Introduction

In the summer of 1848, a twenty-four-year-old man from Troy, Maine, was approached by strangers, who recognized him as Rowland Hause, the missing son of James Hause, of nearby Corinna. Rowland, some three years earlier, had boarded the *Copia*, a whaling vessel bound for the Pacific Ocean. The young man, dressed in ragged work clothes, accompanied the strangers back to Corinna, where he met Rowland's parents. Although Mrs. Hause remembered her son as fairer and stockier than the young man, who had a "swarthy complexion," she eventually accepted him as her son, based primarily on some peculiar corporeal marks—scars on his knee, chest, and neck, and a toe that "lapped over the other."[1] Rowland's sister, a schoolteacher named Rebecca, was similarly incredulous, but ultimately identified her brother through another scar. The young man, now dressed like a gentleman, borrowed money, sold an heirloom watch, and later caused a disturbance in Bangor, where he signed "protection papers" and "stamped" Rowland's name "upon various articles of clothing."[2] Eventually, the young man was recognized by several acquaintances, and "the bubble of imposture burst."[3] During the January 1849 trial, Seth Hause (evidently no relation to the family in Corinna) identified the defendant as his son, Luther Hause. Although the packed courtroom heavily favored Luther, the jury quickly returned a guilty verdict.

Contemporary accounts marveled at the "absolute and entire deception of a whole family" and wondered how James Hause, "an intelligent man, and Justice of the Peace, and a man of property," fell for Luther's imposture.[4] Rebecca Hause, similarly, was a "fine looking intelligent girl, and it is astonishing that she could have been so deceived."[5] Although Luther and Rowland were generally dissimilar, the physical peculiarities they shared were an "infallible guide" to convince even the most intimate relations.[6] An 1874

account of the case observed that "the evidences of identity based on mere *personal appearance* [are] entirely deceptive."[7] The case proved extraordinary because Luther neither had foreknowledge of Rowland's scars nor "sufficient time . . . to produce on his own person an imitation of them."[8] The coincidence of the scars (and, perhaps less so, the overlapping toe) "weaken[ed] the evidence respecting identity that is based solely on the recollection of mere bodily resemblances."[9] Rather than providing unique forensic evidence, the body proved untrustworthy, a text that could be misremembered, duplicated, and counterfeited, what another reappraisal called "the frequent correspondence of marks of violence upon different men."[10]

The Hause imposture marks an important early development in debates over personal identity on both sides of the Atlantic. Although the case played out in Maine, it was retrospectively recognized for its "many features in common with the notorious . . . [Tichborne] imposture," which captivated the Victorian consciousness for nearly a decade.[11] Both Luther Hause and the Tichborne Claimant beguiled witnesses by exploiting the ambiguities and coincidences of corporeality.[12] As Pamela K. Gilbert observes, the Victorian era's "philosophical and anatomical knowledge . . . insists on a material self, located on the surface of the body."[13] This notion of material selfhood advanced in the decades between the Hause and Tichborne cases, particularly through the rise of forensics.[14] Under the influence of science and industry, early forensics granted sovereignty to the body as the exclusive seat of subjectivity, the sole signifier of the self. Yet this same period also saw the rise of the sensation novel, whose plots represented—and inspired— diverse forms of imposture that emphasized the body's incapacity to signify identity. The ubiquity of these plots not only demonstrates how identity fraud "loomed large in Victorian culture, . . . entering into many facets of daily life," but also highlights the paradox at the heart of this study: In the Victorian period, the body both formed and frustrated identity.[15] By resisting the confines of material identity, impostors reveal and exploit the inherent mutability of body, mind, and matter. Sensation fiction provided a reflection of and an incitement for this resistance.[16]

Sensation novels stage what I term *personation plots*—narratives of lost, mistaken, or stolen identities—to reflect a particular Victorian anxiety about the transformation of immaterial subjectivity into material identity.[17] The nineteenth century witnessed the development of increasingly intricate and accurate biometric techniques meant to identify individuals through particular bodily signifiers.[18] These techniques, which culminated in the rise of fingerprinting records at the end of the Victorian period, threatened

subjectivity by marginalizing the soul and reducing human experience to the confines of embodiment.[19] This book argues that Victorian impostors, both actual and fictional, undermine the authority of material identity through methods that, while varied, persistently center on the inherent mutability of corporeality. I assert, in other words, that personation plots invariably focus on the body and its fundamental incapacity to signify subjectivity. More than expressing anxieties about shifting class dynamics in the wake of reform or the increasing influence of textual information—the contexts most critics of sensation fiction distinguish as the backdrop for identity fraud—Victorian imposture resists the scientific, medical, and legal promotion of corporeal identity as the sole indicator of human existence.[20] *Personation Plots* examines sensational narratives of mistaken, counterfeited, or otherwise stolen identities, in which impostors transform the body both inside and out; emphasize the instability of the mind; and explore the growing authority of external matter. The limitations and inconsistencies of corporeal identity, more so than strict socioeconomic factors, provide the conditions for each mode of imposture.

It is necessary, at the outset, to dispense with some terminology. This book distinguishes between *identity* and *the self*, the former being extrinsic, legible, and material, and the latter intrinsic, illegible, and immaterial. To understand and to control its populace, the state placed emphasis on identity, submerging the authority of the self beneath a host of material signifiers.[21] The materialization of personal identity began in the decades before biometric advances in photography, anthropometry, and fingerprinting, when medico-legal writers, following in the wake of pseudo-scientific proponents of physiognomy and phrenology, affixed identity to corporeal indicators.[22] Victorian science moved increasingly toward the materialization of identity, understanding even cognitive processes through physiological models.[23] As Peter Garratt observes, nineteenth-century epistemology "troubled the neat ontologies of self and world."[24] Industrial mechanization similarly constructed the individual subject as a laboring body suited for material production.[25] William A. Cohen notes that "[m]ass industrialism and urbanization provided new locations . . . in which conflicts over the relation between the body and its interior arose; mechanized labor produced [a] new kind of body."[26] Under the influence of science and industry, legal institutions began to recognize corporeal identity as the singular means to read, to classify, and to manipulate the populace, displacing the immaterial self from constructions of subjectivity.[27]

Personation Plots: Identity Fraud in Victorian Sensation Fiction argues that sensation fiction consistently highlighted the discrepancies in this

narrow narrative of material identity. I equate *personal identity* with *subjectivity* throughout, following John Locke, whose chapter "Of Identity and Diversity" (1694) "revolutionize[d] the very conception of subjectivity."[28] Whereas Locke preferred the terms "human" (body) and "person" (mind/consciousness), the Victorians divided subjectivity between *identity* and *the self* (alternately "personality" or "ego"), the former being granted full legal authority as the sole signifier of subjectivity.[29] Ronald R. Thomas points to a "paradigmatic shift in the realm of subjectivity," signaled by "the process of 'materializing' personal identity."[30] This process resulted from the materialist pressures of science and industry, and sociojuridical disciplines followed suit. By the last decades of the nineteenth century, with the introduction of biometrics, identity became fully, but perhaps not irreversibly, tied to the body.[31] Here the cognates *identity* and *identify* become most treacherous. The elevation of identity over the self was the result of an institutional drive to identify, so that identity was always subjugative, promoted as a means to read, to locate, to control. Nevertheless, the self, displaced but never fully removed by materialist systems, regained some agency at the beginning of the twentieth century, primarily through Freudian psychoanalysis. I argue that sensation novelists untethered corporeality from subjectivity by emphasizing the mutability of body, mind, and matter, thus forging a path to modernist/postmodernist notions of the fragmented, fluctuating, dispersive self.

The central aims of this book are not only to highlight sensation fiction's representations of subjectivity but also to examine its interventions in Victorian understandings of the self. "To be a 'Victorian subject,'" J. Hillis Miller notes, "meant to be subjected to specific social, historical, and material conditions."[32] Subjectivity no longer meant only a Lockean notion of memorial consciousness but instead was constructed by cultural contexts. Miller imparts the threat that the word "subject" implies, meaning both being "thrown under" and "the way the self is always subject to something other than itself, something beneath it or beyond it that may be experienced more as an abyss than as a ground."[33] Being a subject means being forced under and into, pressed downward and inward, subjected and subjugated. In the Victorian period, for the first time, it also meant being publicized and fragmented among statistical and identificatory matter. The body was scrutinized, read as a text for the marks of meaning, and also rendered into text, documented, duplicated, and deployed. Subjectivity, as Miller explains, "is not a perdurable monad."[34] Victorians were forced to understand its transformation into identity, the material signifiers divorced from the signified self. Such a phenomenon resembles Derridean freeplay,

wherein a "structure lacking any center represents the unthinkable itself."[35] It is in the mid–nineteenth century that the self becomes unthinkable. Kelly Hurley's convincing argument that the *fin de siècle* Gothic represented "the ruination of the human subject" could easily include the sensation novel as a less macabre, but no less dynamic, antecedent.[36] The body horror of the Gothic abhuman finds its forebear in sensation's spectrum of unstable matter.

Sensation fiction tests the limits of subjectivity, often modeling personation plots after actual events, but also imagining new impostures to predict the future of identity fraud. Rebecca Stern writes that sensation novels are "rife with contradictions between signifiers and signifieds, operating on symbolic systems in which appearances rarely correspond with actualities, in which it is nearly impossible to construe 'truth' or 'nature' from exterior signs."[37] Sensation impostors understand corporeal identity as a collection of signifiers that can be disguised, erased, and counterfeited. Henry Mansel warned of such an issue in his 1863 attack on the genre: "how exciting to think that under these pleasing outsides may be concealed some demon in human shape, a Count Fosco or a Lady Audley!"[38] Mansel's choice of characters, though not surprising, given their almost monarchial authority over the genre, is nonetheless significant. Both Wilkie Collins's Fosco and Mary Elizabeth Braddon's Lucy Audley are preternaturally malleable impostors, if not examples of Darwinian natural selection in real time.[39] Nicholas Daly notes that "it is . . . possible to see that these novels often dwell on the failure of the stable, centered subject."[40] Impostors suggest a further step: it is not just that the "centered subject" fails but that there is no center, no signified. The removal of the self from subjectivity meant "the disappearance of the Author," the chaos of autotelic life, where personal identity became impersonal.[41] Sensation novels signal when things fall apart.

Criticism on identity fraud in sensation fiction falls generally into two camps. The first recognizes imposture as the result of shifting class dynamics during the age of reform. As Andrew Radford observes, sensation fiction "can be perceived in . . . terms of class conflict."[42] The second camp understands imposture through the increasing authority that text commanded throughout the Victorian period. Sean Grass, for example, reads identity as a "textual and commodified thing," opposed to subjectivity, which had to be "cultivated" in response.[43] But the body—the subject of rich interpretations in other areas of sensation criticism—has not been fully articulated in such pursuits.[44] Pamela K. Gilbert identifies sensation fiction as "[t]he most physiological of genres, . . . with its careful attention to the body of both character and reader."[45] When "the surface of the body becomes the

site of self," Gilbert argues, "realism becomes a dominant aesthetic mode of narrating that self."[46] I argue, conversely, that the fundamental fluidity of the body—its transformations and transformability—evidences the immateriality of the self, opposing any sense of a stable physiological identity. Sensation fiction, more so than any other genre, understood and emphasized the paradoxical position of the body, the slippage between signifiers of identity and the signified self. The explosion of identity fraud in the Victorian period signals a last-ditch effort to resist the materialization of subjectivity before late-nineteenth-century biometrics rendered such efforts largely impossible. In 1866, the *Saturday Review* accused sensation novelists of producing a "wave of materialism," but sensation writers actually swam against such a wave, resisting materialism through the formal and thematic elements of personation plots.[47]

Sensation fiction is preoccupied with identity fraud, to the point that some form of imposture seemingly figures into every text in the genre.[48] Yet scholarship on the device is relatively scarce.[49] In fact, Jonathan Loesberg's 1986 article "The Ideology of Narrative Form in Sensation Fiction" remains the most influential assessment of the genre's "question of identity."[50] According to Loesberg, debates over parliamentary reform in the 1850s and 1860s, which culminated in the Second Reform Bill (1867), shaped not only sensation fiction's conceptions of identity but also the genre's form. Reform threatened "to realign the balance of power in unpredictable and possibly threatening ways."[51] Sensation novels, Loesberg continues, "evoke their most typical moments of sensation response from images of a loss of class identity. And this common image links up with a fear of a general loss of social identity as a result of the merging of the classes."[52] But class anxiety, while a prominent theme in many sensation novels, does not adequately encompass the genre's diverse representations of identity fraud.[53] In Ellen Wood's *Verner's Pride* (1862–63), for example, John Massingbird personates his brother Frederick largely on a lark. In fact, class does not even fully account for the several impostures in Wilkie Collins's *The Woman in White* (1859–60), the focus of Loesberg's study.[54]

Although critics have subtly expanded on Loesberg's claims, the linkage between imposture and class identity has gone mostly unchallenged.[55] Jenny Bourne Taylor, for example, notes that Collins "breaks down stable boundaries," and explores "the shaping of social identity."[56] Taylor supplements Kathleen Tillotson's 1969 claim that "[t]he purest type of sensation novel is the novel-with-a-secret" to define the genre's "central narrative features—*secrecy* and *disguise*."[57] Identity, Taylor continues, "emerges as a

set of elements that are actively constructed within a dominant framework of social interests, perceptions, and values."[58] Nicholas Daly has similarly studied the genre's "disruption of culture consumption stratified by class," which "encoded fears" over political reform that "the sphere of culture was not functioning to secure class distinctions."[59] Daly also focuses on *The Woman in White*, arguing that the novel's "most brilliantly realized moments dramatize the annihilation of all subjectivity in the revolutionary crowd."[60] Reform, in other words, meant some measure of societal leveling, an erasure of socioeconomic boundaries that threatened class hierarchy.

Critics have made similar connections between identity and textuality in sensation fiction. Ronald R. Thomas studies "devices of truth . . . aimed at making the body write or speak for itself."[61] Although he focuses on detective fiction, Thomas does not neglect the sensation novel, noting that the genre's search for truth is "achieved in a bitter struggle that pits one textual representation of the body against another."[62] In fact, sensation fiction often denies subjects an "autonomous moral self" in favor of understanding them through a "plot of identification that attends most closely to documenting the material facts of physical embodiment."[63] In *The Woman in White*, for example, both Laura Fairlie and Anne Catherick lose their subjectivity in favor of an identity that fixates on their bodies and documentation (registers, clothing, headstones). "While a person's character may be a deceptive act of impersonation shifting over time," Thomas observes, "her identity can be ascertained with finality because it is grounded in the verifiable and material truth of the body."[64] I argue, conversely, that bodies in sensation novels prove deceptive, continually transformed or nullified by other forces. Such a discrepancy might emphasize one disjunction between detective fiction and sensation novels: the former obsessively follows clues to concluding truths, while the latter often rejects resolution. Robert Audley's monomaniacal detective work in *Lady Audley's Secret* (1862), for example, ultimately translates Lucy Audley into Madam Taylor, "as a safe and simple substitute," further suggesting the limitations of corporeal identity.[65]

The Victorian conflation of identity and textuality has encouraged rich scholarship.[66] According to Sean Grass, the burgeoning genre of autobiography "ma[de] 'life' into a textual commodity," which "reshaped not only the legal, economic, and discursive practices associated with identity but also the narrative representation and ontological status of subjectivity."[67] Identity, Grass argues, became an "object of capitalist exchange."[68] Similar to my own distinction between "identity" and "the self," Grass reads identity as a "thing constituted in and through texts," in contrast to

the "essential insubstantial interiority" of subjectivity.[69] Sensation fiction, which dwells on "proliferating texts," reflects "the anxieties engendered by autobiography's rise."[70] The displacement of identity from the individual, Grass argues, meant that identity was "subject to 'outright theft,'" especially in "the bold new age of its textual and mechanical reproduction."[71] Sensation novels, in particular, "began to treat subjectivity routinely as a thing alienated from its subject."[72] For example, Lucy Audley exists as a "profusion of texts," and John Harmon, the eponymous protagonist of *Our Mutual Friend* (1864–65), is "made up . . . of copies without an original."[73] Similar to Loesberg's claims about class, however, Grass's reading of textual identity cannot fully capture the greater picture of the body's role in displacing immaterial subjectivity. The authority that texts increasingly imposed on subjectivity is a symptom of corporeality's incapacity to signify identity. When bodies pose as legible texts—when their peculiar markings or measurable constructions come to signify unique individuals—they become canvases for forgery and counterfeiting.[74] Textual identity materializes from the failure of corporeal identity.[75]

Sensation fiction emerged during a tenuous period for identification practices, when the body continued to signify identity, despite complications.[76] In 1877, James Appleton Morgan championed the work of legal physicians, who are "not only indispensable, but absolutely omnipotent."[77] Given "the fallibility of human testimony in cases of personal identity," the physician is tasked with examining a "thousand . . . details which will more readily occur to a doctor than a lawyer."[78] For the physician "may be also a valuable detective."[79] According to Francis Wharton, writing in 1880, identity forms through "[p]ermanence of individuality," a condition defined solely by the body's "certain features . . . distinguishable from all others."[80] In spite of the promise that early forensics held, however, some criminologists remained skeptical, especially in cases of mistaken identity or intentional personation. In 1871, Robert Travers remarked: "[I]t is rarely, if ever, found that the matter [of mistaken identity] cannot be decided by other evidences than would be deducible from a laborious examination of physical signs, more or less obvious."[81] Travers's concluding remarks question the authority of corporeal evidence by asserting that there is "no physical sign from which alone the identity of a person may be proved."[82] Only an "approximation," based on "the number and value of the physical signs co-existing," can be ascertained.[83] Sensation novels often center on such corporeal ambiguities, promoting what Edward Higgs has called "the indeterminacy of the body as a means of identification."[84]

The explosion of personation cases in the 1850s signal an effort by criminals (or those otherwise desperate for change) to negotiate materialist structures of identity. While subjectivity was increasingly defined by and confined to the body, some subjects resisted, demonstrating that the signifiers thought to constitute identity never fully form into a signified subject. Just like names, physical peculiarities were arbitrary symbols that could be disguised or counterfeited. Sensation writers recognized not only that the body could be transformed through clothes, cosmetics, and even surgical procedures but also that the mind did not always present a continuum of stable consciousness; from madness and epilepsy to mesmerism and somnambulism, the mind was volatile and capable of being manipulated by outside forces. Is Helen Talboys, for example, the same person as Lucy Audley?[85] But challenges to corporeal definitions of identity did not end with examples of the flexible body and the fluctuating mind. Documentary evidence (registers, certificates, and wills) could alter a subject's past, present, and future, "fashioning individuals according to the terms of artificial codes, and turning life and death into figures of speech."[86] Official paperwork often meant as much to personal identity as persons themselves, a fact that sensation writers frequently exploited. As Sara Malton observes, sensation novels "dwell insistently on the unreliability of texts that apparently confirm identity."[87] Even technology could be manipulated. Simultaneously sensitive to current issues and prescient of future exigencies, sensation novels feature the first instances of photographic fraud.[88]

Imposture was always an essential ingredient of sensation fiction, and contemporary critics observed the genre's ubiquitous representations of the crime.[89] An 1864 review referred to "impersonation—an idea upon which there has been a somewhat inordinate run of late on the part of our novelists," while a later article noted that "[p]ersonation seems to be taking the place of bigamy."[90] In April 1866, *The Times* observed that a "sensation romance might be written with only two actual people [in] it, one of whom (the villain or villainess) shall, by skillful disguise, personate everybody else who is ever mentioned in the book."[91] This intentional hyperbole is not far off the mark. George Messenger, the protagonist of *The Old Roman Well* (1861), appears under a number of names and disguises, until he is hanged and resurrected as a respected and repentant doctor. A June 1864 article in *The Spectator*, aptly titled "Personation," makes the most of the device, noting that "[n]ovelists, weary of love and bigamy, are making a run just now upon personation."[92] The essay is most remarkable for how it separates the modern crime of personation from the fraud of old:

> There is no crime which it is so difficult to manage artistically, so hard to deprive of its excessive *primá facie* improbability. It must be remembered that the offence is not that of assuming a rank to which the offender does not belong,—that has been done a thousand times, and will be done to the end of time, it is that of assuming the personality, the individual shape, character, and relations of another human being.[93]

At stake here is the ability for impostors to live entirely as someone else, to steal every facet of another person's identity, rather than briefly prospering off fraudulent legal claims. The article also provides a distinction between the two types of identity fraud that captured the Victorian consciousness—assumed names and personation. Braddon's Lady Audley exemplifies the first type, while Collins's Mercy Merrick, the criminal protagonist of *The New Magdalen* (1872–73), typifies the second. In contrast to *The Spectator* writer, however, I assert that both types of imposture fall under the wider category of identity fraud, and represent specifically Victorian concerns. Lady Audley and Mercy Merrick resist rigid physiological definitions of identity, each employing an arsenal of signifiers to assume a new life.

Until the nineteenth century, theories of personal identity hinged on concepts of either the metaphysical soul or mental consciousness. Under the influence of empirical science and industrial capitalism, however, medico-legal definitions of identity shifted attention to the body. Victorian impostors resisted strict corporeal definitions of personal identity, exploiting the mutability of body, mind, and matter. Sensation novelists reimagined these crimes, typically, and often hypocritically, punishing characters for identity fraud, depending on class, gender, and intent.[94] The general decline in media attention to imposture is the result of two factors: first, late-Victorian scientists became increasingly wary of corporeal definitions of identity attendant to the rise of psychology in the years before psychoanalysis emerged; second, the institution of increasingly intricate biometric technologies, including photography, anthropometry, and fingerprinting, made personation plots more difficult to imagine.[95] That sensation fiction not only developed during the explosion of diverse types of identity fraud but also declined simultaneous to new identificatory technologies demonstrates the genre's constitutional relationship with imposture.

Personation Plots unfolds in three parts—body, mind, and matter—that feature topic-specific chapters examining the ways that impostors in sensation fiction challenge rigid corporeal definitions of identity. The chronological

range of the study is limited to the mid-Victorian period, roughly between the rise of criminology that focused on the body and the institution of precise biometric technologies. The earliest novel I examine is Collins's *The Woman in White*, though I am aware of, and responsive to, the work of critics who have traced sensation's beginnings to the 1850s, what Anne-Marie Beller has called "the genre's 'infancy.' "[96] On the other end of the spectrum, the sensation novel burned bright well into the 1890s, as Braddon's *Thou Art the Man* (1894) demonstrates. I offer readings of neglected sensation novelists, such as John Cordy Jeaffreson and Thomas Sutton, and occasionally refer to American authors who wrote sensation fiction, including Louisa May Alcott.[97] I have also featured two Dickens novels that were published at the height of the sensation craze, with the understanding that the inimitable could sometimes imitate.[98] Although I have included readings of the foundational novels of the genre, *The Woman in White* and *Lady Audley's Secret*, there are many popular novels featuring prominent personation plots that I have relegated to passing references or endnotes. My reasoning here is not limited to a desire to promote lesser-known novels; rather, the novels I have chosen are often exemplary of the chapter's individual theme.

Part I begins with the body, exploring how impostors transformed identity from both the corporeal exterior and interior. Chapter 1 studies imposture through the surface signifiers of clothes and cosmetics and offers readings of John Cordy Jeaffreson's *A Woman in Spite of Herself* (1872) and Wilkie Collins's *No Name* (1862–63). Chapter 2 probes interiors, scrutinizing surgical procedures and theories of blood transfusion in Sheridan Le Fanu's *Checkmate* (1871) and William Delisle Hay's *Blood: A Tragic Tale* (1888). Part II moves to the mind's role in representations of the unstable self. Chapter 3 charts the ways in which madness and epilepsy call to question notions of personal identity in Mary Elizabeth Braddon's *Lady Audley's Secret* (1862) and *Thou Art the Man* (1894). Chapter 4 reads the Victorian fascinations with mesmerism and opium through Charles Warren Adams's *The Notting Hill Mystery* (1862–63) and Charles Dickens's *The Mystery of Edwin Drood* (1870). Part III deals with material signifiers that exist beyond the subjective body and mind. Chapter 5 studies the impact of registration documents and wills in Collins's *The Woman in White* (1859–60) and Ellen Wood's *Verner's Pride* (1862–63). Chapter 6 investigates the mutable matter of refuse and photography in Dickens's *Our Mutual Friend* (1864–65) and Thomas Sutton's *Unconventional* (1866). The afterword describes the way that the Gothic, reappropriating the theme of identity theft from the sensation novel, converted imposture into monstrosity. The interludes that divide the

parts tell the stories of two remarkable Victorian impostors who transformed their personal identities through a host of signifiers. These short criminal biographies are meant not only to typify the upsurge of identity fraud in the Victorian period but also to show how imposture worked outside of the sensation novel in ways that make truth stranger than fiction.