Stand-in Labor and the Rising Economy of Self

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Ghostwriters represent a form of labor aimed at producing someone else's self, or what we label "stand-in labor." This growing workforce sits at the intersection of critical developments in today's neoliberal economy: the rise in self-branding, the growth in outsourcing of the self, and mounting income inequality. This article explores the experience of stand-in workers and its implication on the economy of self. Relying on 72 interviews with ghostwriters and publishing industry insiders, we show that ghostwriters face *recognition estrangement* because they are often asked to stay out of public view for the crafted selves to prove "authentic." As creative workers with a high degree of investment in their work, ghostwriters are quite sensitive to this form of estrangement. They manage this tension in a unique way: they claim a professional need to disappear in order to properly put forth a subject's "true" voice, yet emphasize their active contribution to the crafting of a subject's public self that differs from the subject's "true" self. In doing so, ghostwriters alter the subjects they impersonate by creating a distance between the subjects' crafted and "actual" selves. Our study therefore uncovers a paradoxical dynamic—namely, taking professional pride in disappearing, yet reappearing in the act of altering others' selves—that we posit might prove inherent to the performance of stand-in labor. More broadly, we suggest that many stand-in workers engaged in this growing economy of self might alter the people they impersonate, thus leading to a situation where calls for authenticity breed adulteration.

In a hyper-mediated society, dominated by a culture of consumption and celebrity, people's constant attempts to purposely produce and project "authentic"

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selves have gained new urgency. Whether in college application processes (e.g., the essay requirement), on social media platforms (e.g., Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, Snapchat, etc.), or in professional settings (e.g., LinkedIn profiles, resumes, etc.), the crafting and presentation of social selves is integral to today's economy (Callero 2003; Hall and Lamont 2013; Harvey 2005). Scholars have described this phenomenon as "personal" or "self" branding (Hearn 2008; Vallas and Christin 2018; Vallas and Cummins 2015; Wee and Brooks 2010), and have linked it to the neoliberal imperative for individuals to both produce and sell social selves (Burchell 1993; Du Gay 1996; Foucault 2008; Lane 2011; Vallas and Hill 2018). Moreover, the more "authentic" these crafted selves appear, the more value they seem to command in contemporary life (e.g., Erickson 1995; Fine 2003; Hahl et al. 2018; Peterson 1997, 2005).

Importantly, this increasing focus on crafting authentic selfhood coincides with the parallel development of an "outsourcing of self"—or the hiring of others to perform what are usually thought to be "personal" and "intimate" acts (Hochschild 2012, 12). With rising U.S. income inequality, luxury spending by high-income individuals, particularly geared toward serving their personal needs, is increasing (Cynamon and Fazzari 2015; Fisher et al. 2013; Henry 2014) and can readily fund such outsourcing. Consequently, there is a growing number of workers whose job it is to help others produce their social selves. We define the labor performed by these workers—ranging from school-admissions and social-media consultants to professional résumé writers and love coaches—as "stand-in labor," or work that is aimed at producing someone else's self. This form of labor proves quite unique. Due to expectations for the presentation of a (solo-authored) "authentic self" (Demetry 2018; Fleming and Sturdy 2011; Mirchandani 2012; Sheinheit and Bogard 2016; Williams 2006), stand-in workers are often required to remain invisible. Because the implications for workers of this growing form of labor are not yet fully understood, we ask in our study: *what is the experience of workers who produce someone else's self?*

To answer this question, we analyze one type of stand-in labor: the ghostwriting of personal memoirs. In this context, individuals pay others to literally help them construct their selves. Contemporary interest in the self is perhaps nowhere more evident than in the publishing world's "name economy" (Childress 2017, 45) and, more specifically, in the explosion of published memoirs. In the United States, sales of books in the category of personal memoir increased by more than 600 percent between 2004 and 2016 (from nearly 1.2 million books sold in 2004 to more than 8 million in 2016).[1] Memoirs are records of events drawn from the personal knowledge and experience of the writer, and yet many memoirs are not written by the person whose personal experiences are being relayed. In fact, nearly 50 percent of memoirs that have appeared on the *New York Times* list of non-fiction best sellers in the past five years were written, at least in part, by someone else (i.e., a ghostwriter was listed).[2] Thus, memoir publication has created a vibrant market for stand-in workers who help those whom publishers refer to as "subjects" or "talents" to craft narratives that encapsulate their selfhood.

Relying on an analysis of interviews with 72 ghostwriters and publishing-industry insiders, we document the unique experiences of stand-in workers. We note in particular that these workers report a heightened sense of estrangement—which we refer to as *recognition estrangement*—due to lack of recognition for their work. We find that stand-in workers manage this form of estrangement in two main ways. First, we show that they make sense of their invisibility by claiming a professional need to disappear in order to properly present a subject's "true" voice. Second, we show that they regain agency through their contribution to production of a subject's self that differs from the subject's "actual" self. In this way, we argue, stand-in labor rests on a paradoxical dynamic: workers invoke their invisibility as a point of pride, and even as a trademark of their profession, yet also alter the subjects they are hired to impersonate, thus regaining agency (and, sometimes, recognition) while performing the work. (By *altering subjects*, we mean the crafting of subjects' selves that differ from their "actual" selves.) Our study therefore also highlights how employers' selves become adulterated in the context of stand-in labor, and how such a process might prove central in the rising economy of self. More broadly, we posit that many workers engaged in this economy of self might alter the subjects they are meant to impersonate when asked to stand in for others, thus leading to an ironic situation where calls for increased authenticity breed heightened adulteration of selves.

Theoretical Background

The New Market for Authentic Selves

Theoretical and practical concerns with the concept of the self have been in the making for decades now (Cooley 1902; Goffman 1959; Mead 1934; Yeung and Martin 2003), but contemporary societal shifts and dynamics have amplified them. As Peter Callero (2003) notes, "this [recent] eruption of attention [on self-hood and identity] was spurred by burgeoning developments in post-structuralism, cultural studies, feminism and queer theory" and by forces outside the academy, most notably "an increasing individualization of social life" in which "personal meaning and social location become a matter of effort and conscious 'choice'" (115). Deborah Cameron (2000) points out that such a preoccupation with self is "characteristic generally of late modern cultures, where the individual's biography and identity are not determined by tradition or social role but must be reflexively constructed" (153). This explains in part why recent studies have documented a rise in "personal" or "self" branding (Bröckling 2015; Hearn 2008; Pagis and Ailon 2017; Vallas and Christin 2018; Wee and Brooks 2010). Indeed, scholars have pointed to an emergent discourse of personal branding, which invites individuals to conceive of themselves as something akin to a capitalist firm or a brand (Lane 2011; Vallas and Cummins 2015; Vallas and Hill 2018).

Such an economic imperative to produce and sell the "self" has been posited to be inherent in the neoliberal ideology. To succeed in an increasingly competitive world, workers must view themselves as a "company of one" (Lane 2011,

13) and as an "entrepreneur of the self" (Du Gay 1996, 182). They are now expected to embody the economic imperative by adopting techniques of the self that are aligned with the broader economic structure (Burchell 1993; Foucault 1980). As Steven Vallas and Angèle Christin (2018, 9–10) remark, "Rather than the mere 'partner of exchange' central to classical liberal economics, neoliberalism expects the worker to become an 'entrepreneur of himself, being for himself his own capital, being for himself his own producer, being for himself the source of his earnings' (Foucault 2008, 226)." Put otherwise, workers' capacity to act and exert agency now becomes an obligation geared toward a "rational" end: the selling of their labor. Here, "the rationality of government must be pegged to a form of rational self-conduct of the governed themselves" (Burchell 1993, 24) —a conduct that includes in particular the proper crafting and presentation of the self.

Moreover, the growth of online social media has heightened the stakes associated with presenting one's social self in both professional and personal arenas. As Ofer Sharone (2017) notes, on the professional front, "by shaping and constraining workers' presentation of self, SNS [social networking sites] architectures redesign the ways in which workers are categorized, compared, filtered, and excluded" (5). Thus, presenting oneself online inappropriately can easily decrease one's job prospects (Turco 2016, 90–96). In the personal arena, the online sphere is now saturated with exposure of supposedly private selves (Illouz 2007; Zhao et al. 2008). In this way, contemporary societal dynamics call for even greater attention to selfhood than in the past.

Consequently, there has been a proliferation of service jobs dedicated to helping others in their pursuit of self-branding—from academic thesis writers to personal dressers. Scholars have referred to this exchange as "outsourcing of self" (Hochschild 2012). For example, individuals can now hire people to inscribe greeting cards to plausibly appear to come from them (Lair 2017), ask personal concierges to choose for them gifts for their loved ones (Sherman 2010), and pay "love coaches" to craft online profiles (and even reply to suitors) to help them find a match (Hochschild 2012, 22–23; Bromwich 2019). Similarly, it is now easy to seek out speechwriters, school-admission consultants, image consultants, and life coaches for assistance in developing an appropriate public self (George 2013; Liu 2011; Richardson 2017; Wellington and Bryson 2001). Though these jobs range from the mundane (greeting-card writing) to the more consequential (academic-thesis writing), they all entail crafting someone else's social self.

Notably, too, the work done by these workers typically remains hidden. The reason is that not all social selves are valued in contemporary society; instead, it is the presentation of "authentic" selves that has become the goal (Erickson 1995, 122). Indeed, as scholars have noted, the search for authenticity has become a distinctive marker of contemporary life (Demetry 2018; Fine 2003; Grazian 2003; Hahl et al. 2017; Hahl, Kim, and Zuckerman 2018; Peterson 1997, 2005; Wherry 2006). As the management consultants James Gilmore and Joseph Pine (2007) assert, managing authenticity—"whether concerning people, places, or things"—has become critical in today's economy "because people increasingly make purchasing decisions based on how real or fake they perceive

various offerings" to be (xii). This assumption explains why aspiring leaders are advised to be "authentic" and "be yourself" (George 2003, 11). In this context, authenticity is no longer the sole purview of self-taught artists and musicians (Fine 2003; Williams 2006); it has become a critical pursuit for all: leaders, internet celebrities, college applicants, job candidates, and workers (Fleming and Sturdy 2011; Mirchandani 2012).

Since the authenticity of the "self" being consumed (in a memoir and in other settings) would be undermined by the awareness of its co-construction with the assistance of others, it is often necessary to conceal others' contributions in this pursuit. Such an imperative to conceal the labor done by stand-in workers is apt to create a tension that these workers must navigate—namely, the inability of workers to be recognized for their work. How workers navigate various forms of estrangement in their work has been the focus of scholarship on the labor process that the next section will discuss.

The Labor Process of Constructing Someone Else's Self

A long line of sociological research has centered on workers' estrangement and their reactions to such estrangement. From Marx' early writing on the commodification of labor (Marx 2007 [1844]) to more contemporary accounts and discussions (e.g., Braverman 1974; Burawoy 1979; Korczynski 2015; Seeman 1959), "nearly all sociological analyses of work-based subjectivity and identity have been cast within the shadow of this modern problematic" of estrangement (Du Gay 1996, 10). Scholars working in Marxist traditions in particular have argued that whenever "one cedes to one's employer control over what one produces and how it is produced," work becomes a commodity and such a form of exchange "*estranges* the worker" (Sallaz 2013, 31). But even scholars working in other traditions (e.g., the Human Relations school) have assumed some sort of workplace estrangement (Du Gay 1996, 10). Consequently, many studies have focused on how workers either consent to or resist various forms of workplace estrangement (e.g., Anteby 2008; Burawoy 1979; Mars 1974; Ong 2010; Roy 1959; Sallaz 2009; Sherman 2007).

Yet, over and above the classic notions of commodification of labor and traditional product estrangement, we suspect that stand-in workers may experience a heightened form of estrangement, leading to possibly novel workplace behavior. Because of the premium on authenticity in the marketplace, stand-in workers are typically asked to remain hidden from public view (sometimes under threat of legal action), and required to refrain from openly asserting their contributions to the product of their work. Unlike Ford factory workers, for instance, who can publicly brag about the work they put into building a specific car model, many stand-in workers (like ghostwriters) are prohibited from speaking about the work they contributed to a given project—per the stipulation of a nondisclosure agreement. We refer to this new type of estrangement as *recognition estrangement*.

For creative workers, this type of estrangement may entail additional costs. Not being able to publicly disclose their contributions to the work may prove

particularly frustrating for creative workers (whom we would expect to be highly involved in their work). As members of the creative class, paid to use their "mind" (rather than their physical labor) (Florida 2002, 9), stand-in workers might prove particularly sensitive to *not* being able to showcase their contributions to others. Moreover, as contract workers, their future labor-market prospects could be restricted by lack of public recognition. Indeed, the product of their labor might need to seen by others to generate more work and to secure a steady stream of income.

Because much of the research on the labor process has focused on blue-collar or lower-level service workers, it remains unclear how workers respond to recognition estrangement. The labor-process literature does suggest, however, that we might encounter unique ways by which workers exert agency in differently challenging labor contexts (e.g., Burawoy 1979; Roscigno and Hodson 2004). Since stand-in workers may face very different circumstances than blue-collar or lower-level service workers, they might exhibit alternate ways of thinking and behaving in the face of such estrangement. Our study of ghostwriters builds on insights from both the literatures on the self and on the labor process to better understand the nature of stand-in labor, and its implication for people's experience of work and for the rising economy of the self.

Setting, Data, and Methods

Setting

Ghostwriting is not a new form of work. As the ghostwriter Jennie Erdal (2009) suggests in her memoir, "it might almost qualify as the oldest profession if prostitution had not laid prior claim" (xii). What seems new, however, is the growth in demand for ghostwriting services. From brief articles, blog posts, and other "content marketing" work for businesses and public relations agencies (James-Enger 2014, 33–49) to longer pieces such as novels (Murphey 2017), celebrity cookbooks (Moskin 2012), memoirs (Childress 2017; Dody 1980; Erdal 2009; McDonald 2003, 42–43), textbooks (Coser et al. 1982), undergraduate theses and even academic articles (Moffatt and Elliott 2007; Ross et al. 2008), demand for collaborators continues to grow across various media and outlets. Perhaps because of this increase in demand, several experienced ghostwriters have recently published "how-to" books for aspiring ghostwriters (e.g., Crofts 2004; James-Enger 2014; Joy 2014; Miller and Santana 2017; Murphey 2017; Shaw 2003, 2012; Whitworth 2015).

Ghostwriters can best be described as members of the "creative class" (Florida 2002) since they sell their intellectual ability and skills to meet someone else's needs. Generally speaking, ghostwriters sell for compensation a product to individuals for whom "written communication isn't their forte" or who "don't have time" to write (Shaw 2003, 16). Moreover, like many others working today, ghostwriters work as independent contractors (Kalleberg 2000, 2011). As contractors, ghostwriters generally sign a collaboration agreement with their subjects (Crofts 2004), even though publishers can make the introduction. This

agreement names the parties and outlines matters of confidentiality, responsibilities and due dates, compensation, copyright, and recognition (i.e., how the work will be credited).

In terms of compensation, ghostwriters typically work either for a "flat fee" or for royalties derived from the finished product (Shaw 2003). Under the former arrangement (often referred to as "work-for-hire"), ghostwriters are paid a negotiated fee, and do not hold a copyright on the finished product. Here, it is common for a ghostwriter to be paid half of the fee upon signing the collaborative agreement and half upon delivery and acceptance of the final product. Under the latter arrangement (often referred to as working "on spec"—on a speculative basis), ghostwriters receive a negotiated share of the product's profits, which can be as much as 50 percent of the author's earnings. In this last context, because the ghostwriter is not paid until the product makes money, working strictly for royalties can be quite an economic gamble for a ghostwriter.

Regardless of compensation system, ghostwriters' work remains economically precarious since it is generally uncertain, unpredictable, and risky (Kalleberg 2011; Vallas and Prener 2012). That is, because they rarely work more than once with a subject (most projects are one-time collaborations), ghostwriters are often unsure when and from where the next gig will come their way. As a result, they often feel internal pressure to receive public recognition for their work, or to build strong relationships in the industry (i.e., with editors and publishers), to help mitigate their economic uncertainty.

Interview Sample

To build our initial sample of ghostwriters, we drew on the *New York Times* Best Seller list for non-fiction. For each week within a window of five years (February 13, 2011 to February 14, 2016), we selected the top 15 books in the combined print and e-books list.[3] (Table 1 provides a breakdown of the sampling.) Over that period, a total of 754 unique non-fiction books appeared on the list, 298 of which we identified as memoirs. We used these 298 memoirs in two ways to derive our sample of ghostwriters. First, 116 of the memoirs recognized the contributions of ghostwriters by naming them on the cover. From these 116 books, we derived an initial sample of 101 ghostwriters.[4] We contacted

Table 1. Interview Sampling

	Contacted	Interviewed	Response rate (%)
Cover	101	45	44.6
Acknowledgments	34	8	23.5
Publishers Marketplace	11	7	63.6
Recommended	11	2	18.2
Industry Insiders	17	10	58.8
Total	174	72	41.4

each one and interviewed 45, yielding a 44.6 percent response rate for this population of cover-credited ghostwriters. Of those who refused participation, the most common reason offered was a concern about confidentiality. Several mentioned contractual prohibitions on participation (e.g., non-disclosure agreements).

Because those ghostwriters had achieved some level of recognition, we also sought out less-recognized ghostwriters to ensure a sampling that spanned the varieties of ghostwriting experiences. From our initial interviews, we learned that ghostwriters are often recognized or thanked for their contribution in a book's acknowledgments section. As a result, we combed through the acknowledgments sections of the remaining 182 memoirs. To identify ghostwriters, we looked for words like "collaborator" and "collaboration," and phrases like "worked with me to tell this story," "helped me to realize the book," or "turned my rambling into writing."[5] We thus found that 39 of the remaining memoirs recognized the contribution of the ghostwriter in the acknowledgments section. From these books, we derived a second sample of 34 ghostwriters (five were already in our initial sample, of whom we interviewed 3). We contacted each one and interviewed 8, yielding a response rate of 23.5 percent for this population of acknowledged ghostwriters.

Because we drew our sample from the *New York Times* Best Seller list, we were inherently oversampling successful collaborations. For this reason, we also sought out writers who had not appeared on this list over the previous five years. To do so, we identified ghostwriters who had advertised their services in *Publishers Marketplace*. *Publishers Marketplace* is a leading U.S. online trade journal for publishing professionals, where writers can advertise their services. Of writers who advertised, 40 self-identified as ghostwriters. From this group, we included only the 25 who listed memoir in their work description (one such writer was already included in our cover-credited sample). We randomly sampled 11 of the 25 and interviewed 7, yielding a response rate of 63.6 percent for this sample of writers.

Finally, the ghostwriters we interviewed referred an additional 11 ghostwriters. We reached out to all of them and interviewed 2, yielding an 18.2 percent response rate from this last population. In total, we were therefore able to interview 62 ghostwriters whose ghostwriting experiences varied. Separately, we also reached out to industry insiders (i.e., agents, editors, and publishers) whom ghostwriters had mentioned in their interviews and encouraged us to contact. We included these insiders in part because of their centrality to the publishing world (Coser et al. 1982). This snowball sample of insiders yielded a list of 17 contacts. We emailed each and interviewed 10, yielding a 58.8 percent response rate. Overall, we interviewed a total of 72 people.

Interviews

To understand the experiences of stand-in workers, we conducted semistructured interviews with these ghostwriters and industry insiders. (Table 2 shows the breakdown of respondents.) The interviews were conducted by one of

Table 2. Details of Interviewees

Ghostwriters Interviewed	n = 62
Male	34 (54.8%)
Has an agent	
Yes	46 (74.2%)
No	11 (17.7%)
Unknown	5 (8.1%)
Number of book projects	
Less than 5	15 (24.2%)
Between 5 and 10	14 (22.6%)
More than 10	31 (50%)
Unknown	2 (3.2%)
*Spectrum of public recognition**	
Three forms of recognition	25 (40.3%)
Two forms of recognition	25 (40.3%)
One form of recognition	12 (19.3%)
Industry Insiders Interviewed	**n = 10**

* The spectrum includes cover credit, inside acknowledgments, and no public recognition.

the two co-authors or by a trained research assistant. Collectively, the interviewers represented a diverse set of individuals in terms of gender, age, and ethnicity. Since "dynamics of power and professional status, gender, race, and age may affect the direction and content of interviews" (Charmaz 2006, 27), this diversity attenuated the potential for bias introduced by interviewers' positions.

We conducted most interviews by phone, but a few took place face-to-face or via Skype. Each interview lasted about an hour, and was digitally recorded and transcribed with the interviewee's consent. (In the case of one interviewee who did not consent to be recorded, detailed notes were taken during and immediately after the interview.) We followed an interview protocol that included a career history and descriptions of book projects that ghostwriters had worked on, but also encouraged interviewees to tell us what they thought we should know to understand their work experiences.

Analysis

We began our analysis by reading the interview transcripts and drafting analytical notes for each interview as well as broader analytical memos. As we compared accounts across interviews (Glaser and Strauss 1967; Miles and Huberman 1994), individual ghostwriters' varying degree of public recognition and skill at finding a subject's voice emerged, for example, as recurring themes. We developed coding categories inductively to capture the dynamics of

disappearing and of rendering a voice, as well as other salient themes, and refined them in tandem with our data analysis. In the process, we also adjusted our interview questions to probe emerging themes. Once our codes were defined, and after we had coded a majority of the interviews, a second research assistant (who had not taken part in the interviews) re-coded all our interview data to ensure the robustness of our codes. Any disagreements among coders were resolved through discussion. To keep track of our data and coding scheme, we used NVivo software.

Findings

Recognition Estrangement in Ghostwriting

There are several ways that ghostwriters can be publicly recognized for their work on a given memoir. These types of acknowledgment form a spectrum of recognition ranging from most to least visible to the public. As one editor explained, "A co-writer is someone who is acknowledged…. A ghostwriter is someone who writes a book whose name is not on anything, who never gets acknowledged even though they were the writer" (Editor_3). But even for ghostwriters who are acknowledged, the form of acknowledgment can vary considerably.

First, at the most visible end of the spectrum, a ghostwriter's name can appear on the book's cover, in the same size and font as the subject's; such full "co-authorship" recognition is rare for ghostwriters. Second, a ghostwriter's name can appear on the book's cover after the subject's name, preceded by "and" or "with," which suggests that the subject is the primary author even if the ghostwriter helped along the way. In these configurations, relative font sizes tend to be contractually negotiated. As a ghostwriter proudly recalled, "My contract calls for my name to be no less than 60 percent that of the principal!" (Cover_42). Third, a ghostwriter's name can appear in the acknowledgments section of the book. (A few ghostwriters managed to negotiate having their name listed on the book's inside title page, above the acknowledgments, despite not appearing on the cover.)

At the least visible end of the spectrum, a ghostwriter's name can be entirely omitted from the published work. Such a worker becomes a "ghostwriter" in the true sense of the term, in that his or her name is fully shielded from public view and only the subject's name appears on the cover. As one editor put it, a ghostwriter is "literally someone who is *not* credited, known, or acknowledged, [but] wrote the book" (Editor_1). Such omission from public view can even extend beyond the published work, ensuring no public recognition at all. One ghostwriter reported, for instance, that some of her contracts specify that she "can't even mention the existence of the contract" (Recommended_1). Because recognition varies from memoir to memoir, the relevant unit of analysis is the project, not the person. Most of the ghostwriters we interviewed had spanned the spectrum of recognition in their portfolios of projects. For example, among the 62 ghostwriters we interviewed, 40 percent had navigated the full spectrum

of recognition (from cover credit to inside acknowledgment to no public recognition) (see Table 2).

Editors and publishers we interviewed justified the minimal level of ghostwriter recognition by invoking the publishing house's bottom line. "Most of the time it's just … a business decision," one editor said about his decision-making process (Editor_3). Indeed, some publishers justify concealing writers' names by telling them that fewer copies will be sold if their names appear on the cover. Their concern thus centered around who is viewed as constructing the "self"— and whether its perceived authenticity would be undermined by recognition of its co-construction with the help of a ghostwriter. As the same editor put it:

> If there's an author who has some kind of a reputation for being a writer, but they don't actually write the books themselves, like, that seems sort of like weird to people…. So it's usually when the person's reputation is such that having someone else acknowledged in writing the book will interfere with the sales.

Others justified such concealment in terms of ease of marketing. As one editor said, "I mean … since the author is going to be the spokesman for the book, it causes less confusion if the ghostwriter or the ghostwriter's name is either not on the cover or is stated in some subordinated way" (Editor_6). The publishing industry's inherent commercial logic (Childress 2017; Miller 2008) provides a readily available rationale for editors to make such calls.

Given these financial concerns, the only "good" (and rare) reason for a ghostwriter's name to appear on a cover is if it will result in added sales. As one editor explained, "We have often excluded the ghostwriter … but if a collaborator is named on the cover, it would be great if it was a David Ritz [a bestselling ghostwriter] or somebody who actually brings a sales track to it" (Editor_7). Since book sales depend heavily on the extent of media coverage (Childress 2012; Hirsch 1972), publishing houses ideally want on book covers only the names of ghostwriters who command a following. As one ghostwriter, whose name has appeared on covers, explained, "At this point in my career, [because] I've even got a little bit of prestige … it's sort of good to have my name on the book because I have a tiny bit of my own little audience" (Cover_6). That said, ghostwriters with large followings did not appear to be the norm in the industry.[6]

In summary, a ghostwriter can be recognized for work on a given memoir in various ways. The nature of this recognition is negotiated between editors, subjects, and ghostwriters, and is codified in a collaborative agreement. For their part, editors spoke about recognition mainly as a financial concern. They believe that in certain instances book sales will be negatively affected by public recognition of a ghostwriter due to concern about the authenticity of the crafted self. As a result, editors generally expressed a desire to conceal the fact that these memoirs were ghostwritten. In this way, many ghostwriters become acutely estranged from the product of their labor—due to their inability to be recognized for their work. The next section describes how stand-in workers, as independent contractors, experienced this form of estrangement.

Securing Work in the Absence of Recognition

Most ghostwriters we interviewed emphasized their desire to have their contributions made visible to the public. They often spoke about this desire for recognition in terms of their own earning potential. Many mentioned the need for recognition in terms of resume building and their ability to secure future work. As one ghostwriter said, "Oh, yeah, I want my name on the cover, and the title page, and the spine. That's what do I for a living. And I need that in order to, you know, have my shingle out. You know what I mean…. Nobody gives a shit who the co-author is…. I'm not going to get any public recognitions. But when somebody starts looking for somebody to write their book, that's where this counts" (Cover_13). Another ghostwriter also spoke about the potential for recognition to attract additional work:

> I like to have my name on the cover, not necessarily just to try to be famous,…but because I still like that it can bring me more work. It can bring me great stories…. So, I do have it in my contract, I do make sure that it happens, something that's important to me (Cover_20).

This desire for recognition was particularly acute for ghostwriters who were beginning their careers. Like most other types of contract workers (Barley and Kunda 2004), the ghostwriters we spoke with were constantly looking for their next gig, and many remarked that recognition could mitigate the economic uncertainty associated with independent contract work. As one rookie ghostwriter noted about his initial project, "For me, I knew this was my career. This would be my first book that would be published. And, so, in our negotiations, I said it was a deal breaker if my name wasn't on there. And yeah, I wanted the credit and the recognition" (Cover_7). Many rookie ghostwriters who did not manage to get their names on covers expressed resentment over their absence from public view. A novice used an analogy with war collaborators to describe such a sentiment after working on a book he had only been "acknowledged for":

> Basically the [publishing] contracts are called collaborators' contracts…. Back in World War II there were collaborators. And generally, they were taken outside the village and shot after the war. So, basically the collaborator kind of disappears…. (Acknowledgment_6).

More experienced ghostwriters rarely voiced as much discomfort about disappearing from public view. (We defined as *experienced* those ghostwriters who have worked on more than 10 book projects.) A main reason for their relative indifference about disappearing is that experienced writers no longer need publicity to secure gigs. Because they have already established their credentials, they can get their next jobs from intermediaries (Kunda, et al. 2002)—publishers, editors, and agents—who already know them. An experienced ghostwriter clarified these market dynamics: "It doesn't do anything business-wise for me to have my name on the cover. I don't get my work that way…. My name will be known in the industry anyway, hopefully, [by] word of mouth" (Acknowledgment_5).

Another commented that he "did not have the need to be on the cover" since people knew him (Cover_11). Publishers and editors confirmed that they looked for "people who collaborated on books that were successful and books that got good reviews," whether or not the ghostwriters' names appeared on the cover (Editor_1).

Yet almost all ghostwriters, even the most experienced ones, expressed some lingering resentment when asked to be hidden from public view. That is, as creative workers, they took pride in their craft, and were often embittered by lack of recognition. As one experienced writer noted, "When I am passionate enough about a project to write it, I want my name to appear on the work accordingly, not hidden" (Cover_22). Another added, "Even though these projects are not fundamentally about my ego, I have enough ego that I want the credit" (Cover_23). These sentiments were shared by many of our interviewees; omission from public view had left lasting marks on them. One ghostwriter who received no recognition (not even in the book's acknowledgments section) stated: "We were blown away.... I mean, it's quite frankly rude to do, you know, [to] people who have worked really hard.... I mean, on that particular book I worked day and night.... There was just absolutely no acknowledgment at all.... It leaves you feeling very sour" (Cover_30).

In summary, novice ghostwriters expressed a desire for public recognition because it could facilitate future employment opportunities. This desire diminished with success, however, as editors learned who they were, experienced ghostwriters could secure work without public recognition. As a result, ghostwriters who stayed in the industry learned over time how to disappear or, as one put it, they learned "to have no identity" (Cover_11). Nevertheless, they expressed resentment at not being publicly acknowledged for their work. The next section will explore how they navigated this tension: by highlighting the virtue of disappearing in order to properly present the subject's "true" voice, and by emphasizing their directorial role in crafting an "alternate" self for public consumption that differed from the subject's "actual" self.

Managing Estrangement by Claiming a Professional Need to Disappear

The first way that ghostwriters managed recognition estrangement was to justify their disappearance by claiming a professional need to put forth the subject's "true" voice. In fact, almost all the ghostwriters we interviewed described their core aim as capturing a subject's voice. An experienced ghostwriter articulated what many saw as a trademark of their profession:

> I mean, the challenge is really to try to find the voice of the person, so it doesn't sound like me; it sounds like them. And it's true to what they're trying to express and what they are all about.... I find, when I do these books, you almost in a sense become that person. There's a total immersion that goes on where you really—you want to think like them. You want to talk like them. You want to feel like them.... You almost

become that person. You want to just sort of nail every detail of their lives so it can be authentic. But after a while, it just, you sort of become —you almost become that person. And that has happened, really, in every collaboration that I have done. (Cover_35)

Describing the process of learning a subject's voice, for example, ghostwriters spoke of the importance of spending time with the subject, to absorb their "rhythms" (Acknowledgment_4) and "their mannerism" of speech (Cover_24). As one ghostwriter put it, "I mean, if you're around someone for 100 hours, you're going to get their syntax. You're going to get the way they express themselves. And you're going to get their peculiar vocabulary" (Cover_45). Beyond spending time, ghostwriters spoke about the importance of tape recording the interviews and deployed various other efforts to properly capture a voice. "When you listen to the tape," one ghostwriter noted, "the voice gets in your head. You know, the rhythms of the speech and the expressions and the tone gets in your head. And, so, if you listen to a lot of the tape and you transcribe the tape, you really get the voice in your head" (Cover_3). Another ghostwriter explained his method: "I don't do any writing for the first month or two because I'm just getting the person's voice" (Cover_34). Editors confirmed the importance to a successful project of a ghostwriter's ability to capture the subject's voice. One editor described a project in which the "wrong tone" led to replacing a ghostwriter. Remarking on the success of the new ghostwriter, the editor commented, "I think what everybody liked about the end result was that it was very much in her [the subject's] voice" (Editor _7).

For ghostwriters, the process of learning the subject's voice was often put in parallel to their own disappearance. As a typical seasoned ghostwriter noted, "I am very used to the idea that the 'I' isn't me … and so you are writing in a character's voice" (Acknowledgment_8). In this way, ghostwriters often likened their work to that of actors. As one ghostwriter stated, "You see, the ghostwriter is basically an actor or an actress. I have to forget who I am, and I have to become that person" (Insider_3). Another echoed that sentiment: "The best way I can equate it is to being an actor. You know, you try to get in this, you know, wear that guy's skin, and then you are acting. You're pretending" (Cover_17). A third described becoming so familiar with her subject that she "could somehow get into the place where I could write creatively from inside that character, in the same way that an actor can do when you go into a character" (Acknowledgment_8). In short, the task of impersonating someone else seemed to justify disappearing, in part by forgetting oneself and in part by being invisible to the wider public.

Thus, the ability to disappear successfully became a source of great pride for many ghostwriters. The following comment captures the linked dynamics of finding the subject's voice and disappearing:

If you're creating a voice that is not your own, you are ghostwriting. And if you do it well, you should sort of disappear. And when the people like, hopefully, like all the good reviews of the book, "Oh it's kind of like … he [the subject] is talking to you across the kitchen table…." And

that's when I know I have done a good job, because I am a ghost. I am *not* present in the reader's mind (Cover_6).

This sense of accomplishment was especially profound when someone close to the subject of the book exclaimed, "Oh, gosh, how did you so perfectly capture [X's] voice? Every … you know, all of his little quirks and everything" (Acknowledgment_7). Praise from subjects' family members (such as spouses and children) meant even more. For instance, a ghostwriter recalled: "The highest compliment I think I'm ever paid, I'll never forget it: I did a book with [an athlete] once, and his daughter called me afterward and said: 'As I read it, I felt like my dad was talking to me.' And I thought, that's perfect! That's what you want" (Cover_27).

Overall, one way that ghostwriters managed recognition estrangement was to justify their disappearance by claiming a professional need. Ghostwriters spoke of disappearing as a virtue and a source of accomplishment. In this way, they were able to recast a tension inherent in their job as a critical aspect of their craft.

Managing Estrangement by Altering Subjects' Selves

A second way that ghostwriters managed recognition estrangement was to highlight their contribution to the crafting of a subject's social self that differs from "actual" self. Ghostwriters claimed that they provided added value to a project through their ability to construct an alternate self for a subject's audience to consume. In this way, ghostwriters pointed to their active role in the production of another person's self, despite being hidden from public view.

For the ghostwriters we interviewed, capturing a subject's "true" voice meant properly impersonating, but not simply mimicking, the subject. As one ghostwriter put it, the true craft is "the difference between inhabiting a character or mimicking them" (Acknowledgment_5). *Mimicking* meant simply transcribing the subject's stories; ghostwriters equated *inhabiting* with individual agency and creativity, thus allowing them to reassert a claim to a distinct identity while simultaneously being paid to disappear. This distinction between mimicking and inhabiting was a shared point of pride among most experienced ghostwriters. As one put it, "There is more to impersonating someone than there is to imitating them" (Cover_34). Another ghostwriter concurred: "You're not a stenographer. You're not taking dictation…. Like, you can't just be a transcription machine…. You really have to figure out who the person is, and what they want and what they feel" (Cover_14).

Inhabiting a subject's voice also meant that ghostwriters did not totally disappear, even when they were not credited for their efforts, since they remained present in the altered self they had produced for audience consumption. Ghostwriters explained that they needed to "take on [the subject's] identity," but that they also "make decisions" in "the narrative and in the dialogue and in the descriptions" (Cover_15). This active decision-making process became "the most exciting part of the project," one ghostwriter clarified. "You are always

putting yourself forward as a certain character, a subset of who you are in total…. And when you are doing that melding with another person… I think I have learned that there is never any totally neutral voice" (Acknowledgment_8). In some instances, the ghostwriter's distinctiveness persisted despite the active and sustained endeavor to ensure its disappearance. One ghostwriter described such an instance, when his spouse recognized his "presence" in the published text despite the efforts he had put forward:

> The book was about to hit the shelves and [X, the subject] had gotten a few advanced copies. [X] said that his mother-in-law wanted to speak to me … and she called me and said, "I have known [X] for 30 years and you've really captured his voice, I can just hear him in every sentence…" and I thanked her…. And so my wife reads it, and she says, "Oh my gosh, I can hear you in these one-liners that you sprinkled here and boy, it's [X's] story, but it's still funny to see you in there…." And it's interesting how you end up with this blending even [when] you don't try to…. You still can't completely keep yourself out (Cover_9)

Consistently, most experienced ghostwriters presented their work as producing a voice that *differed* slightly from the subject's "true" voice. That is, they saw themselves as "getting into somebody's head and making them come alive on paper," but in a way that differed from real life (Cover_14). Thus, finding a subject's voice often meant making it "better" (Cover_10). The shaping of an alternate self could sometimes veer into creating a "monster," however, as Donald Trump's ghostwriter, Tony Schwartz, stated (Mazza 2017).

In this way, although ghostwriters often likened their work to acting, the role they described was actually more akin to directing. As one ghostwriter explained, "I immediately realized that the voice doesn't come out of a transcript…. You can type up a transcript and that ain't the person…. To create a literary character is an artificial act. It's art … and so you have to kind of sculpt the quotes" (Cover_6). Other ghostwriters clarified this directorial role. As one stated, "I am sort of creating—not creating a character, it's the real person—but you have to make it a good story, in a way. Because you can't—I mean, imagine how boring it would be if all we did was basically read transcripts." She added, "You want to take that and make it a story" (Cover_16). Another ghostwriter described purposely *not* "using the exact words that somebody [the subject] chooses" (Acknowledgment_14) to better craft this alternate self.

Ghostwriters often depicted this directorial process as an active endeavor, which allowed them to retain some agency in a process that often concealed them from public view. One ghostwriter claimed a directorial role in crafting the subject's voice: "I used to tease [the subject]…. I said, 'You know, I write things that you would have said if *you* had thought of them.'" She added, "And, like, one time she [the subject] said, 'So you think I have a sense of humor, huh?' And I said, 'Well, you've got the one I gave you'" (Cover_3). In an uncanny way, after disappearing to capture a subject's voice, ghostwriters could therefore regain ownership of the product of their writing. In one ghostwriter's words, they become "the puppet master" in this landscape of disappearance:

> The collaborator—the subject of the book and my collaborator—becomes, in my mind, a character that I animate. I create a voice for the character that feels plausible, like the voice of that real person, and put it down on page. And so you could say there is a certain subsuming of my ego. I, whether foolishly or not, don't consider it a subsuming of my ego. I consider that I am like a puppet master, you see. (Cover_25)

In summary, despite acknowledging the virtue of disappearing, ghostwriters also asserted that their work was not merely that of a "stenographer" who mimics and strings together quotes from the subject. Instead, they claimed that they were molders and crafters of the self. That is, their value to the project was their ability to construct an alternate self (i.e., not the subject's "true" self) for the audience to consume. As such, ghostwriters retained some control over the result of the labor process despite their absence from public view.

CONCLUSION

This article explores the experience of workers who produce someone else's self, which we characterize as "stand-in labor." Such labor is not new, but it seems to be rapidly expanding in today's rising economy of self. Hired hands are increasingly being asked to perform a wide variety of personal and intimate acts for their employers. From the tasks of social media account handlers to those of coaches, many jobs that could be done by the payer are now increasingly done by others. Performing such work is very different than building cars or serving food; stand-in workers are asked to be someone else as they work, and to remain invisible so that this self appears authentic. Drawing on an analysis of ghostwriters' experiences of their work, our study contributes to a better understanding of stand-in labor in several ways.

First, our study highlights the growing importance of stand-in labor in the contemporary economy. While the rise of service work and alternative work arrangements (Kalleberg 2000, 2011; Katz and Krueger 2016) has generated many efforts to better classify new forms of work in today's economy (e.g., Cappelli and Keller 2013), past scholarship has largely missed the emergence of stand-in labor. This oversight might be due to treating the type of employment arrangement (direct hires vs. subcontractors) as the key organizing principle for classifying contemporary work—at the price, we would argue, of attention to the actual "tasks" being performed (Cohen 2013). By spotlighting a unique task (here, producing someone else's self) as a common denominator across work arrangements, our study pinpoints the uniqueness of this form of labor. In the same way that factory work and service work characterize specific periods of economic development, we suspect that "stand-in work" embodies our modern era.

Second, our analysis indicates that a heightened form of estrangement, which we refer to as recognition estrangement, might be endemic to stand-in labor. That is, because of prevailing expectations for the presentation of an "authentic" self, acknowledging the contributions of a stand-in worker to the crafting of a

subject's social self tends to undermine a claim of authenticity. As a result, the efforts deployed by stand-in workers are often deliberately obfuscated by subjects. Such obfuscation can ironically be understood as "authenticity work" (Peterson 2005), performed by both subject and stand-in worker. Yet such authenticity work also generates recognition estrangement on the part of workers, a situation most troubling perhaps for creative workers.

Third, our analysis indicates that stand-in workers manage this recognition estrangement both by claiming a professional need to disappear and by reappearing in the act of altering others' selves. In doing so, they transform what most outsiders would consider an unflattering situation (i.e., being invisible) into a point of pride, and even a trademark of their profession. Such a transformation can be conceptualized as emotional labor, since it entails bringing one's feelings and/or visible emotional displays into line with the demands of the job (Hochschild 1983; Wharton 2009). Furthermore, stand-in workers craft their employers' selves in ways that differ from the employers' "actual" selves. This form of adulteration reverses the workers' disappearance, if only fleetingly, since traces of their efforts become visible.

We posit that these paradoxical dynamics—namely, taking pride in disappearing, yet reappearing—may be inherent in stand-in labor more broadly, and may apply to many other work situations. For instance, college-preparation counselors and professional resume writers may justify their disappearance in terms of producing an "authentic" applicant for college or a job, while simultaneously highlighting their contribution to the social self that is being consumed. Similarly, political speechwriters might agree to allow their contributions to remain unacknowledged in the interests of crafting (and thus in part altering) an "authentically" appealing political candidate.

Our research design was not meant to test the relation between stand-in workers' degree of recognition estrangement and the level of adulteration their work produces. We did, however, identify a spectrum of recognition estrangement—ranging from a fully hidden ghostwriter to a cover-acknowledged collaborator—and suspect that the most estranged workers might be those whose work entails the most extreme alterations. Accordingly, workers' degree of perceived recognition estrangement might prove to be a good predictor of their propensity to exert agency by trying to (re)shape the person they are meant to impersonate.

That being said, other stand-in workers may not acknowledge as willingly as ghostwriters did their contribution to the production of an altered self. For instance, many life coaches profess a belief in their clients' ability to determine and achieve their own specific or generalized goals (George 2013, 182). Hence, acknowledging efforts to shape a client's self runs somewhat counter to coaches' professional ethos of a client's individual agency. Even so, one coach notes that she "can see the potential in people" (198), thus hinting at the prospect of helping craft a yet-unrealized side of her client's self despite professional norms that might discourage acknowledging her directorial efforts.

Finally, this study advances theories of the self by focusing on the collaborative work that makes the social self possible. Although scholars have long

argued that the "social self" is a relational concept (see: Cooley 1902; Goffman 1959; Mead 1934; Yeung and Martin 2003), this article highlights collaborative work done "backstage" in the construction of the social self. Indeed, while the self is performed on stage, the individual and select backstage collaborators strategically manage information jointly—i.e., leaving out some facts while foregrounding others—in order to offer a particular presentation of the self (Goffman 1959). In this way, our findings call attention to a need to refocus analytical attention on the dynamics occurring backstage, since stand-in workers seem to fully embrace Goffman's (1959) notion that public personas are creative works of fiction. Our findings suggest that, in order for a performance of an authentic self to be effective, individuals will attempt to conceal and keep secret the extent of stand-in workers' cooperation in its production.

In an uncanny way, the demand for authenticity in today's economy might fuel the hiring of workers who prove particularly skillful at altering others. The rising economy of self might therefore create a context in which the imperative to project authentic selves and the adulteration of selves are highly intertwined. Assuming that the crafting of authentic selves rests more and more on stand-in labor, those being impersonated will see their selves increasingly altered since the adulteration of subjects' selves is the signature of many stand-in workers. Put otherwise, calls for increased authenticity are likely to yield heightened adulteration of selves.

Notes

1. These figures are from Nielsen BookScan, a data service that tracks sales via barcode scanners at bookstore cash registers. Nielsen BookScan captures an estimated 75 percent of all U.S. book sales (Childress 2012).
2. For reasons of simplicity, we use the term *ghostwriter* in this article to describe all co-writers, including those whose names appear on book covers.
3. According to the *New York Times* methodology, rankings on the Best Seller list reflect unit sales reported on a confidential basis by vendors of all sizes and demographics across the United States. The *New York Times* defines sales as completed transactions by individuals on or after the official publication date of a title. Sales are statistically weighted to represent all outlets nationwide accurately and proportionally. Rankings published in a given week reflect sales during the week that ended two weeks earlier.
4. Fourteen ghostwriters worked on multiple books on this list, and three books had more than one ghostwriter.
5. This approach has two limitations. First, we cannot recognize the name of a ghostwriter if it appears in a string of names unaccompanied by such identifying words or phrases. Second, some of the 182 memoirs in our sample lack an acknowledgments section.
6. In our *NYT* sample, a ghostwriter's name often appears on the cover of a memoir (116 out of 298 memoirs). Such a high degree of visibility probably indicates an initial oversampling on our part of the most prestigious ghostwriters and is thus not reflective of the entire industry.

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