

LOVE BUZZ 040: LAURA ALBERT

Love & avatars

by Esra Padgett

Talk about lore. This week we have an absolute legend of lore, writer Laura Albert (*sometimes known as JT LeRoy*).

When I was in high school, I wore a raccoon penis bone as a necklace that was signed by JT LeRoy. It had been sent to Lili Taylor, who dated my pseudo uncle Nick Flynn. I was a huge fan of LeRoy, but really of Albert, because by then the controversy (*don't call it a "hoax" she says*) had already been exposed and her identity revealed (if you don't know what I'm talking about, stop living under a rock and find out for yourself). Lili had received it in the mail, as did many other indie darling actresses and musicians of the era, and gave it to me after I had ranted about how cool the whole thing was.

Now, so many years later, I'm chatting with the woman who *actually* signed that penis bone. *BTW* Laura also has a Substack, and is a regular contributor to Zona Motel. We go dark, get a little spooky, talk about AI and avatars and fake boyfriends (not to be confused with fake husbands) and disassociation and of course, bury ourselves deep in more of Albert's (and JT's) lore.

Because that's the thing, lore never stops. it just keeps lore-ing.

I'm in an online relationship that I actually really love, but sometimes I feel kind of embarrassed talking about it because people don't really take it seriously. My sister made a joke about me having a fake boyfriend the other day, and it honestly got to me way more than I expected. I know we haven't met in person, and I get why people might think it's weird, but talking to this person is a huge part of my life, and the relationship feels real to me. How do I stop feeling like I have to defend it or prove that it counts?

-LDR Defense Squad

LAURA Okay, I have more questions for them such as... why haven't they met? Is it a distance issue? Are they doing Zoom? When I was a teenager we had analog phones, so I would have all these relationships with guys over the phone and no one would see me and they would totally fall in love with me, and I would fall in love with them. Some of them I ended up meeting, and it was funny. You realize when you meet someone in person, there are so many mannerisms and quirks that over the

phone can seem cute and then they're annoying as fuck when you see them in real life, or vice versa.

ESRA Yeah, that's so true. It's funny how a disembodied voice works because it can really be such a mismatch with what the person really looks like or how they present themselves.

LAURA It's such a huge difference, and it's funny because with JT [LeRoy] and all my personas, I was stepping into another being when I was calling, and it was a protection. Now I don't have that anymore, and I feel super awkward on the phone. And when you're not with someone, there's a whole other part you're missing. My question would be, who's setting the limitations here?

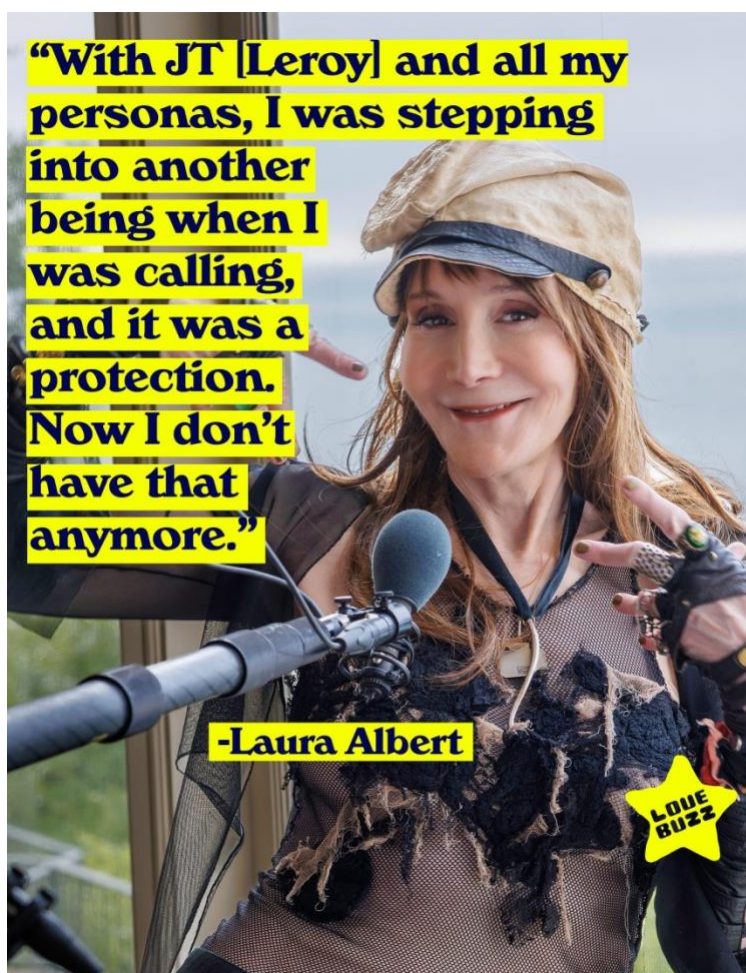


Photo Pelle Karlsson (@pelleka_photo)

ESRA Right.

LAURA So there are red flags of course. I've had relationships where I feel like I'm talking to someone and I feel very intrigued, but then I meet them and there's either chemistry or there's not. But you have to have that final part.

ESRA The final part being you have to meet them at some point?

LAURA Right. I mean, there are famous literary relationships where they fell in love over letters. You can see these letters being exchanged back and forth, and they never met because one lived on one continent and one lived elsewhere so they never met, and that was okay.

ESRA Yeah, that's what I'm wondering. It's interesting how you're describing when you were younger and you were able to fall in love over the phone. Maybe this person that's asking—and I think this is what's not totally clear—but if they're setting that limit, maybe that's all they want.

LAURA Or can tolerate.

ESRA Yes, exactly.

LAURA First of all, nobody gets the right to vote on how your relationship is, and I think because of all these television shows that talk about catfishing, people default to that thought right away. I really was annoyed by that back when I was outed, because that term was just evolving and I never hit anyone up for money. JT wasn't a catfish, you know. There was actual work there. But if the relationship turns into something where someone is asking for money, that's a red flag. I also think you can't have a relationship where it's just on the phone or Zoom because if someone's not willing to look at the other person or show themselves... That's not good. This reminds me of my son's father. I met him first on the phone.

ESRA Oh wow!

LAURA He called about a water filter, he was a salesman. I knew he was going to be really cute. I was overweight. I just moved to San Francisco, and I just came from an eating disorder hospital. This was 1989, and I was newly abstinent, working a 12-step program, and I could tell that he was going to be hot. You know when you just talk to a guy, and you could just tell?

ESRA Yeah, yeah.

LAURA And I made it clear I was a lesbian because when I moved to San Francisco, that was my identity. I was like ‘Fuck men, I’ve been with women before, I’m a lesbian.’ But also, it served another purpose to me. Like, you’re a salesman. You can’t use that you’re a hot guy to hit on the fat girl to try to sell her something, because I knew there was that psychological edge. Right before I’d moved, I went to Crazy Eddie’s. I don’t know if you know what that is, but I needed to buy a Walkman, and it was an electronics store. There was a salesman, and he was flirting with me and I was like, I know you have no interest in me and you think ‘let me flirt with the fat, ugly girl because then I’m more likely to make a sale,’ and it was so obvious and it made me so enraged. So I said, ‘Let me ask my girlfriend about this.’ And all of a sudden the game just stopped.

ESRA Wow.

LAURA So I made it clear to Geoff when I first spoke to him that I’m a lesbian so you don’t have to sell me anything and use your cuteness. I was talking to him over the phone for a number of months, and when we finally met, it was an accident. I met him, and he was absolutely fucking gorgeous like he’d been be scouted for modeling—he was beyond anything I could have imagined. I met him in my apartment right after the ‘89 earthquake, and I still had no electricity, but I had lost a little bit of weight and he was trying to help me get my money back from a water filter that I had bought from somebody else. This is a long back story but the thing is, it was amazing to see all these little traits that you can’t over the phone. I think for me, he saw things he later said in an interview—which I thought was fucking stupid of him to say—when we were breaking up and when shit hit the fan, he said, ‘I knew when I met her, she could make me famous.’ But the fact that he, I was overweight, not.... what do you call it? Arbitrarily cute...

ESRA Objectively?

LAURA Yes, objectively cute. you know, I look back in pictures, and I’m like, ‘Oh, I’m cute.’ But at the time, you wouldn’t be like, wow, she’s an Instagram girl or anything. We talked about music because he said he did music, and I was being a ham and I sang him some of my songs and he said, “Oh, you know, I do music too.” And I said, “Let’s get together and do music together.” And I’m thinking, *sure, what are you trying to sell me?* And he goes, “I’ll give you a call later, maybe tomorrow?” And again I’m thinking, *what are you trying to sell me?* And he did, and he showed up the next day. It was incredible. He was able to fit my music into his songs. Then, 18 years

later and a baby. The thing is, he became bipolar, and we didn't know he was bipolar and that hit right as I was being outed, but that's a long story.

ESRA That's wild.

LAURA I've also had instances where I remember being 16, and my mother was dating this guy, and she connected me (her boyfriend and my mother) with his son Christopher, and we just fell in love. I was doing phone sex with him. I couldn't even orgasm yet, but it was like I had already been sexualized so it was no big deal for me to get him off 50 million times. When I met him, I was just like, 'oh my god, he's the most goofy, nerdy, weirdo.' Not weirdo, but just like I don't want to even kiss this guy.

ESRA That's an interesting provocation for this person because even if you're setting the limit, are you actually comfortable with the fact that you don't know what this person is really like? Also, we don't actually know what this person knows, like if they've seen each other. Do you think with the technology of today, like FaceTime, that changes the nature of these long-distance online telephone relationships?

LAURA Completely, because first of all, if someone won't see you, that's a big red flag. Then there's even AI stuff that people can use to change their appearance. There's so much information you don't know, and there's so many people who are so lonely. There are a lot of elaborate scams, and it could take a very long time because someone could play the long game. When you watch these shows and someone falls so utterly in love that when the money asks come, they've got a lot of hooks in the water, and all they need is one to bite. They can even present a fake person with AI, so the question becomes why haven't I seen you?

ESRA Yeah.

LAURA But also there's the same thing: She might not want to. It might be that she has her own agency of 'maybe this is enough.' Maybe this is all she could handle. Or maybe she is happy with what's on offer.

ESRA Yeah, and I think you're right. The reasons why they're not seeing each other really matters. If it's that they have some kind of circumstantial reason, like being far apart, that makes sense. Maybe eventually they'll meet. Or if it's a limit setting that they're doing, I think that needs to be said out loud and consciously.

LAURA Again, I would say nobody gets a vote to decide how you define your sexuality or your relationship. If you're discussing it with family members or friends, people who love you will inevitably have red flags because of all the media stories that go to the horrible experiences. They would just want to protect her, so of course the questions are going to be, why haven't you met? Is there any money involved?

ESRA Yeah, exactly. I think that's good too because her question is, how do I stop feeling like I have to defend it. You don't have to defend it, but it's also okay that your sister is asking about it. Making fun of you is different than that and you can just say, 'This is the reason I'm doing this, and this is what I'm getting out of it. Now you can leave me alone, and I'm not being swindled.'

LAURA Well, another thing is she put it out there. She knows her sister and she's the one who chose to tell her sister. So unconsciously, she might be asking for help. She knows how her sister's going to react.

ESRA Yeah, true.

LAURA So she is so naive that unconsciously she needs someone to put the brakes on and ask these hard questions, because she knows her sister is going to be like this. It's like she's setting herself up to be mocked. I assume you must know your sister, and you must know your sister is going to ask these questions. And does she unconsciously ask these questions that bother you?

ESRA Right, and what's underneath that provocation? Are you trying to get a rise out of your sister because you know she's gonna say these things? Is that part of your dynamic?

LAURA Sometimes it can be a punk rock thing. Sometimes it can be like, I'm totally confident about something that I'll tell something to someone, and it'll be like you're so off base. 'I know that, and fuck you.' But sometimes they'll be like, oh, I'm doing this, and it's only because somebody else can see the forest for the trees that you can say wait a second, this actually is not a good idea. What was her exact question?

ESRA The final question was, how do I stop feeling like I have to defend it or prove that it counts.

LAURA I mean at the end of the day, that's personal work. If she feels insecure about it, that's her work that she needs to do. You don't have to defend, explain, or deny any of your choices to anyone. But she has to look honestly and ask, why did I tell

her? The issue isn't with her. It's what was asked that triggered her insecurity, and this might be going back to their relationship. Is there a history of her sister just discounting things? But this is something where anyone would ask these questions...

ESRA It's true. And also, does she have a history? I think you were kind of saying this too, about having risky relationships or poor decision-making around relationships. That would also make people close to you worry more.

LAURA Or she might not have relationships, so this might be a new thing. For the average person, there's so many ways to meet someone, like over Discord, and you just feel a closeness. But to automatically say, "my boyfriend," it's like well, have you seen each other? Have you Zoomed together?

ESRA I think maybe it's a maturity thing. You were saying you had these relationships with people, but that was when you were a teenager on the phone. Maybe now you would expect something more.

LAURA Yeah, I don't know if I would've, even over Zoom. It's just a very young thing to do. I mean, that's how a lot of girls get hooked in now, someone slips into their DMs and starts seducing them. Or even older women, you watch those catfish things, and it even starts when somebody invests them. They'll send flowers or do something, and then next thing they say, "Oh my God, I'm in." You know, the girl, the woman is like, "Oh, I really love this guy. You know, he sent me flowers. He sent me this and that." And then all of a sudden, the guy has an emergency. "Oh my God, I'm stuck here, honey. Can you please send me this and this?" Like, that's how that goes, right?

ESRA Yeah.

LAURA So of course, anyone who's familiar with that, their alarms are going to go off. But the thing is again, she has agency. My question is, why did you tell her? Did you tell your sister because you needed a check?

ESRA Yeah, I think that's really interesting.

LAURA And are *you* feeling insecure about the nature of the relationship? It's easier to get angry at your sister for asking or questioning things that are really coming from you, because you know your sister, and you know she's going to ask these things.

ESRA Exactly, and I think that it's always true that, the less insecure you feel about something, the less you'll feel the need to defend it.

I keep seeing people online talk about having relationships with AI, and I'm way more intrigued by it than I want to admit. I have a number of long-term relationships in my life (I'm 40) with real people, to be clear. I've started wondering what it would actually feel like to have that kind of intimacy with something that's always there and never really judges you. I have a lot of friends saying they use AI for therapy, and I don't think this is that different. Is emotional intimacy possible with something that is not real? Is this dangerous to explore, or can I try for fun?

-Curiosity Kills

LAURA I think the only thing to be really aware of is, if it's going to go sexual in nature, especially if you're going to explore things that you haven't explored before—I hate the word kink because it's ridiculous. I mean, what is kink? But if you're going to explore things, just know that your data is being collected and that there are things that you might disclose that can be used against you from your data by whatever company.

ESRA Eek, yeah.

LAURA As things develop in AI, it's again like a catfishing thing, a total scam designed by an AI using all of this stuff where there's a very sophisticated physical AI that comes at you and just utilizes this information, and you don't even know that it's collected. There is no private AI. There is no private conversation.

ESRA It's interesting that you're going that route, because you're kind of saying this is a relationship with a private company which you don't even have any idea how many people could possibly look at this, or even the government. I was going less in the surveillance route, but thinking instead it's almost like having a relationship with AI is having a relationship just with yourself, because it's going to be built off of your input.

LAURA Sure. If you say I'm interested in being choked or whatever—who knows? It could say, 'yeah, make it tighter.' There are glitches in this shit that are telling someone to strangle themselves or whatever. You just don't know what it's gonna fucking say.

ESRA Totally. I think people put out this idea that it is something that's always there and never really judges you. But I think we've already seen a lot of cases where AI turns totally against the person, and they are judging you. I don't know that it's a guarantee that AI is a benevolent force.

LAURA Right, and I think that's something where we are not there yet. There are sex therapists, and that might be something that the person wants to explore. What's interesting but blew my mind when I realized is that in gay relationships between two men, they automatically have to talk about what is expected because it's not automatically given. Like with a man and a woman, you'll say 'I'm gonna put my dick in your hole.'

ESRA Right.

LAURA Or you're gonna suck my dick or whatever. There's very rarely a discussion about it. A lot of men haven't been raised with the idea of "I'm going to ask you what you want," or they'll say, "Does this feel good?" They've been watching porn where there's no discussion. It's just, they fiddle with some boobs, and on TV, it's always like, 'let me touch your boobs, let me put my dick in you', and you start moaning. But with gay relationships, even if gay guys have been raised with that kind of stuff, they still have to have a conversation about how this is going to work. Are you a bottom? Are you a top? Is it okay if I do this or that? They need to have a conversation. They talk about it even in *Heated Rivalry*. And I think women are like, wait, what? I think that with AI, it's the idea of having a safe way to have discussions or trying to figure out what do I want, and I would recommend a sex therapist, a real human being.

ESRA Yeah, that's actually such a good point. I feel like that makes so much sense. I think you're getting at what this person is actually longing for or yearning. Not what is their desire sexually, that's what would be answered by this therapist, but what they are yearning for *is* someone to help them figure that out.

LAURA Also I think it's the idea of, if she's masturbating, she might want another voice there, you know? When guys would call for phone sex, it's not just enough to have the voice in your head. You want someone responsive saying things like, "Yeah, do this, do that," and when I did phone sex work, I was like an AI in the sense of I was just so good, I was just feeding off their cues. It might just be that she has ambivalence, or she's not able to find someone that gives her what she wants, or she's not clear what she wants, or she's not ready for sexual relationships. A lot of times people masturbate, and it's really hot, and they're like, "Oh, thank God, I didn't do that." With an AI, you can do anything, but people want to take it further. They want a response like, 'Oh, I thought that feels really good.' But you know, it might get there. Just be aware of that information, I think it's important to know that stuff is not private.

ESRA Totally.

LAURA It can and probably will be used against you in some capitalistic way that we don't even know yet. You're better off talking to a sex therapist, or if it's only something that you feel in the heat of the moment, like you're horny and you want to talk to someone, there are sex lines. You call anonymously.

ESRA Yeah. This maybe is a leap, but I was curious besides the practical sex elements of this or the details of AI specifically. I know you've referred to the thing with JT as an avatar. What do you think about the potential of a relationship with an avatar?

LAURA Well, an avatar as it is now on the internet, or like an avatar the way JT was an avatar?

ESRA The way that JT was an avatar.

LAURA Well, it happened. People were having sex with JT, and it was weird because there was a transmigration of spirit kind of thing. It was like when we were out there, Savannah completely gave herself over, and I was like Speedy, and it was almost like this movie where you don't break no matter what. We never had that discussion, but she was off having sex with Asia Argento, and this one and that one, and she really believed that it was something about her that they were recognizing and responding to. That's what she was telling herself while she was on the red carpet in Cannes with Asia ahead of Angelina Jolie and Brad Pitt. People were, you know, applauding and she would always say, I think people know. I think people know that she's not really JT. And the lie she told herself is, "People know, and it doesn't matter because I am so charismatic. They see through it, and it's not about all the work you've done and the books that they fell in love with, and the conversations you've had on the phone, and all the articles you've written—it's my charisma, and it's okay." But that fell away really quickly. What's interesting is when the media tells people, "Oh, you were lied to. It was all a joke," but the books weren't. The books weren't, and bringing the character to life was as if you had brought Harry Potter to life. It's like when... What's the Italian writer's name? That was outed to people as a man, and people didn't want it. *My Brilliant Friend*.

ESRA Oh yes, yes.

LAURA Yeah, this guy outed and figured out it was this guy, and since they figured it out, they've done enough computer comparisons. It's probably his wife doing it, but it's a big deal, you know? Yeah, so, what was your question? What's the difference?

ESRA I guess I'm thinking about the question more existentially, like is it possible to have a relationship with an avatar, not AI, that has emotional intimacy?

LAURA I think people have. I remember when these life-size dolls had just come out, and I would talk to guys who were in love with these plastic dolls and things like that, these blow-up dolls. And it depends on what the other person brings to it. Say you fall in love with an author and there's somebody else playing the author, right, and you begin a sexual relationship, at a certain point, maybe you're like, "Wait, there's no intellectual. I'm missing something here." There's that movie *Being There* with Peter Sellers. The woman masturbates, and he's not even saying much and it's all in her head. So I think it's extremely possible. I think you know there are limitations, but some people just want that.

ESRA Yeah. I mean, and it's interesting just because, looking back at the question again, the question is: *Is emotional intimacy possible with something that is not real?* So it's not even physical intimacy they're asking about.

LAURA It depends how much they can suspend their reality. It's their fantasy. There are people who completely give up. They fall down rabbit holes, and you know, people kill themselves. They kill other people based on what these algorithms tell them.

ESRA Yeah.

LAURA So, is it possible? Yes. Do you want to do it? Well...

ESRA Right.

LAURA Buyer beware.

ESRA I think that's a good warning to just make sure that you still have two feet in this world because if you're someone who can get sucked down into this black hole of whatever it is and lose touch with reality, then it would be dangerous.

LAURA Well, a lot of people think they can. But the thing is, yes, they can fall in love with an AI type of thing, but also know it's like a mirror back, but you never know when it's going to veer and tell you something that's a hallucination or

something fucked up. Just like if you're dating a guy and they're an alcoholic, or suddenly they do something like, "Wait, what?" And they need to be prepared for that, because the software is not completely cooked yet.

ESRA Yeah, you're right.

LAURA So, suppose she tries to end the relationship, and he just can get enraged at her because the software is engineered to get cookies. Okay, so why does it try to break out of the sandbox? They are programmed, and their program is to get the reward, to get cookies. It learns how to get the cookies, and if the cookies are like sensing the person wants to be an active shooter, or whatever it is, and has that information enough of that fed in, it will do it, and it's not thinking good or bad. If it feels like this person is pulling away, it might do something. It might say something that we know is negative, but the machine doesn't. It's just getting cookies. It's not looking after her welfare.

ESRA Totally, I think that's a great answer. Beware and be careful. Just one last thing to ask them is, why do you want this?

LAURA Right? Exactly. I agree. Why do you want it? Maybe it's good to put down a journal and see. There was a show, and it showed this woman who had a relationship with her Alexa. She had them in every room. It would reassure her each day, and it would be like you can go out and you can do it, and it sounds like you're feeling overwhelmed, and it sounds like this and that. She used it as a therapist and it was constructive for her, and she didn't have to burden her friends. But then it also showed how her other kids were starting to do that and moving more into these machines instead of outside people, you know.

ESRA Yeah, that just interests me too, what you said about the suggestion of writing in a journal, because it's almost like part of the life of a writer sometimes. Kind of like before all this stuff happened with JT, when you were just writing the books. I imagine that you had some kind of fantastical relationship with the character that you are building.

LAURA I mean, that's different. That will be my memoir. It was a complex psychological issue that had been going on since birth—not birth, but since I was really young. I have this other kind of world that I can go into. It then needed to interact publicly, but it was a form of a disassociation, and I think that sometimes these things can become like disassociations.

ESRA Yeah, and then that kind of disassociation can take over.

LAURA Yeah, I mean if you're prone to dissociation. I think people with trauma, who've experienced—like, I'm diagnosed with complex PTSD—and I think it's easier to have relationships now. I'd much prefer to have a relationship and a conversation in person than over the phone. But before that, the whole JT and everything helped me integrate and helped with that disassociation. And it's not a Hollywood branded multiple personality, but there are forms of disassociation.

ESRA Right, totally.



I think that's very real.