, such as being female or poor – like Sarah. Anthias (2005: 45) finds translocational positionalities to be particularly open to new forms of imaginings which are not necessarily more progressive or transgressive, but which open up possibilities of thinking and being, “stressing the fluid and the contradictory as well as making transparent the imaginary sphere of collective belonging.” Both inside and out his body of work, I see J.T. LeRoy evoking new forms of imaginings and depicting a translocational identity *par excellence*.

Translocationality strongly manifest in LeRoy’s writing voice in the stories of *The Heart is Deceitful Above All Things* in terms of the body. Not only does Jeremiah aspire to become physically a woman, but he also struggles with disconnections of his bodily experiences and his sense of self. He develops a coping mechanism for physical and sexual abuse by voluntarily subjecting his body to extreme pain in an effort to sustain his sense of identity and control. Thus the following subsection discusses intentional bodily harm in terms of identity.

## 2.5 Carving out the rules: (Self)mutilation, sadomasochism and identity<sup>5</sup>

The story “Natoma Street” (2001) depicts an intense underground S&M session during which Jeremiah, now in his late teens and estranged from Sarah, reflects on his memories of abuse he suffered with his mother; as a result, he has developed a self-mutilation habit. In addition to occasional beatings by her and her negligence which caused him to fall pray to her sexually and physically abusive boyfriends, he reminisces a situation when he got caught shoplifting whilst doing her bidding. She encouraged a

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<sup>5</sup> The reader is asked to note that the account of sadomasochism in terms of identity offered here is not unequivocally shared by academic feminism. On the discussion within the field, see e.g. Modleski (1995).

security guard to beat him with a belt, as will his Master, the gargantuan man Jeremiah is paying to execute the torment, during the extreme session do. Memory of the beating is entwined with other ritualistic abuse recollections revolving especially around his genitalia. In the past, Sarah burnt his penis with a car cigarette lighter saying that God only likes little girls. His religious grandparents with whom he lived sporadically were firm believers in corporal punishment, forms which varied from beatings with a belt as a punishment for disobedience to scrubbing him and their biological children with bleach in a bathtub filled with scalding water as a punishment for obscenities.

Jeremiah has internalized the disgust for his penis so deeply that he wishes the Master will cut it off as he hangs extremely bruised and bleeding tied to a rack akin to the archaic torture contraption of the Inquisition. With the last excruciatingly heart-rending lines of the story the entire book draws to a close (2001: 247)

I hang here, the voices still bleeding in my ears. I watch my shadow,  
solid like murdered body's outline, and I pray. Maybe one more slice,  
just one more, will sever it forever.

The 'it' in the quote refers to more than just his penis, although his violent desire to have a body matching his (female) gender identity should not be ignored. The session also has goals outside sexual arousal which should not be perceived as his personal deviance. Suppressed erotic nature of flogging, executed with a belt instead of the more traditional whip in Jeremiah's case, derives from the ambivalence of pleasure and pain which is present throughout history as the sexual aspect of corporal punishment is nowhere more evident than in the flagellant orders of the medieval church (Scott 1996: 22). The renunciation of sex by those joining holy orders ensured its inevitable return in another form: the beating of penitent nuns and monks of cloistered sects, often before bishops and aristocrats, established a powerful link between sexuality and corporal punishment fuelled by erotic rage (ibid.) In this sense, corporal punishment is inherently sadistic, and although the

masochistic pleasure of these acts can be scarcely applied to those being punished involuntarily, flagellation was also used in private penitence and prayer sessions to cleanse oneself of bodily desires, to reflect and to gain closeness to the transcendent by identifying with sufferings of the Christ (Scott 1996: 98–99).

Against this backdrop, self-mutilation or voluntarily coming to bodily harm by proxy is, albeit extreme and often caused by psychological trauma, historically understandable behaviour, a mode to both explore and transcend one's identity by pain. The 'it' Jeremiah refers to while hanging on the rack refers to his body, his identity – “my shadow, solid like murdered body's outline”– and the conflict between the two; as he has abjectified his own body and as he is either willing or able to sufficiently distinct his identity from his body to successfully navigate the conflict, he is both excited and repulsed by himself. As will be discussed in detail in the next section, this ambivalence, the marriage of pleasure and pain, is omnipresent in his self-reflective characters who use violent sexual relationships for positive emotional responses and self-validation, which are the exact reasons why his identity as a whole has a solid link to masochism.

According to Anita Phillips in her persistently controversial and stylistically embellished book *A Defence of Masochism* (1998: 136), those who have never understood the attraction of masochism must wonder how is it that masochists can turn something so undesirable like pain into the very fabric of their satisfaction. Phillips (1998: 139) argues that masochists perform a complex psychosexual manoeuvre, a virtuos plunge to exploit their secret knowledge, which is that at the kernel or mortality lies the most intense erotic charge. Further, however, symbolic restriction of the body, like Jeremiah hanging on the rack legs and arms tied, and the ordeal involved in a sexual submission produces a sense of focus in the body, which is important to combat the malaise that can result from an imaginative dispersal over an undefined terrain. When experiencing the types of interior malaise caused by a vacant, floating freedom, the need then is for definition, location. Jeremiah finds identity cohesion when being tied up as his inner

conflicts are constrained. He is no longer a mere “shadow” of interrupted, abusive bodily memories and becomes a cognitive entity, his body and soul forcefully bound together into a meaningful continuum; by reliving abuse on his own accord, he claims it and gains the potential of redefining it to be used for his own reflective purposes, although his methods transgress the conventional guidelines for soul-searching.

### **3. An Underground Self with the Upper Hand: On Transgression and Transgressive Fiction**

As became evident in section two, the intersectional approach *per se* does not deconstruct identity categories but aims at making them visible. One could also argue that intersectionality can only brush upon the different and simultaneous unequal practices stemming from intersectual positions and that it does not offer strategic tools to battle the issues of power, dominance, alternative identity construction and empowered agency (e.g. Kähkönen 2012). In an effort to formulate a subversion strategy to battle those issues, I next scrutinize the concept of transgression and promote the subversive potential of identity politics in the context of transgressive fiction.

#### *3.1. Danse Macabre: Transgression in art history*

I initialize my viewpoint through tracing historical origins of transgression by discussing its connections to macabre art; further, I wish to formulate key concepts of transgressive fiction. I find macabre and transgressive to meet in three fields: bodily representations, carnivalism and subversiveness.

Transgressive fiction is not an established genre in Finland, although, as discussed later in this thesis, it does not mean that transgressive fiction does not exist in Finland. In the Anglo-American literature market with its understanding of target audiences, transgressive fiction has had its own labelled aisles for two decades now. One of the first mainstream journalists

to tackle the genre by name was Michael Silverblatt who in 1993 wrote an article for the *Los Angeles Times* on Dennis Cooper, perhaps the most notorious and critically acclaimed contemporary transgressive fiction writer. A novelist, poet, critic, editor and performance artist, Cooper was also a mentor and a personal friend of J.T. LeRoy. The article antedating J.T., Silverblatt discussed Cooper's subject matter, albeit akin to J.T.'s, of homoerotic ephedophilia and pedophilia investing Cooper with the title the most dangerous man in America. However, transgressive fiction is neither a mere shock-value marketing gimmick nor a parade for the perverse; it does not constitute itself on finding the most imaginative new uses and locations for bodily orifices even though Marquis de Sade (1740–1814), the namesake for sadism, can be seen as a transgressive fiction pioneer. However, De Sade's position is not based on his phantasmagoric depictions of sex, violence and moral degeneration, let alone on his abilities as a writer, but on the philosophical connotations of his writing juxtaposing and attacking the omnipresent Christian value system of his time (Airaksinen 1995).

Transgressive fiction emerged into common literary parlance in 1996 as movie adaptations of *Trainspotting* by Irvine Welsh and *Fight Club* by Chuck Palahniuk captivated critics and audiences alike, even though both authors had been celebrated amongst connoisseurs of the transgressive for years. Perhaps these intense visual introductions were one the reasons why Ann H. Soukhonov (1996) of the *The Atlantic Monthly* noted transgressive fiction a key phenomenon of the year and described it as a newly-emerged literary genre which depicts taboos in shameless detail, its subject matter including incest, marital rape, substance abuse and violence, these definitions revisited later in this thesis. Soukhanov was deeply disturbed by the genre and mentions specifically how it emphasis bodily experiences contradictorily to rational thinking in treating the body as the site for spiritual growth through extreme physical experiences; furthermore, it treats the body as the site for gaining knowledge.

Harrowing bodies and their symbolic communication value, however, link transgressive fiction deep into art history. I find it bearing communicative

resemblance to macabre art in which the body, the living and the dead and skeletons are central motifs. They depict the sense-making system that contrasts life and death elemental in the medieval *ars moriendi* – tradition and further, portray the spiritual and mundane social conservatism of their world (Kallionsivu 2007). However, even though macabre has included contradicting, new notions of human existence, its purpose and limits since the 15<sup>th</sup> century as results of socio-political development tendencies, it is not plausible to assign the concept of the body *per se* allowing divine, i.e. more true, most important, revelations and indeed to perceive it as an apparatus for gaining knowledge. Thus transgressive fiction harbors a unique relationship to reality and epistemology. Within the macabre tradition, bodies can be perceived epistemic in a symbolic-representative sense but not as independent entities producing meanings and knowledge as bodies of transgressive fiction can. Indeed, often the body is the only tangible, reliable way for characters of transgressive fiction to communicate and understand their own identity and also, the people and the world around them. An example of bodily experiences as a coping and sense-making mechanism would be, as discussed, the protagonist in LeRoy’s “Natoma Street” who regulars the extreme underground S&M studio with the attempt to escape memories of abuse by embracing, re-enacting and controlling it.

During the Renaissance, macabre began to fragment and grow less monumental; illustrations of both Death and those depicted with him started to include flesh and other bodily elements (Kallionsivu 2007). The concept of death both personified and abstracted also began to encompass notions of allure, and macabre thematic transformed as erotic in appeal specifically via the popularity of the Death and the Maiden motif. Eroticizing death and the bodily effects leading up to it or mimicking them – processes which can be taken to the extreme of sexualizing death as a concept – is common in transgressive fiction and follows the 16th century macabre tendency to view death as (opposed to the medieval view of the afterlife as the most significant realm of human existence) the end of life or as extreme and ultimate ecstasy. This ecstasy can also be shared with someone either by being a killer or a willing victim, which intensifies the experience, making it

the most romantic of all acts. Dennis Cooper's work – e.g. his novel *Frisk* (1991), the second novel in a series of five known as *the George Miles cycle* – discusses these notions in intellectually stimulating yet exquisitely torturing detail. Death in transgressive fiction can also be restricted to the inner realms of the identity in the sense that although they are alive in the anatomical meaning of the word, they are dead from the inside – i.e. refuse moral judgments, lack emotional responses and other humane attributes – which underlines yet another peculiarity in the ways in which transgressive fiction makes appeals to reality. Further, death can also be a symbolic excruciating bodily act through which the identity reprocesses itself, also implying a sense of cleansing as depicted, for example, in the previously mentioned LeRoy's "Natoma Street".

Borderline between subjectivity and objectivity, demarcations between the self and others and the struggle for cultural self-determination, autonomy, over conventionality are central themes of transgressive fiction. A linguistic meta-thematic tool is to utilize such structural and stylistic effects which underline the narrated identities' confused observations of the world by grammatical anomalies expressing how characters fail to form whole, functional identities with clear-cut borders between inner layers of the self and the outside world or 'reality', which often causes discombobulating clashes and unconventional solutions to resolve these clashes. One solution is offered by J.T. LeRoy's twelve-year-old protagonist Sam in *Sarah* (2000), who sick of living neglected in his mother's shadow takes on a grim yet fantastical mission of becoming the best lot-lizard (prostitute soliciting at truck stops). As for Sam as well, elements of danger and violence are specifically internalized in transgressive fiction, simultaneously projected into the self and perceived omnipresent in others and latent in all milieus. This treatment resembles macabre's portrayal of Death as an abject (Kallionsivu 2007), i.e. something sinister which neither includes nor excludes the self as a whole; this immersion makes death far more parlous than it is by placing danger only in others. Identities of transgressive fiction are *ipso facto* structured on this abjectivity, thus allowing horror, threat and

loss to leak in simultaneously from the Other and the self, both from inside and outside the self.

To transgress is to break or overlap, transcend rules, boundaries and taboos: as an act it both locates the boundary and transcends it (Lyytikäinen 2004). Transgressions interrogate and challenge authorities and hierarchies, confuse orders overlap rules, exceed limitations and undermine unproblematic meanings. In European cultural dichotomies it also associates with the naïve, the ridiculous, the ugly and the insane and is related to Bakhtinian carnivalesque in revealing and decentralizing spectacles of power with the shared *telos* of warping and questioning the truth as we know it. I find transgressive fiction's relationship to reality being similar to Kendall Walton's (1990) notion articulated in *Mimesis as Make-Believe* where he describes realistic/historical fiction aiming at structuring an illusion of reality. The reader is invited to play along and imagine the acts as facts, even though one knows they are more fictitious than factual. Akin to historical fiction's setup evoking as if – affect, transgressive fiction reveals violent, dark and disturbing sides of human behavior but also, the potential of subversiveness embedded in our pseudo-collective mindset. Nevertheless, ultimately the most important evaluative criteria for any genre are the reader's aesthetic and cognitive experiences – a whole based not only on artistic and entertainment value but also on cognitive-hermeneutic processes – the piece triggers; thus, the truth is to be placed within the reader alone as a sense of intellectual and emotional integrity manifested through stylistic devices of literature evoking personal involvement (cf. Louwse and Kuiken 2004).

So both transgressive fiction and carnivalesque wish to question cultural truths as we know them. Both stem from the same ideological root of inversion, demoting the high and celebrating the low and hybridization of hierarchic cultural categories in order to denounce them and to challenge their seriousness and monotone nature, which are abstracted forms of the actual carnival traditions of pre-industrial Europe (Lyytikäinen 2004). This



connection is deepened by analyzing macabre art tradition with its most early and central motif of *Danse Macabre*.

According to David A. Fein (2000), carnevalistic connotations are deeply embedded in *Danse Macabre*, a depiction of the living being dragged to dance by the dead; further, *Danse Macabre* is closely related to conventions of the farce in exaggerated gestures and stereotypical (i.e. reoccurring) body positioning, which is akin to carnevalism in ridiculing the powers-that-be. In his analysis of the earliest survived *Danse Macabre* woodcarving from 1485 by Guyot Marchant, Fein finds the images to manifest deflation of pretension and ambition, swift reversals of fortune and the undercutting of social conventions meant to protect and maintain the status of certain privileged members of society; in this reversal of the social norm constituting the hallmarks of the farce, it is the 'weaker' figures who end up controlling the action, manipulating their victims and choreographing the dance (2000: 4). Indeed the authority figures in the carving, such as the king and the cardinal, can only cling on to their emblems and figurative expressions of power and can not grasp the state of their predicament. They are unable to realize the feebleness and futility of their means to escape the inevitable, which makes them appear ludicrous; as the weak i.e. the dancing dead have now become the strong, carnivalesque laughter reverberates through this inversion.

Despite their similarities in initial ideological connections to the farce, however, carnevalism and transgression are not the same. As the widely shared critical position to Bakhtin's carnevalism states (e.g. Kallionsivu 2007), past or present carnevalistic practices only create restricted areas or realms of alternative order or lack there of – as these areas or realms are based on contract and are symbolic, (partial) anarchy during carnivals is ritualistic at best. Hence, historical carnivals have been more a playful way to decrease social tension to augment the *status quo* than real vessels of social change. Could transgression as a concept offer more tangible, subversive and wild political dynamic?

Even though the pre-industrial European carnival is an example of practices which symbolically invert cultural hierarchies by revealing hidden aspects of social structures through distortion (e.g. Babcock 1978), it is not enough to constitute a subversive strategy for change. In fact, revealing is mere poetics.

Peter Stallybrass and Allon White (1986) claim that transgression can intermediate from carnevalism to subversion, to where carnevalism itself discontinues. In addition to revealing, they find transgression to have two using purposes; unlike revealing yet overlapping it, these purposes are actual strategies. The poetic transgression strategy of is to reveal the mechanics of hate, fear and desire which create the dominant Us through demarcating its negative Them. The politics of transgression, then, in the very sense of the word politics, is subscribing to a position from which we demand redistribution of power to include identities who occupy subjectivities excluded from the (pseudo) monolithic, middle-class, white heterosexual experience. Further, transgression can be understood both as an analytical method and a thought category: elements which seem marginal or distant in the social structure are often symbolically central, and to ignore social structures is to misunderstand our sense-making processes (Babcock 1978).

I find the tradition of macabre art to include similar sense-making between Others and the self, of hiding and revealing, distancing and convoking – the mechanics of hate, fear and desire – that operates between different social positions of gender, sexuality and class and on a larger scale, between cultural high and low categories. The essential analytical foothold is to grasp, whether the interpretation and/or production of a work of art is labelled by stagnation, the critical moment of melancholia formulated by Julia Kristeva (1999), when detachment, irony and cold rationality have taken over. This disassociation prevents ethical commenting and critique of the dominant worldview as such endeavours feel futile; pieces of art governed by melancholia only evoke illustrated reticence, leaving no room for alternative courses of action. Transgression and macabre share the

ambivalent dynamics of social conservatism and subversiveness, the latter albeit only potential on occasion yet still present, looming as one of options in the horizon of alternative answers

Next, let us look at Stallybrass and White's treatment of cultural hierarchies of high and low in terms of literature on our way to further explore symbolic inversion and the politics and poetics of transgression.

### 3.2. At the high end of the Low

Within the field of comparative literature studies, some scholars have traced the idea of the 'Classic author' as originally being derived from ancient taxation categories, tax-bands. This social division of citizens according to property qualifications was adopted as a way of designating the prestige, including rank of writers. Citizens of the first taxation category, the top rank, came to be known as 'classici', and the ranking of types of author modeled upon social rank according to property classification was still being actively invoked in the 19<sup>th</sup> century (e.g. Kaarto 2001). As Peter Stallybrass and Allon White (1986) suggest, from our modern/postmodern viewpoint, we are inclined to forget this ancient and enduring link between social rank and the organizing of authors and works, including literary genres, although for the major part of European history it was a natural assumption for readers and writers alike. This is the collective cultural mindset from which we see the 'high' and the 'low' reverberate as distinctive evaluative categories which are not to do with aesthetics judgments but with morality itself: the former is associated with attributive notions of style, grace and other noble qualities whereas the latter is seen to only cater for the crude needs of the lumpenproletariat.

To add to the historical high/low polarity, Stallybrass and White introduce further cultural categories which operate within the canon-formulation process of literature (1986: 2–3). According to them, the ranking of literary genres or authors in a hierarchy analogous to social classes is a particularly clear example of a much broader and much more complex cultural process

whereby the human body, psychic forms, geographical space and social order are in fact all constructed within interrelating and dependent hierarchies of high and low. Stallybrass and White see the high/low opposition in each of these four symbolic domains as a fundamental basis to mechanisms of ordering and sense-making in European cultures, stating that cultures ‘think themselves’ in the most immediate and affective ways through the combined symbolism of these hierarchies. Furthermore, transgressing the rules of hierarchy and order in any of the domains may have major consequences in the others; the low always troubles the high.

A case in point for Stallybrass and White hit close to home in 2009 when *Helsingin Sanomat* announced the nominees for the annual Pro Finlandia award on November 13<sup>th</sup>. Hannu Marttila’s article features the crème de la crème of Finnish literature in 2009 in the form of the six authors whose work, out of the approximately 130 applicants, is potentially worthy of the most prestigious of our national awards, alongside to an interview with the chairwoman of the elective board, professor and PhD Liisa Steinby. When asked to give a general account on the candidates’ pieces, Steinby expresses her concern over how “dark and commercial” the subject matter was, depicting negligent and abusive relationships, acts of racial violence, and hopelessness of those cast out to societal peripheries by poverty, unemployment or old age. Furthermore, Steinby asserts, these elements were treated with *cynicism rather than with optimism* (emphasis added) in voices of submission instead of empowerment. (Marttila 2009.)

As peculiar as it might seem to think of such social issues having commercial potential, Steinby explains her critique is to do with plot development since she finds that storylines which in the past were strictly associated with war and crime literature emerge in contemporary mainstream literature into whose realm arraigments of violence and suspense simply “do not belong”. Steinby suspects many authors incorporate these elements into their work out of fear they would otherwise lose the reader’s interest. “Characters were often portrayed as very violent on the one hand and extremely vulnerable on the other”, Steinby says and

continues to contemplate that perhaps literature is regarded as uninteresting unless it is entertaining. Steinby feels this all-consuming demand for entertainment “surrenders authors to commercialism, even those whose work could gain us some relevant insight into the modern-day world and human nature.” (Marttila 2009.)

Even though there is ample truth to be found in Steinby’s logic and despite the fact many readers and writers alike share her objection to conspicuous consumption as *modus operandi* in the art world, her argument clearly manifests the high/low hierarchy. Not only is she banning the conventions of certain genres of literature as inappropriate outside their own marginalized position in the literary canon but also, she enunciates the patronizing attitude of the cultural establishment looking down upon the moronic layman who simply enjoys a good read and writers who sell books by providing no more or no less than exactly that.

Could it be, however, that the board was implicitly disturbed by certain subject matter *per se*; like in 1863 when Charles Baudelaire’s *Le Peintre de la Vie Moderne* was published and his contemporaries were shocked by the visions of ‘lust and decay’? Is it possible participants included transgressive fiction which was misunderstood or misinterpreted due to unfamiliarity of knowledge of the concept?

As established, according to Ann H. Soukhanov’s article in the December issue of *The Atlantic Monthly* (1996), transgressive fiction can be defined as a literary genre that

graphically explores such topics as incest and other aberrant sexual practices, mutilation, the sprouting of sexual organs in various places on the human body, urban violence and violence against women, drug use, and highly dysfunctional family relationships, and that is based on the premise that knowledge is to be found at the edge of experience and that *the body is the site for gaining knowledge* (emphasis added).

Soukhanov describes the genre to have a number of distinctive visual signatures, including undersized formats, whole texts set in italics and funky cover designs. One could also add some stylistic linguistic elements to the

list, such as colloquialism or minimalism, but generic claims on language are more writer- than genre-related since transgressive fiction eludes all boundaries. In writing style alone, there is little common ground to be found, for example, by comparing Kathy Acker's body of work consisting of drawings, diary notes, translations, and sections of contemplating essays all in the same book, to the meticulously and poetically crafted, formal short fiction of Mary Gaitskill.

I feel it is futile to try to conceptualize transgressive fiction by further name-dropping or by standing on the outside looking in searching for external markers such as those mentioned by Soukhonov, including "distinctive visual signatures", let alone "funky cover designs". Also, it seems obvious at this point that subject matter *per se* is by far insufficient in defining the genre at its core; oxymoronically, however, they are treatments like Soukhanov's which offer transgressive fiction its subculture appeal. Yet again, we see the low troubling the high: even though it is clearly the collective, marginalized Other who deals with such disturbing issues as sex, dysfunction and violence, the culturally dominant, 'normal' Us is both disgusted and intrigued by it.

Stallybrass and White discuss the growing body of research devoted to the topic of hierarchy inversion or world upside down (WUD) model as an analytical apparatus to explore discourse structures (1986: 4–5; Lyttikäinen 2004: 20–22 ). Because the higher discourses are associated with the most powerful socio-economic groups existing at the centre of cultural power, it is they who generally gain the authority to designate what is to be taken as high and low in the society. In this setting sometimes referred to as the inherent dominant mode, the dynamics of repugnance and fascination between Us and Them are the twin poles of the process in which a political imperative to reject and eliminate the debasing 'low' conflicts powerfully and unpredictably with a desire for this Other; as discussed previously, this same mechanics of melancholic desire applies to heteronormativity and between middleclass and under class as well.

An explicit example of this phenomenon, however, is to look at history of cultural studies, such as anthropology, which have a distinctive shift in their practices and philosophy stemming from colonialism to the culture-sensitive approach of the 21<sup>st</sup> century. In this context, Stallybrass and White (1986: 33) offer an example from Edward Stain's work on Orientalism from 1979. Stain encourages the Westerner to form relationships with the Orient "without ever losing him the upper hand", but at the same time Stein notices that "European culture gained its strength and identity by setting itself off against the Orient as a sort of .... underground self".

Thus, transgressive fiction can be interpreted as the underground self of the literary canon as the dialogue between these two is unequivocally restricted to the twin poles of lust and loath in terms of forming abstract identity categories to separate Us from Them. In this process, the political connotations Stallybrass and White mentioned apply in transgressive fiction under the refusal of the 'low' position and the audacity to respectfully give the dominant, uninterrupted voice, no matter how coarse or piercing, to those with no socio-economic or cultural power at all.

As Stallybrass and White introduced, in a culture where we make sense of the world by processing the interlinked hierarchies of the human body, psychic forms, geographical space and social formation, the notion that the body is the site for gaining knowledge infringes the pseudo-objective epistemology stipulated by Western thinking calling itself civilized. The fact that this body is often hurt, abnormal and obscene further transmogrifies the linear sense-making, and it is these anomalous cognitive connotations that can lead to interesting trails of thought, as they did Bakhtin.

### 3.3. From carnival to transgressive

Charles Baudelaire (1821-1867) can be considered as one of the first-born *enfant terrible* of Modern literature. In his seminal study *Rabelais and his World* published in 1968, Bakhtin developed the term carnevalism to elevate the French Renaissance folk culture from being travesties and vulgar farces, i.e. low culture, by perceiving it as politically progressive behavior

expressing symbolic empowerment. The concept became a huge academic hit, and much like Michel Foucault term discourse, it has been discussed *ad nauseam* ever since the 1970's in literary and historical studies alike, so much so it has become ambivalent in contents to say the least. In this essay, however, carnavalism is to be taken in a sense, as Stallybrass and White relay, that in the world of carnival the awareness of the people's immortality is combined in the realization that established authority and truth are relative, in which context carnavalism is to be read as a symbolic hierarchy-inversion strategy following the WUD model (1986: 6).

Keeping in mind its connections to the conventions of the farce introduced when discussing macabre art history, Bakhtin finds that fundamental to the corporeal, collective nature of carnival laughter is what he calls grotesque realism. Grotesque realism uses the material body-flesh conceptualized as corpulent excess – to represent cosmic, social, geographical and linguistic elements of the world; thus, there is the notion of transcodings and displacements effected between the high/low image of the physical body and other social domains. As discussed, the element of carnality is vital to transgressive fiction, and it is yet another high/low hierarchy inversion that the impure parts (such as genitalia) of this imaginary, corporeal bulk are given symbolic priority over its upper regions (head or reason).

Stallybrass and White find that one of the functions Bakhtin's schema of grotesque realism fulfilled in pre-capitalistic Europe was to provide an imaginary repertoire of festive and comic elements which stood over against the serious and oppressive languages of the official culture (1986: 10). The concept of carnivalesque high/low inversion can be widened based on Barbara Babcock, an editor of *The Reversible World*, a collection of essays on anthropology and literature. Babcock offers a definition of symbolic inversion, which I feel contributes to the definition of transgression. Symbolic inversion can be (1978:14)

any act of expressive behavior which inverts, contradicts, abrogates, or in some fashion presents an alternative to commonly held cultural codes, values, and norms be they linguistic, literary or artistic, religious, social or political.



To Stallybrass and White (1986: 202), this type of transgression has two operative prongs. The poetics of transgression reveals the disgust, fear and desire which inform the dramatic self-representation of the dominant culture through the scene of its low Other, whereas its politics reveals quite clearly the contradictory political construction of bourgeois democracy. I feel this is an adequate analysis to describe the dynamics of transgressive fiction and mainstream literature as well, since the exact process of disgust to the low fuel the sense-making of Us versus Them. Babcock (1978: 32) insists on the importance of transgression as a thought category by stating that what is socially peripheral is often symbolically central, and if we ignore or minimize inversion and other forms of cultural negation, we often fail to understand the dynamics of symbolic processes generally. Subsequent is an example of symbolic inversion and the politics and poetics of transgression in LeRoy's *Sarah* (2000).

#### 3.4. The child prostitute who walked on water: Symbolic inversion and the poetics and politics of transgression

Symbol and ritual are overlapping subjects of interest for many disciplines, so any attempt to define these concepts by bringing together the various opinions of scholars in different fields (behavioral, ethnic, religious socio-psychological studies to name a few) is bound to fail (Althoff 2009.) Thus the definition offered here is merely a definition and it is not aimed at offering an exhaustive account on the subject.

As Babcock's delineation of symbolic inversion implies, symbols can be understood as communicative tools through which we transmit value systems (Cohen 1989; Althoff 2009). This both interpersonal and intrapersonal dialogue of symbolic communication is marked communication which, as the analysis of medieval macabre art demonstrated, conveys the codes of power, politics and religion but also addresses socio-cultural life in terms of gender relations and transitional acts as mundane as e.g. welcoming or saying farewell (ibid.). Symbolic codes are nonspecific and context-bound in meaning; they convey values confirming social order yet are the very mean which opens the order for

parody (cf. Fein 2000). Even though the codes of the Middle Ages were normative, i.e. more binding, than the democratic formulations of today, coding still exists and continually, codes do not become visible until someone brakes them, either at the dinner table or in political rhetoric as we have witnessed observing the reactions to public speeches of racist extremists around contemporary Europe.

However, as Anthony Paul Cohen states (1998: 14–15) symbols do more than stand for or represent something else – in fact if that is all they do, they would be redundant – since they also allow those who employ them to supply part of their meaning. When looking at categories such as gender, art, life, death or love, we see that they are symbols shared by those who use the same language, or participate in the same symbolic behavior through which these categories are expressed and marked. Still, their meanings are not shared in the same way as each is mediated by the idiosyncratic experience of the individual. Thus symbols do not so much express meaning as give us the capacity to make meaning.

Of course, Cohen (2009: 15) continues, not all social categories are equally variable in meaning, but those whose meaning is the most elusive tend to be those also hedged around by the most ambiguous symbolism. In these cases the content of the categories is so unclear that they exist largely only in terms of their symbolic boundaries, and attempts to explicitly define such categories invariably generates argument, sometimes worse. In addition to gender, I would like to introduce the category of normal as so ambiguous it exists mostly on exclusion i.e. demarcating abnormal. As discussed both in terms of the body and the cultural categories of high and low on a comprehensive scale, this ambivalence also manifests in simultaneous attraction to and repulsion of objects which are symbols of anomalies in the system.

Rituals then, are actions, or rather chains of actions, in which actors and spectators are required; although we most commonly associate the ritual with religious practices, it is not restricted to them (Althoff 2009). Public communication rituals, such as coronations or inaugurations, are repetitive,

performative, demonstrative, formal and ultimately utilitarian-rational in *telos*, partaking in symbolic communication and thus reflecting the social value system, the latter applying to all types of rituals (ibid.) It also worth noticing, as Gerd Althoff (2009: 74) argues, rituals were used in history to give sufficiently early warning of deterioration in relations or of a threatened disturbance of the social order as escalations of conflict were ritualized. Further on this note, Althoff (2009: 84) refers to Babcock's notion of symbolic inversion in demonstrating how rituals can also be used for undoing something done earlier, i.e. challenging the social order through ritual change or parody. An example of such parody would be crowning a layman king for a day (False King Day) in carnival traditions of the pre-industrial Europe (more on these traditions, see Lyytikäinen 2004; Stallybrass and White 1986). To encapsulate, rituals and symbols are to be understood in the scope of this thesis as elements which are structured on ambivalent desire and which not only represent but also potentially challenge the social value system, yet ultimately needing the politics of transgression to fulfill that potential.

During his phantasmagoric odyssey to become the best and most loved prostitute of all South depicted in *Sarah* (2000: 70), the teenaged protagonist She-Ra (Sam under his female alias)<sup>6</sup> winds up living in a remote trailer park with Le Loup, a trucker, a full-time pimp and a part-time self-proclaimed "Baptist-tailored" preacher man. She-Ra becomes more than Le Loop's lover and a valued sales commodity when he discovers She-Ra to appeal to his religiously-oriented cliental due to her angelic features and knowledge of scriptures. Together with his staff of prostitutes, Le Loop organizes a spectacle of She-Ra walking on water for the audience of few truckers. She-Ra is timid and skeptical going into the performance, yet her initial struggles turn into amazed joy as she finds herself not sinking. This highly symbolic act of supernatural power reserved for Jesus and the Saints, those pure in body and spirit and close to divinity, is performed by a child

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<sup>6</sup> Due to this transgendered backdrop, the strategy adopted from here on to end of this section in order to avoid imminent confusion of gendered person pronouns is to use the feminine form.

prostitute in order to impress an abusive man she claims to be in love with (2000: 74)<sup>7</sup>

I take my steps, moving forward steadily, gracefully (...). Two more steps and I will be in his arms and nothing will matter anymore. I will forgive his long absence, I won't even ask why he left, or if he ever thought of me or missed me the way I missed him.

The jubilation of the crowd is masked by my heart surging in all its electrical currents towards him. I take one more step onto the dry land and he is there in front of me. Le Loup shouts out loud 'Hallelujah!'

Her exuberance and his affection turn out to be short-lived as Le Loop is interested in capitalizing her novelty item 'Saint Sarah', the latter name given to Le Loup by She-Ra as her alleged real name but which in fact is the name of Sam's mother (2000: 74–75)

I open my arms to the man as he suddenly pops up and turns and turns from me to slap hands with some of the other truckers. 'You lost that one, buddy!' he says. 'You owe me two hundred dollars now!' ....

Logbooks get pressed into my hands. 'I rode straight for a solid week without a break. Please bless this falsified logbook!' petitions one trucker on his knees. 'Me too!' another pleads.

'Gentlemen!' shouts Le Loup .... 'You may have an audience with Saint Sarah back at the church.' The cruch was LeLoop's barn, now stripped of the fur and the wet-animal scent. The wood floor had been spread with sawdust, and urns of imported incense burned on little plywood mantels. The satin zebra sheets had been replaced with bedding more fitting for a saint. Even the 3D picture of the Pope removed with apologies muttered by Le Loup. 'Too much confusing for the Christ-loving factions,' Le Loup explained.

The passage demonstrates the low, the abject body of a child prostitute, inverted as high in the symbolic ritual; she is also given the active role as the spectators, Christian men, are drawn to her marvelous magic. This inversion turns the world upside down and becomes transgressive as it reveals through its poetics the flawed and superficial ways in which it is possible to subscribe to a seemingly good and normal dominant value system. As the truckers are willing to pay have sex with her, their religious

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<sup>7</sup> Since no comparative observations are to be made between the original and the translation of this passage, I find the original text to suffice for my analysis. The Finnish volume also entitled *Sarah* was published by Like in 2004.

views could cause them to be perplexed by a picture of the Pope on the wall but not to abstain from child abuse and ‘fornication’. As analyzed in “Baby Doll”, this was also the case with Jackson, a born-again Christian (LeRoy 2001: 115). These deviant desires illustrate quite tangibly how abject bodies attract desire. They also have political connotations since we are forced to question our moral limitations when it comes to sexual ethics and love. Are She-Ra’s emotions towards Le Loop to be condemned due to their age difference and the abusive nature of their relationship? Perhaps so, but that does not make them any less real to the identity in question and does not expel them from being legitimate to her. As we demand redistribution of power to include identities who occupy subjectivities excluded from the monolithic, middle-class, white heterosexual experience, it is just the dialogue with such abnormal desires that reveals the complexity, interrupted and constructed nature of that seemingly dominant and unproblematic experience.

How did She-Ra do it, walk on water? For a while, she too thinks it was magic: she believes her love for him could indeed make her divine. After the show, however, she is attended to by a fellow child-prostitute called Pooh who reveals it was the thick aquatic flora that kept her afloat (2000: 77)

‘Oh your feet are bleeding...’ she says, pointing at them. I glance at them and nod. ‘I didn’t notice.’

‘It’s all the pitcher plants, sundews and bladder worts. They eat flesh. That’s how a lot bodies get disposed of around here.’ Pooh shrugs. ‘In those bogs’ – she gestures to where I had just performed my miracle – ‘you float on the moss, like swinging in a hammock, while them plants chew you up nice and slow...’

Thus the poetics and politics of transgression abstract the reader to access one the central thematic elements of the novel: love is confused, manipulative and can tear you apart, yet we all are desperate to find it.

### 3.4 Linguistics of transgression

In the light of transgression being defined as a tool including but not limited to hierarchy inversion, as a tool to challenge assumingly collective world views within a culture, we can now revisit Steinby and her disturbing award nominees. Even if the subject matter would include each form of bad behavior listed by Soukhanov in her effort to characterize transgressive fiction, if such issues are treated with, as Steinby noted, with cynicism rather than with optimism, narrated in voices of submission instead of empowerment, pieces are to be excluded from the genre of transgressive fiction since such treatments reassert the dominant cultural hierarchy, not subvert it. Still, however, little has been said about the linguistic means through which literary genres operate, and it is worth noticing that such means are a social rather than verbal phenomenon, hence having a significant impact on cultural hierarchies.

To Bakhtin, too, linguistics has inextricable social connotations to it – discourses are social throughout their entire range and in each an every of their factors, from the sound image to the furthest reaches of abstract meaning. He feels that in terms of literature, the separation of style and language from the question of genre led to a situation in which only individual or period-bound overtones of a style were the privileged subjects of study, while its basic social tone was ignored. The aspects of thematic content, style, and compositional structure constitute individual utterances, but also, each sphere in which language is used develops its own relative stable types of these utterances, and these types are called speech genres (1986: 60).

As noted earlier, Bakhtin saw the Modern novel as the most interesting literary forum to explore speech genres and the variation between and within them. To justify this position, Bakhtin lists the basic types of compositional-stylistic unities into which the novelistic whole usually breaks down to justify his position: there is direct authorial literary-artistic narration; stylization of the various forms of oral everyday narration;

stylization of the various forms of semiliterary (written) everyday narration, such as the letter or the diary; various forms of literary but extra-artistic authorial speech (moral, philosophical or scientific statements, oratory, ethnographic descriptions, memoranda, etc.); and last but not least, stylistically individualized speech of characters. Thus, the novel orchestrates all its themes by means of the social diversity of speech types and by the differing individual voices that flourish under such conditions; to Bakhtin, authorial speech, the speeches of narrators, inserted genres, the speech of characters are merely those fundamental compositional unities by which heteroglossia can enter the novel as each of them permits a multiplicity of social voices and a wide variety of their links and interrelationships (1981: 262–263).

Even though sociolinguistics has asserted itself in the academia, it still seems to be the case that social categorization results from linguistic variability. Sensitivity to heteroglossia is pivotal in literary theory and translation if we subscribe to the philosophy of language according to which multi-faceted speech genres are to be treated with respect, not only due to artistic reasons but also because they convey discursive social power positions and conceptualize identities in various different ways. Obviously enough, speech genres or heteroglossias are not neutral to the high/low hierarchy, and if we insist upon finding some shared linguistic features within transgressive fiction, one could suggest the latter dominates the former in terms of curses, slang use and fragmented grammar. However, this is only true for certain texts, and thus there is no unison linguistics of transgressive fiction.

### 3.5 The upper hand?

Language, literary genres and identity positions are social constructions that bare connotations of discursive power struggles in our sense-making systems, and there are no neutral or objective rules to rank these systems into hierarchies. Despite of this, cultural hierarchies are constantly implemented through the high/low structure, but by symbolic inversion, the

concept of transgression can unmask these processes as the poetics of transgression reveals the disgust, fear and desire that inform the dramatic self-representation of the dominant culture through the scene of its low Other. This unveiling must be accompanied by strategies for change, the politics of transgression, as the contradictory political construction of our society becomes painfully apparent. Further, high/low should not be understood as essentially binary and separate but as processing each other through ambivalent dynamics of desire and repulsion, deconstruction and reconstruction which every so often produces potential stances for subversion.

As an empowerment strategy, transgression needs to be understood in the sense of offering alternative ways of thinking, as a mode to impugn the *status quo* of social order, aesthetics and culture hierarchies. The aim of transgressive fiction is not to cover the reader with filth or to parade around examples of human misery for our perverted amusement, but to voice issues and participate in the symbolic dialogue through which we conceptualize the world. Much like a raging drunk at the town square, it is sometimes rude and shocking, but the reactions to it are more reflective of morals and ethics of the society at large. Since the high is always troubled by the low, we can surely see the underground self of mainstream society subsisting in transgressive fiction. Perhaps this underground self does not have the upper hand, but it most certainly holds the whip.

#### **4. Identity Politics: Concluding Remarks**

Queer theory is a form of transgressive academics within the heterosexual matrix of human understanding. I conclude my thesis by interrogating the relationship between queer and transgression to formulate a standpoint for identity politics. I suggest politics and poetics of transgression could rise up to the challenge presented by the intersectional approach (cf. Kähkönen 2012), i.e. to offer a strategic tool to battle the issues of power, dominance, alternative identity construction and empowered agency.



#### 4.1. Politics of queer

The initial development of queer theory in the humanities can be traced back to the mid-1980s as there was a growing theoretical interest in sexuality, particularly through the work of Michel Foucault who viewed the body as immersed in discourse and imbued with meaning by discourse (Pilcher and Whelehan 2004; Ilmonen 2012). A disunited theoretical approach, the principle stance of queer theory could be described as to deny and interrogate the privileges of heterosexuality and to openly question dominant ideas of normalcy and appropriate behavior. Adopting a 'queer' position amounts to a celebration of one's outlaw status as well as actively denying the meanings attached to sexual identity. Pilcher and Whelehan lay emphasis on the fact this is not a plea for the assimilation of 'gay' culture into 'straight' culture but rather a celebration of continuing marginality by which to scrutinize the heteronormative center.

Similar to the mechanisms at work when analyzing the relationship between feministic linguistics and the women's rights movement, early queer theory is closely connected to gay and lesbian activist groups who adopted the term 'queer' as a deliberate appropriation of a term always used pejoratively and homophobically in the past, in order to facilitate more radical declarations of visibility. Pilcher and Whelehan note that this strategy of visibility and rebellious assertion of 'deviance' was to characterize much of the political work conducted in the wake the AIDS epidemic. Once cast as offensive, they comment, 'queer' is now used in opposition to the knowledge of its past meanings to challenge the general public and to anticipate the majority's normal lexicon of abuse. Academically, queer theory helped to bring together aspects of lesbian and gay studies with other postmodern theoretical writings, although, as Kaisa Ilmonen (2012) notes, both the academic field and the gay political movement of the 1980s were disharmonious. The key irreconcilable difference in theory formulation was the conflict between essentialism and structuralism; on the one hand, identities like gay and female were deemed as unjustly formulated tools of

oppression, and on the other, simultaneously and contradictorily, they were thought to be identity positions bringing people together as gays or women. Such implementation of unity, however, suggests that all share the same experiences of these positions with one normative identity at the core of the experience, which debunks sensitivity to intersectional elements such as race, class or gender; *ipso facto*, lesbians found more similarities with feminism than with the politics of HIV/AIDS motivating gay men.

Heavily influenced by Butler's *Gender Trouble* (1990), the theory of gender performativity helped to reconcile the problematics of essentialism versus structuralism as performativity reconceptualized identity by subverting it. Although performativity does not solve the problem of identity completely – no commonly shared standing ground impugns collective political claims, as the critique goes – it did introduce and mobilize a new way of discussing issues of gender and identity without having to appeal to a unison identity (Ilmonen 2012). Since the 1990s, queer theory of today questions the usefulness of gendered binary distinctions and re-examines their role in the centralization of heterosexuality. Pilcher and Whelehan see queer theory as having links with theories of embodiment and performativity and as asserting the breakdown of dualist structures of meaning and the application of homosexual and bi-sexual identifications. This is an effort to undermine the naturalness of gender, in order to decentralize heterosexuality as a privileged and authoritative identity. Further, queer theory is a method of questioning: most notably, it aims to problemize the differences still existing in dominant conceptualizations of terms such as homosexual and lesbian, including welcoming gay identities who are marginalized within the marginal, such as sadomasochists or religious members of the gay community (Ilmonen 2012; Modleski 1996).

As Pilcher and Whelehan remind, for some, the word queer is still closely linked to the establishment of a personal identity, even as it deflects singular identity. Furthermore, the theory becomes increasingly associated with theories of individual sexual identity and has been especially popular in film theory and analysis of popular culture including literary research. To

Ilmonen, however queer marks an epistemological breach from the historical theory context of sexology and perversion. Queer strategies in literary theory include rereading historical texts with the 'queer eye' i.e. challenging heteronormativity and its suppressive discourse by committing to deconstruction of institutionalized sexuality, to reactivity and to the courage to remain undefined.

Pilcher and Whelehan resolve that queer theory can work well as a positive assertion of an endlessly multiple and transgressive self against an assumingly monolithic cultural backdrop. Indeed, I find queer more compatible with the notion of transgressive identity rather than that of a sexual one, albeit the two can coincide; nevertheless, I find actual sexual preferences or sex acts to be irrelevant to identity and to its political connotations, not in terms of interactions with the outside world but in terms of how identities can construct themselves. Adopting a queer position is to question the justifications of the system in order to encompass a more democratic arrangement of gender, sexuality and identity regardless of one's own sexual preferences; thus, it is open to all sexual or asexual identities.

#### 4.2. Politics of transgression

Identities are to be treated as fluid and dynamic socially constructed concepts that are constantly reproduced, interpreted, and negotiated in various discourses by different means, including language and linguistics. Nevertheless they also need to be considered as social positions with political connotations subjected to analyses of power and inequality. In the postmodern theory context, J.T. LeRoy is alive and well; perhaps (s)he is even waving a rainbow flag.

In the Butlerian reading, if the performative nature of identity is understood as a matter of reiterating or repeating the norms by which one is constituted, J.T. LeRoy persists as a coherently produced and narrated transgressive identity. As an empowerment strategy, transgression needs to be understood in the sense of offering alternative ways of thinking, as a mode to impugn

the status quo of social order, aesthetics and cultural hierarchies. In terms of literature, this strategy can be applied in analyzing J.T.'s writings in numerous ways. From the standpoint that there is a contingency autobiographies of J.T.; from the standpoint of subject matter, discussing issues of child abuse, substance abuse, poverty and alienation; from the standpoint of J.T. raising real-life awareness of transgender and queer rights and setting himself in the public eye as HIV positive, I suggest these elements to construct J.T. as a political identity through his adoption of the poetics of transgression.

However, accepting J.T.'s identity and applauding its political connotations brings us facing perhaps the ultimate transgression, that of questioning the very core of reality. In this sense, J.T. LeRoy also reveals the limits of postmodern theory as the logical epiphany of a constructed and performed identity, which taken to its terminus leads to moral ambiguity. One could state that since Laura Albert is not a HIV positive male-to-female-transgender, her depictions of the position are purely imaginary. Yet if those depictions evoked feelings of relation and personal involvement through their artistic abilities of fiction not only in those who occupy these positions in the actual world but also in those formerly unfamiliar with the problematics of such positions, readings of the politics of transgression in LeRoy's texts sustain. I would like to offer an analogy; LeRoy's texts can be perceived as a literary equivalent of the Veil of ignorance method introduced by philosopher John Rawls (1999).

Veil of ignorance is a method of determining the morality of a certain issue (e.g. slavery) based upon the following thought experiment: parties to the original position know nothing about their particular abilities, tastes, and position within the social order of society. The veil of ignorance blocks off this knowledge, such that individuals do not know what burdens and benefits of social cooperation might fall to them once the veil is lifted. With this knowledge blocked, parties to the original position must decide on principles for the distribution of rights, positions and resources in their society. As Rawls (1999: 119) put it (androcentricly, though)

....no one knows his place in society, his class position or social status; nor does he know his fortune in the distribution of natural assets and abilities, his intelligence and strength, and the like

The idea then is to relinquish personal considerations that are morally irrelevant to the justice or injustice of principles meant to allocate the benefits of social cooperation, and ultimately, to benefit social redistributions of power to construct a more just society. I suggest poetics and politics of transgression can serve as similar thought experiment in deconstructing and imagining alternative connections between positions when renegotiating the matrix of oppression. They are crucial additions in contributing the sensitivity to gender, race, class and sexuality which dominant Western philosophy *per se* often fails to encompass due to, as the quote from Rawls demonstrates, its androcentric roots.<sup>8</sup> An intriguing advanced research topic from this viewpoint within the literary context would be to negotiate a canon for transgressive fiction by identifying historically subversive writings – to suggest a canon of the underground self, if you will.

#### 4.3. Conclusions

In addition to being a representational, performative, translocational, potentially subversive identity fuelled by the politics of queer and further by the poetics and politics of transgression, ultimately J.T. LeRoy's legacy is that of a talented writer. His writing still turns the horrific into a world of lyrical and grotesque beauty, without losing any of its authenticity; within the realm of his textual construction, his language is always fresh, his soul never corrupt.

Albert no longer writes as J.T. LeRoy – at least not for publication. His last novel *Labour* (2006) received few reviews and zero celebrity hype; however, proving the point made earlier about the quality of his writing, the

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<sup>8</sup> On androcentricity of history of philosophy see e.g. Lloyd (1993).

sales of *Sarah, The Heart is Deceitful Above All Things* and *Harold's End* (2005), a novella published at the brink of the Albert/LeRoy identity revelation, have been unaffected by the identity twist (Handy 2006).

In Handy's article (2006: 114), Karen Rinaldi, J.T.'s former editor, reminisces of her past professional collaboration with J.T. She claims she always kept the writer at an emotional distance, but her kiss-off is as resonant as any

I said, 'Jeremy, I don't know who you are. I don't know what part of your story is true. I don't think you're H.I.V.-positive. I think you're full of shit. But here's what I know: you're a brilliant writer. You're really good, and that's what I care about. The rest of it doesn't really mean that much to me.'

J.T.'s response? "He just giggled, and that was the last conversation I had with him", Rinaldi concluded. My last conversation with J.T. was bittersweet but yet even more resonant. In response to my lengthy thank you message depicting my struggles with my own writing heavily inspired by his example, I received this short email which I continue to cherish. In unison with the politics of the transgression – combating the conventional and celebrating the imaginary – I feel J.T. has to have the last word

Dear Tiia  
Thanks for yer words, they mean a lot to me.  
I wish you luck with yer own writing. To write truthfully, being true to oneself is very hard work and often painful, but for me it's the only way of doing it.  
Take care  
yers,  
J.T.

## Finnish Abstract

Tarkastelen pro gradu –tutkielmassani kieltä, diskursiivista valtaa ja voimaannuttamista sekä identiteetin käsitettä yhdysvaltalaisen kirjailijan J.T. LeRoyn lyhytproosan kautta, jonka määritän lajiltaan transgressiiviseksi. Syvennän käsitteitä analysoimalla kielellisesti tuotettua valtaa ja identiteettien rakentumista identiteettipolitiikaksi postsrukturalistisessa viitekehyksessä l. kielellisesti ja sosiaalisesti tuotettuina keskittyen sukupuoleen, ruumiillisuuteen, sosiaaliseen luokkaan ja kokonaisvaltaisiin kulttuurisiin ylä- ja alakäsityksiin, siis kulttuurimme hierarkkisiin merkityksellistämisyjärjestelmiin. Lähestymistapani on poikkeittieteellinen; analyysissäni yhdistyvät feministisen sosiolingvistiikan, queer-/sukupuolentutkimuksen ja kirjallisuustieteen näkökulmat, joiden teoriakonteksteissa problematisoin identiteetin rakentumisprosesseja sekä tarkastelen transgression käsitettä ja transgressiivista fiktiota selvittääkseni, mitä niiden avulla voi paljastaa ja millaista kumousvoimaa niihin sisältyy.

Mutta kuka tai mikä on J.T. LeRoy? Täytyy aloittaa kertomalla tarina.

Olipa kerran yhdysvaltalainen uuden vuosituhannen kustannustoimittaja, joka erään aivan tavallisen työpäivän aamuna löytää työpöydältään omituisen kirjekuoren. Siinä ei ole lähettäjän nimeä, kustannusyhtiön nimessä on kirjoitusvirhe. Kuoren kääntöpuolella on vaaleanpunainen tahra, joka tarkkaan katsottuna paljastuisi huulipunaksi – kuin joku olisi suudellut kirjettä toivottaakseen sille onnea matkaan.

Kuoressa on käsikirjoitus otsikolla *Sarah*. Sekä *Sarah* että sen kirjoittaja, 18-vuotias koditon narkomaani, joka kutsuu itseään nimellä J.T. LeRoy, ovat ylistävistä saatekirjeistä päätellen jo voittaneet puolelleen sellaiset kulttikirjailijat kuin Mary Gaitskill ja Dennis Cooper, joiden molempien kustannustoimittaja tietää nauttivan älykkökriitikoiden sekä pienen mutta sitäkin intohimoisemman fanijoukon suosiota. Kustannustoimittaja lukee

käsikirjoitusta, ja sivu sivulta hänelle valkenee yhä selvemmin, että LeRoyn omaelämäkerrallisessa romaanissa rakkaudennälkäisestä, äitinsä mekkoihin pukeutuvasta 11-vuotiaasta poikaprostituoidusta on kaikki sosiaalipornahtavan mediasensaation rasvaiset ainekset, etenkin kun kirja on vielä kirjoitettu hyvin. Kustannustoimittaja päättää ottaa riskin ja lähettää käsikirjoituksen esimiehelleen suositellen kirjaa julkaistavaksi.

*Sarahista* tuli enemmän kuin osiensa summa. Siitä seurasi muutakin kuin keskusteluohjelmia seksuaalisen hyväksikäytön uhreista. Siitä tuli muutakin kaunokirjallinen transutuhkimotarina, se oli enemmän kuin taiteen kautta pelastuksen löytävän piinatun sielun synninpäästö. Siitä alkoi tarina nimeltä J.T. LeRoy, joka harppasi yhdellä askeleella namusetien katutyttöpojasta kirjallisten salonkien sylikoiraksi inspiroiden kaikkia, jotka halusivat uskoa taiteen hyvyyteen ja kauneuteen. Sellaisia kuin minä.

LeRoy oli kaikin puolin kärsivän kirjailijamyytin perikuva, pahan maailman uhri, joka lahjakkuutensa ansiosta pystyi vastoin kaikkia sosioekonomisia todennäköisyyksiä kääntämään vaikeutensa voitoksi – lumoavaksi, koskettavaksi kirjallisuudeksi. Alusta alkaen oli kuitenkin niitä, jotka pitivät LeRoyta vähän liian hyvänä ollakseen totta: jo *Sarahin* ilmestymisen aikoihin pahat kielet kuiskivat ja katalat kynät kirjoittivat, ettei kukaan, jolla on sellainen menneisyys kuin LeRoylla, voi kirjoittaa kuten hän. Niin ikään alusta alkaen kiersi sitkeä huhu, jonka mukaan J.T. LeRoyta henkilönä ei ole edes olemassa, että kirjan on kirjoittanut joku tai jotkut, jotka haluavat käyttää LeRoyta jonkinlaisena kollektiivisena salanimenä ja –hahmona. LeRoyta syytettiin myös julkisuuden nälkäiseksi tyrkyksi, joka oli valmis mihin tahansa kenen kanssa tahansa, mikäli se takaisi hänelle lisää aikaa parrasvaloissa. J.T. vastasi syytöksiin eräässä lehtihaastattelussa toteamalla, ilkkurisen inhorealistisesti, tyylillä, joka oli lukijoille tuttu myös hänen teksteistään: ”Jos pystyn nykyään myymään itseäni ilman, että lähden edes ulos, olen mielestäni päässyt elämässäni eteenpäin” (Karisto 2004). Minä ilahduin ja huvituin hänen nokkeluudestaan ja rakastin yhä enemmän.



Vuonna 2001 julkaistiin LeRoyn toinen teos, edelleen lapsuusmuistoja käsittelevä novellikokoelma *The Heart is Deceitful Above All Things*, joka Sarahin lailla oli kaunis ja kauhea; surullinen, hauska, järkyttävä, oivaltava ja voimaannuttava. Helmiäishuulin hymyilevän poikakuninkaan valtakunnassa oli kaikki hyvin.

Vaaleanpunaiset pilvilinnat romahtivat lokakuussa 2005, kun *New York Magazinen* toimittaja Stephen Beachy julkaisi laajan salapoliisiartikkelin, jossa J.T. LeRoy paljastui Laura Albertin, tämän aviomies Geoff Knoopin sekä jälkimmäisen sukulaistytön Savannah Knoopin perheyriyukseksi. Albert oli kolmikosta tärkein, sillä hän oli kirjoittanut kaikki tekstit ja antoi lähes kaikki J.T.:n haastattelut. Savannah Knoop taas esitti J.T.:tä julkisissa tilaisuuksissa. Albertin aviomies Geoff (pari on sittemmin eronnut) osallistui jonkin verran itse kirjoittamiseen mutta toimi pääasiassa takapiruna kuulostellen sopivia markkinointitilaisuuksia ja tuottoisia projekteja J.T. LeRoy Oy:lle. Keijukaispöly muuttui kissankullaksi, kun lukemattomat ihmiset, jotka oli imaistu tarinaan heidän tietämättään – haastatteluja tehneet toimittajat, ammatillista tukea tarjonneet kirjailijat, apua antaneet ystävät, samaistuneet ja rakastuneet lukijat – olivat täysin ymmällään; vihaisia, surullisia, petettyjä, turtia ja täynnä kysymyksiä.

Tarina on kuitenkin monimutkaisempi kuin pelkkä kylmäverinen huijauskertomus. *Vanityn Fairin* artikkelissa (Handy 2006: 111) Geoff Knoop kuvailee Laura Albertin motiivin J.T. LeRoyna kirjoittamiseen olleen ensisijaisesti sisäinen kokemus LeRoysta. ”Laura kokee, että J.T. on osa häntä itseään...hän on kirjoittanut äänellä vuosia, ja ehkä kertonut tarinoita sillä koko elämänsä” (Handy 2006: 111). Artikkelissa Albertin läheisesti tuntevat antavat myös ymmärtää, että Albertin henkilöhistoriaan kuuluu samoja elementtejä kuin J.T.:n narratiiviin, väkivaltaa ja seksuaalista riistoa. Artikkelissa on niin ikään lainaus keskustelusta, jonka Albert kävi J.T.:nä *the London Observer* –aikakauslehden edustajan kanssa. Lainaus on alkukielellä, sillä sen muotoilu kokonaisuudessaan on hyvin paljastava (Handy 2006: 113)

If people want to say that I don't fucking exist then they can do that. Because in a way I don't. I have a different name that I use in the world, and maybe J. T. LeRoy doesn't really exist. But I'll tell you one thing: I'm not a hoax. I'm not a fucking hoax.

Moraalisesti arveluttavista konnotaatioistaan huolimatta tarinan ei voi katsoa päättyneen kirjailijan 'oikean' identiteetin paljastumiseen. Niin kirjallisuuskriitikot, kirjailijat kuin lukijatkin ylistivät LeRoyn kirjojen tyyliä, koskettavuutta ja emotionaalista rehellisyyttä, jotka eivät ole ensisijaisesti kirjailijan vaan tekstin ominaisuuksia. Tekstin laadusta kertoo sekin, että kahden ensimmäisen teoksen myyntiin paljastus ei juuri vaikuttanut (Handy 2006). Ironista tai ei, *Sarahin* Britanniassa julkaistun laitoksen sisäkannessa lainataan vuonna 2000 *The New York Times*issa ilmestynyttä kirja-arvostelua, jonka mukaan teos "turns the tawdriness of hustling into a world of lyrical and grotesque beauty, without losing any of its authenticity...his language is always fresh, his soul never corrupt." Sardonisesta jälkiviisaudesta huolimatta lainaus pitää yhä paikkaansa: kirjaa ei ole kirjoittanut laskelmoiva ja kylmäkiskoinen mieli vaan aidosti herkkä ja lahjakas taiteilija, jonka kertojaääni ja –persoona on koheettinen koko hänen tuotannossaan. LeRoyn tekstejä kiitettiin niiden huumorista, persoonallisesta kielestä aavemaisesta tenhosta ja herkkyystään, ja ne puhuvat yhä puolestaan.

Lajityypillisesti J.T. oli 2000-luvun transgressiivisen fiktion supertähti, joka toi genreä myös laajemman yleisön tietoisuuteen, vaikka termi saattaa olla vieras suomalaislukijoille. Yhdysvalloissa se on kuitenkin tunnustettu jo vuosia, ja sitä kuvaillaan usein määrittelemällä sen käsittelevän 'häiritseviä' teemoja, kuten vaikkapa seksuaalista väkivaltaa. (Kuten tutkielmassani analysoin, häiritsevyys ei kuitenkaan ole transgressiivisen fiktion ydin vaan oleellista on, kuinka subversiivisesti tabu-aiheita käsitellään so. millaisia vaihtoehtoisia toiminnan tapoja ja maailmanjärjestyksen malleja teksti kykenee resonoimaan.) LeRoy oli marginaalihahmo paitsi genrellisesti myös identiteetiltään: hän kertoi kirjoissaan sekä julkisesti haastatteluissaan avoimesti transsukupuolisuudestaan, HIV-positiivisuudestaan ja lapsuudessa kokemastaan seksuaalisesta hyväksikäytöstä tavalla, joka ei

rajoittunut henkilökohtaisten tuntemusten tilittämiseen vaan sisälsi myös yhteiskunnallisesti kantaaottavia painotuksia.

Henkilökohtaisesti J.T.:n kirjoista ja tarinasta inspiroituneena jäljitän tutkielmassani niitä narratiivisia ja performatiivisia elementtejä, joiden kautta J.T. LeRoyn identiteetti rakentui ja analysoin, voivatko nuo elementit säilyttää legitimiytensä, vaikka J.T. LeRoyta ei aktuaalisessa maailmassa ole olemassa. Aloitan analyysini tarkastelemalla lähemmin J.T.:n autobiografista narratiivia hänen haastatteluissa rakentamansa elämäntarinan kautta, jonka avulla lähestyn hänen autobiografiseksi määriteltyjen tekstiensä teemoja. Samalla problematisoin rajanvetoa fiktion ja ei-fiktion välillä, kyseenalaistan autobiografisuuden konventionaaliset lainalaisuudet sekä sitoudun postmoderniin identiteettiteoriaan, jonka mukaan identiteetti on sirpaleinen ja autoritaarista yksinäiseksi määrittelyä monimutkaisempi käsite. Seuraavaksi tutkin sukupuolen, seksuaalisuuden ja luokan ruumiillisia implikaatioita, joiden havaitsen operoivan lingvistis-diskursiivisesti ja luovan intersektionaalisen l. moneen identiteetin osa-alueeseen yhtä aikaa eri tavalla vaikuttavan syrjäjäjärjestelmän, jonka avulla identiteettejä arvotetaan.

Havainnollistan identiteettipoliittisia argumenttejani korpuksenani J.T. LeRoyn novellit purkaessani ruumisrepresentaatioiden hierarkkista struktuuria transgression ja transgressiivisen fiktion käsitteiden ja tradition avulla. Transgressio kytkeytyy ideologisesti karnevalismin analyysiapparaattiin sekä symboliseen inversioon, kulttuuris-kielellisten hierarkkisten rakenneosasten ylösalaisin kääntämiseen, joiden avulla kaivan esiin vaihtoehtoisia merkityksellistämisen tapoja transgressiivisen fiktion kontekstissa. Lopullinen tavoitteeni on jälleenrakentaa J.T. LeRoy representatiivisena, translokationaalisenä, kumouspotentiaalisenä queer-identiteettinä transgression poetiikan ja politiikan avulla.

Totean, että kieli, kirjallisuusgenret ja identiteetti-positiot ovat sosiaalisesti tuotettuja ja että tuottamisprosesseihin liittyy diskursiivisia valtataisteluja, eikä ole olemassa objektiivista tai neutraalia tapaa muodostaa hierarkkisia

luokitteluja. Silti kulttuurisia hierarkioita konstruoidaan jatkuvasti alentamalla yhtä struktuuria ja ylentämällä toista, mitä vastaan on mahdollista nousta tekemällä symbolisen inversion ajatuskokeita. Transgressiot – sääntöjen rikkominen tai niiden ylittäminen – paljastavat hierarkkisoimisprosessit poeettisen ulottuvuutensa avulla tuomalla esiin sen inhon, pelon ja houkutuksen dynamiikan, jolla valtakulttuuri rakentaa käsityksenä itsestä yöpuolensa, marginaaliensa, alemman Toisen kautta.

Paljastaminen ei kuitenkaan yksin riitä vaan siihen tulee liittyä muutosstrategioita, transgression politiikkaa, kun epäoikeudenmukainen vallanjako identiteettien kesken on tullut kiusallisen ilmeiseksi. Kulttuuristen ala- ja yläkerrosten suhdetta ei myöskään tulisi mieltää binaariseksi ja eriytyneeksi vaan molemmat konstruoivat toisiaan ambivalenteissa inhon ja halun sekä rakentamisen ja purkamisen prosesseissa, joissa aika ajoin avautuu kumouksellisuuden mahdollisuuksia. Transgressio tulisi ymmärtää paitsi ajatusrakennelmana myös voimaannuttamisstrategiana, jonka tarkoitus on löytää vaihtoehtoisia maailmanjärjestyksiä, jotka horjuttavat vallitsevaa epäoikeudenmukaista sosiaalista järjestystä, estetiikkaa ja kulttuurihierarkioita.

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