

Laura Elrick

Con Auto Gens

A Name With Two Parts

Conceptual Autobiography / Projective Genealogy, a Story

Around certain clusters of the dead, almost magnetically, a vortex of opacity gathers in the record. Inexplicable small lies, a silent energy of secrets, traces of something hidden, “errors.” Not the missing link (more data, thicker cloud) so much as a hidden Order. *So, what do you want me to say, I had a premonition of something nasty in it, like a word, or a worm, a piece of worm that would be a piece of word, and that would be seeking to reconstitute itself by slithering, something tainted that poisons life.*

In Perec’s novel *A Void*, which was composed entirely without the letter *e*, the words *père*, *mère*, *parents*, and *famille* cannot appear, nor can the name Georges Perec. Years after its publication, he discovered what this meant: unable to approach the unspeakable loss directly, he had encoded it into the machinery of the book.

In the book of public records that might be little more than an irritant on a surface of occlusions, does a letter always arrive at its destination? Letters in sufferance. A code.

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The problem is always beginning: 1492, 1607, 1787, now open the frame.

Shall we go up or down, from the present back, or be present in what’s past, or past the future? What is here that isn’t—what isn’t here that is.

Gottfried, Gootleb, or Gottlieb left LE HAVRE and arrived in NEW YORK. It was 1850. He was twelve. Twelve! That mysterious slow-moving not-child

of the self stretched toward a future that always recedes, ever only just emerging at the moment one is said to have “arrived.” He “arrived,” then. Two years after one of the most widespread revolutionary waves in European history (collapsed), one year after reactionary forces regained control.

And who were his parents?

Were they Christian and Maggie Madelaine? or Christian and Mary Zuber Hofer? Another way of asking which Christian was his father. The cypher that was a mother, deceptive data, erased seams.

Or was he alone? Had he run away from BERN to the coast as one might imagine a child doing in a year like this one, of migrants, but luckier, whiter, gotten on as a stowaway to a new world? Or was he, as they say, *accounted for* with a pair of parents, several siblings, and a grandfather, as one May Westphalier notes in her extensive online amateur history of the Gilgen family.

In any case, so it was that sometime after Godlopp, Bootleg, or Gottlieb Gilgen arrived in the New York harbor, four years to be exact, he was married to a woman a full seven years his senior. Her name was Ruth Ann, it was 1854; he was sixteen, she was twenty-three. And a year later, a child, Leroy, was born.

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The name Leroy has come to signify, for me in time, a deeply saturated excess, a punctuating reminder, an uncanny marauder, a dissemblance and a glyph.

Not a family name, not “passed

down,” Leroy repeats across the horizontal axes, on different “lines,” often coeval to themselves. Leroy’s on so many branches that would have formed no tree, just endless branching, if not for (what is blank in the lore is also blank in the record). Where it ends.

This story isn’t even a story that has never been told.

My grandfather (dead before I arrived) was a name to me, a Leroy, or Lee Roy, or LeRoy, depending on what year and with whom he spoke, but he wasn’t related to Gotlieb or Gotlieb’s Leroy though I am related to both. And so, for that matter, is my father, whose middle name is Lee, the same—and this perhaps more oddly so—as my mother’s, though her first name is Billy to his Donald. Both my mother Billy, and *her* mother James, were, as you might say, women despite—or is it because of—their having the names of men. Though it was my father, to be fair, who often mothered me, if somewhat poorly, while Billy worked to support the family with her wage.¹

LeRoy’s wife, Aloyce, was Godlopp’s Leroy’s grandest daughter; she married the name of her longest father. It was this Leroy who became a Roy at the exact instant when, on the very same government census, his mother Ruth claimed to be a widow living with Roy

1. Here we see Billy as a middle school teacher (c. 1974), forced to kneel before the principal to prove that her skirt was long enough to touch the floor. And here we see her exhausted face, peering straight at the camera from under an off-kilter wig, wearing an expression of badly suppressed contempt.

and to Gottleib was no more (though he yet lived?). Lies!

She was no widow. He was not dead.

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But I digress, as is my way, as is the way of most who set out to begin a thing. And beginnings are what we are all about! When we are twelve, and then again later, at sixteen. At twenty-three, thirty-five, fifty-seven, and every time we feel ourselves somewhat caught unawares, coming suddenly upon the threshold of a new expanse of years.

In his case, I conjecture from the record that Gotty must have fallen in love with this older woman, this Ruth Ann, who was the eldest girl of nineteen Ogan children. Not Ogre. Ogan. Though the boys were named Calvin. Indeed it seems he must have at the very least become her lover, she being seven years his elder, and one would presume, given the dates, that from their union emerged a child, for which, it would also seem, they joined in marriage.

But the love affair between Gotty and Ruth is, as always, a matter of projection. No one really knows how much or even whether they loved each other at all. And perhaps their love or lack of it, the degree of their feeling of realness in their beds, their *foreclosed*s, shall we say, yielded to the futures they bequeathed. Then again, perhaps it is always out of what is missing that the future grows, tendril-like and searching, poking up through the language that can only pretend to be its scaffold and foundation.

An illusion of positivist expression then. Was this their thing called love?²

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The child, in any case—this Leroy—was my great-great-great-grandfather on my father's mother's side. Not to be confused with LeRoy who was my father's father (and so, unrelated, I will state it again for the record, at the risk of the appearance of excessive protestation). That one's (LeRoy's) kindergarten teacher was responsible for the Francophone spelling and pronunciation of his name, having told him that Lee Roy (in two parts) was uncouth and would hinder his young

ambitions to become something other than a Kansas farmer's son.

But in any case, Leroy was a shoemaker's, in Iowa. The shoemaker was Gottlieb, Gootlieb, or Gottfried Gilgen, and what is strange is that he seems to have married Ruth Ann twice. Once in 1854, as was previously stated, and again six years later in 1860. Why twice?

That is one question.

Why at all even once is another.

A slew of possible answers gather like so many moth-blown rumors. Perhaps the second time was to reaffirm their love when Gotty was of legal age? Or perhaps they had separated in the interim, had the first annulled, then matured and reunited. Or perhaps one of their memories failed and two marriages did NOT in fact take place, but only one remembered differently by two people. Or perhaps, simply, a census taker made an error, albeit a rather convenient one at that. For the record, so to speak, the two were "married" when Leroy was born.

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In any case it was that two years later another child came along, Mr. Seamon S. in 1862, a full seven years after his purported elder brother. Four more would follow: Charles Monroe in 1864, Orpha in 1869, Clarence O. in 1871, and finally, Stella in 1877, now open the frame.³

Semen, orphans, clarity, and stars. A genealogy of the genealogy, coyly.

Indeed, why the long gap between the first two brothers, at an age of such sexual proclivity for Godlopp and Ruth? At a time, to which we may be fast returning, when so few options for reproductive control were at hand, i.e., Leroy's mother was a mother, etc. But which mother was she?

The question deepens when one considers that Gottlieb's family history, published in the 1982 *Melbourne, Iowa, Centennial History Record* (over fifty years after his death, discovered in a stranger's family archive) makes no mention whatsoever of the first son—there was no Leroy, no Le.⁴

You see, the *the* was missing. The *the* was missing from the genealogy, which made it more like adverbial excess, a philosophy of transmogrified becomings.

No genealogy, just genealogical lust. A piece of word.

And to boot, a projection of their mistaken love, or of the absence of it.

That's right, the binary here is rather odd, so let me repeat it for the record so to speak: either mistaken love or its absence. For isn't all love mistaken if it exists? And a mistake is the most profound expression of that which I conjecture may have existed between them. Even the cat looking on most surely would have sensed this.

Animal, who, autobiography, non-identity, freedom. A piece of worm that would become a word.

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Again a digression. For in fact the *Melbourne, Iowa, Centennial History Record* says only that Gottlieb married Ruth in 1860 (making no mention of 1854) and that they became the parents of: Clarence, Charles, Orpha, Seamon, and Stella. Again the omission! It would appear, for the record, that there was no Leroy. And therefore, no Claude

2. I began to search for possible sources of a sickness, what made the monster of my father's mother's child's child. Hoping to stumble upon some insight into a notoriously "difficult person." Mythlike, she was said to have crammed her children's feet into purposely small shoes, as they dreamt of murdering her in her sleep. It is possible, however, that this difficult person became a decoy for another difficult person, who may also be a decoy. Aloyce, who was the daughter of Claude, who was the son of Leroy, son of Gottlieb and Ruth, Ruth who was the daughter of, etc. *You may think that I am in fact telling a prehistory of the subject, one that I have been arguing cannot be told.* Something about treaties made and broken, an orchestrated nuclear loneliness, a man named Schnell, a prairie, a rape, an annulled marriage, a locked trunk found and opened after its owner's death. Something about Aloyce and Ruth, three generations apart—and their relationship to me, that is LE, and their Leroy's.

3. *Yet in this sweeping mechanistic interpretation, there is no room for the real plot of the story. There have been houses broken open, windows smashed and doors broken down in the dead hours of the night, men rushing in, cursing and swearing and discharging their Pistols inside the house. Men have been knocked down and unmercifully beaten and yet the authorities do not notice it at all. We would open a school here, but are almost afraid to do so, not knowing that we have any protection for life or limb.*

4. LE is not only a masculine article, but also a pair of fairly promiscuous familial initials, an abbreviated moniker and transpersonal pronominal gesture for Leonidas Ealos, LeRoy Elrick, and myself, the purported author of this story. *Mais le nommé n'a pas comparu devant nous* [but the aforementioned did not appear before us].

Monroe, no Myrtle Aloyce, and no Donald Lee—hence, no Laura.

Yet (if it's true) (if I need submit no habeas corpus to myself to confirm my true existence). For I am 'my body, so surely I cannot "show me the body" that I am. Because my little cat knows me. Hence, if I do not exist, I am not a body and my little cat does not seem know it. Fed by spectres.

Not unlike our bodies that do not yet exist (more than formally I mean) in the racialized social-sexual contract that is daily performed and reperformed in space. (The cat's name is Topo, often Topito—Little Mole.) *And, well grubbed, once again we recognize our old friend, who knows so well how to work underground, suddenly to reappear.*

Marx said that. His sweet diminutive Old Mole, revolution.

Ruth Ann, Ruth Ann. An old mole, Ruth Ann.

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But back to the facts. As before, the *Melbourne Record* states that Ruth and Gotty married in 1860 *only*, and that they quote became the parents of Clarence, Charles, Orpha, Seamon, and Stella *only*. From this I can only attempt to fill in, to project, to conjecture that old Gotty could have found that Ruth had tricked him, Leroy having been sired by another, and that old Gotty or his descendants erased him from the record after that.

Or perhaps the son Leroy angered his young father Gottlieb, Gootlieb, or Gottfreid, and they grew to be at odds, as is wont to happen sometimes. Or, young Gotty, in a haze of gallantry, could have offered to marry young Ruth in 1854 to save her from the infamy of childbirth out of wedlock, knowing full well the child was not his own. Perhaps Ruth had led him to believe the child was wrongly conceived, in a moment of violence, and that later Gotty came to believe this was a lie, renounced the child when he turned out to be, as was said then, "somewhat queer," a sickly sort, and a veritable living terror. This seems to me most likely. The Gilgens were a motley crew of meanness, shame, and secrets, grasping after norms that by constitution could only elude them.

In any case, this pseudo-bastard, this eldest son, this Leroy, begat Claude Monroe (a reputedly mean man) who begat my grandmother Myrtle (also mean), who went by that name for the first half of her life, and then began to call herself *M. Aloyce*.

You see the slipperiness of names and how they come to signify things to their wielders: Myrtle lived in a brothel in Kansas City, but Aloyce was a school teacher in Denver.⁵ I digress into a century of the future.

5. *I don't understand this idea of mine that I resemble the sleeping waters that drowned their springs. I manage to melt into the countryside, trapped by the material. This is not a lake. Some places are fake and I get caught in them.*

Laura Elrick is the author of several collections of poetry, the most recent of which is Propagation (Kenning Editions, 2012). Her performance works include Blocks Away (2010), Stalk (2008), and Five Pieces for Doubled Voice (2006). She is currently at work on El Wahz, a long bawdy poem about things hidden, and A Name With Two Parts, of which "Con Auto Gens" is an excerpt.