This is the published version:

Miller, Alyson 2014, Stylised configurations of trauma: faking identity in Holocaust memoirs, 

Available from Deakin Research Online:

http://hdl.handle.net/10536/DRO/DU:30068233

Reproduced with the kind permission of the copyright owner.

Copyright : 2014, Walter de Gruyter GmbH
Alyson Miller  

**Stylised Configurations of Trauma: Faking Identity in Holocaust Memoirs**

**Abstract:** Exploring a series of fraudulent Holocaust memoirs — Herman Rosenblat’s *Angel at the Fence*, Misha Defonseca’s *Misha: A Mémoire of the Holocaust*, Binjamin Wilkomirski’s *Fragments* and Helen Demidenko’s *The Hand That Signed the Paper* —, this paper argues that fakes are not some ‘bogus Other’ (Ruthven 3) of ‘genuine’ literature but in fact parodic works that reflect on the tenuous nature of both the past and the notion of self. Indeed, the revelation of a fraudulent memoir exposes the investments of a public culture in notions of the real — firstly, in terms of an authentic identity and secondly, in relation to a genuine literary experience. The Holocaust frauds perpetuated by Rosenblat, Defonseca, Demidenko and Wilkomirski, in exploiting an historical phenomena regarded as sacrosanct, highlight and utilise the commodification of trauma in both public and literary arenas, manipulating discourses of victimhood and authenticity in order to interrogate the boundaries of the real and the unreal and, indeed, to reveal the faultlines in literary culture per se. Less interested in literary classifications, however, than in notions of history and identity, this paper contends that the scandals surrounding fakes are fundamental to understanding anxieties about the connection between word and world, and the strange expectation that literature is able to provide access to something ‘true’.

**Keywords:** Fakes, Holocaust, memoirs, testimony, history, identity, literary culture, performance

DOI:10.1515/arcadia-2014-0022

Fraudulent literature is an intricate and varied genre, involving a detailed history, a spectrum of complex subgenres, and convoluted narratives of motivation and intent. As acts of amusement or as targeted attempts to reveal cultural and institutional fault lines, fakes unsettle ideas about ‘genuine’ literature and ‘real’ authors. But, as this paper argues, the anarchic possibilities of fakes extend further than the presumptions of literary culture, challenging fixed notions of

---

**Alyson Miller:** School of Communication and Creative Arts, Deakin University, Locked Bag 20000, Geelong, Australia 3220, E-Mail: alyson.miller@deakin.edu.au
identity and history, and unravelling static ideas about authenticity. Herman Rosenblat’s *Angel at the Fence*, for example – one of the four case studies explored in this discussion – ignited imaginations with its tale of blossoming romance in a Buchenwald concentration camp. The memoir recounts the narrative of the 11-year-old Rosenblat who, interned in the sub-camp Schlieben, was sustained by a nameless girl who threw him apples and bread over the perimeter fence. After liberation in 1945, Rosenblat migrated to New York where, twelve years later, he was miraculously reunited with his ‘angel at the fence’, Roma, on a blind date. In 1995, Rosenblat wrote about his experiences, winning a Valentine’s Day-themed short story newspaper competition (Day). Rosenblat then appeared twice on *The Oprah Winfrey Show*, featured on the Hallmark Channel, Lifetime Television and CBS News, was the subject of newspaper articles and ‘inspirational mass-email chains’, assisted in the production of a $25 million film, and released a children’s book, *Angel Girl*. The publishers of the memoir, justifiably convinced it would hit bestseller lists, described *Angel at the Fence* as ‘the true story of a Holocaust survivor whose prayers for hope and love were answered’, adding that ‘it makes a perfect Valentine’s Day gift’ (Sherman). Doubts about the Disney-like nature of the story first circulated on the Internet, eventually coming to the attention of Professor Kenneth Waltzer, the director of the Jewish Studies program at Michigan State University, who had voiced concerns about the premise of the narrative whilst researching a book about child prisoners at Buchenwald and its sub-camps (Sherman). Waltzer questioned the ability of Rosenblat to conceal the meetings with Roma from fellow prisoners as well as the likelihood of accessing the perimeter fence. Drawing on maps of Schlieben, Waltzer discovered ‘that the only external fence was down by SS barracks and that civilians had been banned from the road that ran alongside it since 1943, so there was no way Herman and Roma could have had a rendezvous’ (qu. Day). With the memoir’s history rendered impossible, the Rosenblats retreated, silenced by the fury of thousands of readers, historians and survivors concerned about the consequences of falsifying Holocaust testimony. For the eminent Holocaust historian Deborah Lipstadt, Rosenblat had ‘instrumentalised the Holocaust. This is the worst possible thing you can do on so many levels’ (qu. Sherman).

Undoubtedly, Rosenblat’s memoir transgresses not only the sacralisation of the Holocaust but also the truth-telling obligations of its genre. It is a scandal that evokes anxieties about ownership and authenticity. Yet it raises questions, too, about the appeal of fake narratives, the pleasure of the frisson they create in treating subject matter normally approached with great profundity as a source of theatre. Nick Groom notes in *The Forger’s Shadow* that frauds ‘haunt culture’ (2), evoking difficult questions about the ‘limits of literature’ and the unsettling suspicion that ‘truth might merely be a [...] special effect’ (65). In the context of
four case studies of scandalous fakes – Misha Defonseca’s *Misha: A Mémoire of the Holocaust*, Herman Rosenblat’s *Angel at the Fence*, Benjamin Wilkomirski’s *Fragments* and Helen Demidenko’s *The Hand That Signed the Paper* –, this paper will argue that the fascinating aspect of faux Holocaust memoirs is embedded within the outrage of reactions about the compromising of history and identity, most particularly in response to the suggestion of the past and the self as a series of mutable representations, rather than mediums that are objectively ‘fixed’. But the intrigue of these fakes is also caught up in the initial seduction of readers by narratives that appear to offer an emotional ‘real’ that, combined with an abiding reluctance to question narratives of trauma, constructs a ready marketplace for figures such as Rosenblat and his Buchenwald romance.

Drawing on postmodern theories of simulation, history and identity from scholars such as Linda Hutcheon, Jean Baudrillard, and Jerome Bruner, this paper examines the scandals surrounding four cases of fraudulent Holocaust memoirs to argue that fakes are not some ‘bogus Other’ (Ruthven 3) of ‘genuine’ literature but in fact parodic works that reflect – in some instances, quite self-consciously – on the tenuous nature of mediums traditionally seen as fixed and stable; that is, both the past and the notion of self. Indeed, the revelation of a fraudulent memoir exposes the investments of a public culture in notions of the real – firstly, in terms of an authentic identity and secondly, in relation to a genuine literary experience. The Holocaust frauds perpetuated by Rosenblat, Defonseca, Demidenko and Wilkomirski, in exploiting an historical phenomena regarded as sacrosanct, highlight and utilise the commodification of trauma in both public and literary arenas, manipulating discourses of victimhood and authenticity in order to interrogate the boundaries of the real and the unreal and, indeed, to reveal the faultlines in literary culture per se. The result, as this paper will argue, is a destabilisation of the separation between genuine and faked literary experiences that further questions the already dubious, and much critiqued, status of life writing as a genre of truth. Less interested in literary classifications, however, than in notions of history and identity, this paper contends that the scandals surrounding fakes are fundamental to understanding anxieties about the connection between word and world, and the strange expectation that literature is able to provide access to something ‘true’.
Fakes, Frauds and Forgery: 
Situating Literary Imposture

In order to clarify the key characteristics of contemporary fake memoirs, it is instructive to begin with a brief discussion of the terms that delineate fraudulent literature. While it is not the aim of the paper to provide a lexicon for literary fakes, differentiating between various pseudopegraphia is useful in determining the motivation and intent of the creators of forged texts. Critics such as K.K. Ruthven, Hunter Steele, Anthony Grafton and Julia Abramson have discussed at length the subtleties defining phenomena such as faking, forgery, mystification and hoaxing, and offer complex definitions of categories which often denote the same thing. Ruthven describes this overlapping of terms as a ‘synchronous problem of definition’, caused when ‘contemporaries choose different words to describe the same phenomenon’ (37). Noting the various descriptors applied to the pseudo-medieval poetry of Thomas Chatterton, for example, Ruthven observes the variance in describing literary fakes: ‘Chatterton is an “impostor poet” to Louise J Kaplan, a “hoax-poet” to Marjorie Levinson, but a “literary forger” to Ian Heywood’ (36–7). The language of fraudulent literature, Ruthven concludes, seems to lead ‘a social life quite independently of our Humpty-Dumptyish desire’ to ‘taxonomise fake literature...to make it mean exactly (and therefore only) what we want it to mean’ (36).

Recognising the fluidity of terms associated with fraudulent literature, this paper employs the words fake, fraud, forgery and imposture rather promiscuously. In the context of memoirs, however, the term ‘hoax’ is consciously rejected, as a number of its key features are incongruous with the character of fake life narratives. Critically, hoaxes represent ‘culture-jamming’ exercises that involve, as Ruthven and Abramson have observed, impostors whose practice in faking is short-term and specifically targeted. Crucially, a hoaxer plans for revelation to occur, often within a short period of time following the publication of the falsified work. Moreover, a hoax is a stunt consciously designed to act as a piece of cultural criticism directed at a specific figure or institution of power. The authors of fraudulent memoirs, however, publish with the full intent to deceive, as evidenced by both the public performance of an assumed identity and the near-absence of justificatory claims after the fake has been revealed. As Groom elegantly notes, ‘hoaxes are intellectual exercises designed to show the mastery of the hoaxer over the hoaxed; the forged work, however, maintains its integrity and is not designed to implode. It is more seductive than that’ (61). The writers of false life narratives often disappear entirely once discredited, or stubbornly maintain that the text represents a truthful account of lived experience. In either scenario, there is a clear
sense of pleasure in the process of not only creating the fake, but also of duping an entranced audience wholly committed to the spectacle of a traumatic event. Indeed, as the Australian case of Helen Demidenko illustrates, fraudulent life narratives are clearly linked to the theatre, a performance that stages a thrilling tension between the fake and, once suspicious, the detective reader. As fraud, fake or forgery, the false memoir is arguably a much more complex occurrence, refusing to provide an etiology or account of its methods, purpose or inspiration. Finally, while hoaxing can be an aggressive and cynical tool, belying ideas of its ‘amusing’ qualities, its agenda in misleading an audience is usually made explicit, and publicly analysed in the interests of maximising its effect. By contrast, the faking of self in memoir is an act that attempts to remain hidden, obscuring the agenda of the fake, as well as raising questions about the interplay between the constructed and actual selves of the authors who create such texts.

Given the tendency of authors who produce fake life narratives to maintain an enigmatic silence about their work, the discourses surrounding fraudulent memoirs are often engaged with locating the fake in ‘hard’ reality. In the initial stages of scandal, much of the interest is in detecting, quite simply, how the fraudulent memoir was able to emerge and it is arguably here that the thrill of a fake is located – the piecing together of clues and the relish of outrage. Certainly, controversy only occurs after the publication of an exposé. Thus the scandal about I, Rigoberta Menchú emerged after the historian David Stoll published Rigoberta Menchú and the Story of All Poor Guatemalans, a book which scrutinised the inconsistencies of Menchú’s internationally acclaimed testumonio of the suffering of Mayan Indians. The public sense of outrage at being duped fuels the compulsion to gather information about the truth ‘crime’ that has been committed. The life of the author is systematically examined, as in the example of Demidenko, the author of The Hand That Signed the Paper. Demidenko not only constructed a false family history but also claimed to be Ukrainian, faking cultural heritage, language and appearance in an effort to deceive. The defrocking of Demidenko was particularly vitriolic, including the details of her ‘boringly English extraction’ to her own later confession that her ‘father managed to kill himself off “on the job” in a local brothel’ (Malcolm). In the tradition of le pacte autobiographique offered by Philippe Lejeune in L’Autobiographie, readers accept that ‘the author, the narrator and the protagonist’ of an autobiography ‘must be identical’ (5). In the event of imposture, the public which once authorised a life narrative, seeks to claim other truths, to sort the real from the unreal as compensation for a false investment. Indeed, it is a process that is often marked by intense hostility. As Andrew Stafford, a journalist and friend of Demidenko, claims, aside from media attacks, the ousted author was ‘spat on in the street, threatened repeatedly with rape and death, and had dog shit sent to her through
the post’ (qu. Mendes). Such hostility reveals a public enraged by being duped, suggesting the arousal of deep-seated anxieties, which this paper argues revolve around a stable notion of identity, and the relationship between representation and authenticity.

The often hostile search for the truth of the author highlights questions about the autobiographical nature of identity per se and provokes interest in the symbiotic connection between life and narrative. It is the potential of fakes to expose the self (and history) as a narrated construction open to re-inscription that is fundamental to censorious public reactions. In *Living Autobiographically*, John Paul Eakin argues that the controversies surrounding fake memoirs expose how the narrative rules of autobiography ‘also function as identity rules’ that feature ‘truth-telling’ as ‘both generic marker and identity requirement’ (Eakin 34). According to Eakin, ‘when the public responds to rule-breaking autobiographers’ – authors who do not comply with Lejeune’s *pacte* – the primacy of ‘identity issues’ and ‘truth-value’ for a reading audience is revealed (Eakin 34–5). Citing the scandals of Menchú and Binjamin Wilkomirski, ‘rule-breaking’ controversies involving the fake memoirs of a Guatemalan Native Indian and a child survivor of Nazi concentration camps, Eakin contends that ‘the autobiographer’s character supplanted the accuracy of the text as the primary concern, with the identity-function of the truth-telling rule overriding its generic, literary function’ (Eakin 39). As interest shifts from text to author, scandalous fakes thus illustrate the cultural investment in notions of an abiding self, a stable subjectivity that is as it is represented. As Eakin notes of Wilkomirski’s *Fragments*, ‘if the book could not pass muster as autobiography, why not simply repackage it as a novel? Because it is not generic status that is at issue; it is not the text but the person’ who has threatened ideas of an essential self (39–40). The problem, as Susanna Egan posits, is the notion of ‘authentic identity’, whether it exists and whether or how it matters (Egan 19).

As previously noted, much of the outrage that occurs in response to a fake memoir is connected to anxieties about the lack of an essential self. Narrative theories of identity have long contended that subjectivity is constituted by language and by the stories told about self. Jens Brockmeier and Donal Carbaugh, for example, argue in *Narrative and Identity* that the idea of human identity is connected to the ‘very notion of narrative and narrativity’ (16) and that the self, like story, is a process of narration: ‘The stories we tell ourselves about ourselves and others structure our sense of who we are, who others are, and how we are to be related’ (10). Similarly, Bruner posits in ‘Life as Narrative’ that identity is formed via narrative, arguing that the culturally defined ‘cognitive and linguistic processes that guide the self-telling of life narratives achieve the power to structure perceptual experience, to organise memory, to segment and purpose-build the
very "events" of a life. In the end, we *become* the autobiographical narratives by
which we "tell about" our lives' (694). This notion of subjective life as not only
visualised but also constructed through narrative modes and tropes is central to
anxieties about fake memoirs. Indeed, the idea of identity as a story open to
transformation is both liberatory and deeply unsettling. However, while frauds
expose the radical potential for what Brockmeier and Carbaugh term the 'options
of identity' (8), fake memoirs also disturb the effect of genuine and cohesive
selves, and suggest to readers that it is not only the impostor who is faking it. It is
a revelation that is profoundly disturbing, and which has significant implications
for understanding both individual and collective realities. As Egan observes, if
autobiography as imposture is able to produce 'either the interior life or the public
effect of that life by virtue of its narrative claims, is the impostor, cut loose from
reference to the real world, not only able but actually welcome to produce *that
which was not*?' (21).
Arguments about the construction of identity vis-à-vis fake memoirs do not
occur in a vacuum, but are situated in – and have effects on – highly specific
cultural contexts. As Rutheven states, fraudulent literature is a 'symptom of the
culture into which it intervenes' (193), a sign of an institutional or paradigmatic
gap that allows existing social narratives, generic conventions and literary estab-
lishments to be exploited. In this way, forgery provides a mechanism through
which cultural fault lines are revealed. Abramson similarly notes that the revela-
tion of a fake 'draws attention to the conditions under which deception was
allowed to transpire' (25), arguing that forgery is 'an illusion, but one that points
insistently to that which makes illusion possible' (145). Recent scandals involving
fraudulent memoirs have primarily related to the fictitious lives of Holocaust
survivors, victims of sexual and drug abuse, and the marginalisation of ethnic
'others'. Capitalising on histories of trauma, fake life narratives have been acerb-
ically denounced for a lack of moral and political conscience. Robert Manne
observes that the detractors of Demidenko's *The Hand That Signed the Paper* 'see
in it little but moral vacuity, vulgarity, historical ignorance and overt anti-Se-
mitism'. However, as pervasive as the topical interests of fake memoirs have been
seen to be, each fraud reveals a public interest in particular kinds of authors and
suffering, reflecting an uncomfortable series of social and literary vulnerabilities,
political interests, and prejudices. Gillian Whitlock, for example, asserts that the
'commodification of life narratives by Arab and Muslim women is a well-established
circuitry that offers 'privileged readers the pleasure of empathetic identification'
with traumatic experience as well as providing the sense that the public is
supporting the 'interests of social justice' (118).
Yet it is not simply cultural interests and identity anxieties that are ques-
tioned in the incidence of a fake memoir, but also the authenticity of literature and
literary institutions. Maria Takolander and David McCoey argue that literature has been positioned historically in terms of authentic experience despite being ‘often about – perhaps fundamentally about – successfully faking it’ (57). Indeed, since Plato, literature has been conceptualised as a medium that is both false – constituted by imaginative creations – yet powerfully and transformatively ‘real’. It is a form that has been endowed with the ability to impart ‘a transcendent moral truth’ about human nature even though its truth-telling capacity relies entirely on the construction of persuasive artifices (Takolander & McCoey 58). Ruthven similarly asserts that the ‘relationship between literariness and spuriousness is framed as a binary opposition, in which literature is valorised as the authentic Self and literary forgery disparaged as its bogus Other’ (3). But fraudulent texts, Ruthven maintains, are less ‘the disreputable Other of “genuine” literature’ than a ‘demystified and disreputable Self’. In these terms, the genuine and the fake are less in a diametrical opposition than in a dialectic relationship. As Abramson contends, ‘the discovered fake has the added interest of pointing dramatically toward the spurious or forged nature of all texts,’ asserting that forgery is the ‘stunt double’ of literature (22). The public desire for literature to function as a medium for ‘truth-telling’ – though complicated by the required ‘truth-value’ of forms such as autobiography – is thus made ironic when considering that literature itself, Groom contends, is already an artifice: ‘[…] literature, that most monumental fabrication, is no less forged than any shadowy literary forgery’ (2).

As suggested, literary culture is also compromised by the revelation of fraudulent texts. In the context of contemporary fake memoirs, the ‘guardians of cultural institutions’ (Ruthven 2) have been both questioned and undermined by the emergence of frauds validated by literary authorities such as publishers, critics, prize committees and funding bodies (Takolander & McCoey 57). Ruthven further observes that as ‘a creative way of judging the judges, literary forgery is the bête noir of a literary awards system’, whose expert critics, particularly in Australia, endure a defrocking akin to that of the original fake (190). As Ruthven notes, when fraudulent literature is granted a prestigious prize, the ‘major casualty…is neither the prize nor the hoaxer but the literary awards system as represented by its judges. For whenever a literary forgery wins a literary prize it becomes clear that some other agenda than the putative one of recognising “literary merit” is being implemented’. Thus when Demidenko was awarded the 1993 Miles Franklin award, it was described by Peter Goldsworthy as a ‘kind of multicultural affirmative action prize’ (Goldsworthy 2). The exposure of a fake, then, reveals anxieties about the authenticity of literary culture in its mistaken validation of texts that clearly fulfil agendas other than (or alongside) that of artistic merit. As Groom posits, literary fakes function to ‘spook […] literature’, and ‘perpetually
interfere with the order of things’ (3). In this way, forgeries are the rebel doubles of ‘genuine literature’, questioning those determinants which distinguish the authentic from the fake (both textual and subjective), as well as revealing the institutional and cultural gaps that enable such constructions to emerge.

Reimagining the Unimaginable: Victims of History

As noted, recent fakes have increasingly sought to capitalise on the popularity of narratives of trauma. The sociologist Frank Furedi argues that before critics condemn these ‘fantasists as simple literary hustlers’, it is important to acknowledge that contemporary culture has created powerful incentives for those who claim a position of victimhood. Furedi notes that narratives of trauma satisfy a ‘cultural sensibility that encourages us to celebrate the survival of abuse’ and, indeed, rewards those who confess their suffering — as well as those who read their memoirs — with ‘moral authority’. In a culture that treats the confessions of victims as a ‘transcendental “truth” of abuse’, those who interrogate the veracity of trauma claims are thus framed as complicit in the act of victimisation. In addition, in the market of fraudulent memoirs, suffering is prime stock, capitalising on a public unwillingness to doubt victim testimony as well as a cultural ethos that confers identity via association with social and historical injustice. In a milieu thus catering for the confessions of the ‘historical victim’, it is perhaps no surprise that the greatest trauma of the twentieth century, the Holocaust, has inspired a gamut of memoir fakes.

The Holocaust has come to symbolise the most traumatic of human events. Denoting suffering on an unthinkable level, survivors such as Elie Wiesel have argued that the Holocaust is simply unrepresentable. As Wiesel contends, ‘just as no one could imagine Auschwitz before Auschwitz, no one can now retell Auschwitz after Auschwitz...Only those who lived it in their flesh and in their minds can possibly transform their experience into knowledge. Others, despite their best intentions, can never do so’. Positioned as the defining standard for victimhood, the Holocaust has been sacralised, in the words of Wiesel, as ‘a universe outside the universe’. As the exceptionalist arguments of survivors and writers such as Wiesel suggest, the Holocaust has been positioned as a trauma that is incomparable to all others, a phenomenon of suffering that can be represented — if it can be represented at all — only by those who experienced it. The moral authority awarded to the accounts of Holocaust survivors is thus profound, granting memoirs and testimonies a status of publicly recognised ‘truth’ that is beyond doubt — providing disturbingly fertile ground on which to construct a fake memoir.
However, John Frow observes in *Time and Commodity Culture* that the Holocaust has been ‘constructed and reconstructed as an object of public memory within the play of present interests, fears and fascinations’ (243). No longer simply ‘history’, the Holocaust is an ‘event’ which has been appropriated by popular media and transformed into a product that can be easily accessed – and enjoyed – by mass culture. Refigured as a commodity, the real and the unreal begin to slide uncomfortably into one another. Due to the release of Steven Spielberg’s *Schindler’s List*, for example, it is possible to visit the ghettos of Krakow on a ‘Schindler’s List Tour’, which ‘not only includes the main landmarks and features of this terrible period, such as Schindler’s factory and the old Ghetto walls, but also visits locations from which the movie itself was filmed’. The excursion, offered alongside vodka tasting, a Krakow ghost tour and a 4 x 4 off-road challenge, packages history as a holiday adventure and uses the commodity of the film to sell Holocaust tourism. Indeed, Auschwitz is commonly listed as the primary ‘tourist attraction’ of Poland. As the boundaries between truth and product begin to blur, and as Holocaust narratives grow increasingly familiar for reading audiences, the genocide is treated as an object of entertainment that invites co-option and exploitation. Constructing a fraudulent memoir about the Holocaust is, then, a savvy choice. If, as Furedi argues, critics and readers are already inhibited about questioning the veracity of trauma memoirs, the sacrilisation of the Holocaust adds even greater deterrence, particularly in the context of contemporary debates concerning historical revisionism and the politics of denial. As a result, testimonies that might have been otherwise deemed absurd are – however temporarily – accepted as credible.

The scandal of Misha Defonseca is illustrative of the public’s willingness to be seduced. The memoir of a girl who was adopted by wolves after escaping Nazi oppression, *Misha: A Mémoire of the Holocaust* was a European bestseller, translated into eighteen languages, glowinglly endorsed by the Nobel laureate and Holocaust survivor Elie Wiesel, and adapted into a French feature film, *Surviving with Wolves*. According to the memoir, Defonseca wandered across Europe as a seven-year-old after the deportation of her parents in 1941, sheltering with wolves, killing a German soldier, creeping into and out of the Warsaw Ghetto, befriending Polish and Russian partisans, and escaping and witnessing numerous massacres before walking home at the end of the war. Sharing one of the more dramatic narratives of survival, Defonseca capitalised on a public reluctance to question Holocaust witnesses even by survivors themselves, as she gave ‘gripping talks’ to Jewish organisations and shamelessly pursued the considerable profits resulting from the marketing of her miraculous tale (Mehegan).

Details of the fraud emerged in the wake of a trial involving the ghostwriter of the text, Vera Lee, and its publisher, Jane Daniel. According to Defonseca and Lee,
Daniel failed to fully promote the memoir and concealed revenue from the co-authors in a breach of contract that awarded Defonseca $7.5 million and Lee $3.3 million in damages, an amount later tripled 'by a judge who found Daniel... had misled both women and tried to claim royalties herself by rewriting the book' (Associated Press). David Mehegan notes that even in its earliest stages as a manuscript, Holocaust scholars dismissed the work after uncovering numerous historical and geographical errors. Deborah Dwork, the director of the Strassler Family Centre for Holocaust and Genocide Studies at Clark University, reported the incongruities to Daniel, who simply 'kept finding ways to get around' the objections, fearful the memoir - a likely market success - would be discredited by experts (qu. Mehegan). Indeed, Daniel initially excused any discrepancies in Defonseca's narrative by emphasising the problematic relationship between memory and history: 'Of course, she was a young girl at the time... This is a memoir - people make mistakes on details and dates all the time'. But later bankrupted by the court battle, Daniel decided to follow evidence suggesting the narrative was fraudulent. She attracted the assistance of a genealogical researcher, who discovered that Misha Defonseca was baptized Monique de Wael in a Brussels Catholic church in 1937, was enrolled in a local primary school in 1943–44, and her parents were not Jewish but resistance fighters arrested and executed by the Germans (Mehegan).

The journalist Blake Eskin notes that Defonseca's memoir was not only published despite expert scholarship questioning its authenticity, but was available for over eleven years before the truth of its falsification fully emerged. The acceptance of the memoir as an authentic testimony raised concerns not only about the reliability of other Holocaust accounts, but also about the processes through which history is constructed. Indeed, as false testimonies are incorporated into the body of knowledge that bears witness to the Holocaust, both the genocide and history are perceived as distortions or corruptions in ways that have far-reaching consequences for the construction of 'fact' and 'fiction'. Michael Shermer and Alex Grobman contend in Denying History, for example, that the issue of Holocaust denial has widespread implications for understandings not only of specific events, but also of the world — and thus reality — per se:

If people can be convinced that the Holocaust never happened, perhaps they can also be persuaded to believe that slavery is a hoax perpetrated by blacks to coerce Congress to institute affirmative-action programs. Once we allow the distortion of one segment of history [...] we risk the possible distortion of all historical events. For this reason, Holocaust denial is not just a Jewish issue. It is an attack on all history and on the way we transmit the past to the future (16).

In response to suggestions that fake memoirs sustain the theories of Holocaust deniers, Susan Rubin Suleiman argues it is crucial to distinguish between the
ontological and the epistemological, to separate questions concerned with the reality of the event from the means through which access is gained to it. ‘To admit the constructedness of all narratives’, Suleiman states, is not to reject the ‘distinction between invention and truth claim’ but rather to acknowledge that ‘even if every memoir about the Holocaust were to prove inaccurate in some details, that would still not negate the Holocaust’s existence’ (550). In highlighting the gap between the actuality of the Holocaust and the memoirs which represent it, Suleiman reveals the disconnection between representation and the ‘real’, observing that a memoir ‘provides only a single mediated perspective on reality, not a direct, immediate apprehension of the “thing itself”’ (551). Yet the ‘thing itself’ is only available through representation, through what Linda Hutcheon terms in *A Poetics of Postmodernism* ‘narrative emplotments of past events that construct what we consider historical facts’ (92). Thus history, like fiction, is a discourse, a ‘human construct’ that creates the past as it is textualised via official documents, eyewitness accounts and archival material (93). So while Suleiman correctly notes that the reality of the Holocaust is not put into doubt by the revelation of a fake, it is an event that is accessible only through the slippery medium of text and, as such, is open to transformation. As Hutcheon argues, history, like fiction, is a discourse that constitutes ‘systems of signification by which we make sense of the past [...] In other words, the meaning and shape are not in the events, but in the systems which make those past “events” into present historical “facts”’ (89).

As frauds are seen to compromise the integrity of historical knowledge by fabricating alternate ‘systems’ through which the Holocaust is understood, they render ideas about the construction of history unstable and raise questions about the ‘natural or common-sense methods of distinguishing between historical fact and fiction’ (93). These implications for history are arguably at the heart of anxieties surrounding impostures. Indeed, the notion that history is neither determined nor fixed but open to multiple narrative constructions significantly challenges beliefs in the immutability of the past and those who bear witness, revealing its basis in narrative rather than objectivity. As Groom observes,

> Holocaust historians have sought to establish truth by recording witnesses. These archives form a colossal monument, but one which is diverse and disparate. Truth here is not one story but many. It is not a totalitarian aspiration, but is often confused and contradictory, for multiplying witnesses multiplies error, and there is a human validity in that imperfection (298).

If fakes, then, as per Ruthven, offer a ‘demystified and disreputable Self’, it is in this mode that they are most revealing, undeniably capitalising on the inability to render history a ‘hard’ and verifiable science yet also exposing this very
thing – and, by doing so, suggesting that fraudulence is not a terrible double of genuine or authentic accounts, but rather an echo of other, inescapable fabrications.

Interestingly, the difficulty of determining the true from the false was explicitly evoked by de Wael in the weeks following the exposure of her imposture. In interviews after the revelation that Misha was a fake, de Wael admitted she had created a false memoir, but she attributed blame to Daniel, claiming that she had been persuaded to publish the narrative against her judgement: ‘There are times when I find it difficult to differentiate between reality and my inner world. The story in the book is mine. It is not actual reality – it was my reality, my way of surviving. At first, I did not want to publish it, but then I was convinced by Jane Daniel’ (qu. Mehegan). The antipathy normally directed at the author of a fake is mitigated by de Wael’s confession of psychological instability, the admission that her distinction between the real and the unreal has been skewed due to experiences of extreme trauma. The producer of Surviving with Wolves, for example, describes being ‘a little annoyed’ at the deception, but recognises that de Wael ‘concocted this tale in order to stop herself from falling apart. So I have a little bit of pity in my heart for her’ (World News). As the scandal developed, de Wael repeatedly returned to ideas of her otherness, insisting on her position as a victim and a cultural outsider. In a statement made via a legal attorney, for instance, de Wael claimed to have been mistreated by the family who protected her during the war. Her parents were members of the Belgian resistance who were shot by Nazis, after which de Wael lived with her uncle’s family who, she argues, ostracised her as ‘the traitor’s daughter’ (qu. Eskin). Claiming to have always ‘felt “other”’ and to have experienced an affinity with Jewish communities in the post-war period (qu. Sasportas), de Wael uses victimhood in order to capitalise on the tensions between majority and minority interests, recognising the increasing importance of the marginal in the dominant sphere. The imposture executed by de Wael thus raises questions about the processes through which the ‘real’ is displaced in the interests of the marketplace – or, to shift the terms, it reveals how a commodity culture creates an effect of the ‘real’ in the interest of the marketplace.

Indeed, the second example of Holocaust imposture, the scandal concerning Herman Rosenblat’s Angel at the Fence, as outlined at the beginning of this paper, demonstrates that genuine experiences of suffering are disregarded by faking authors in the interests of catering to an audience demand for narratives that are fabulously real. Sherman observes that ‘selling the Holocaust as Hollywood kitsch sanitises its horror’, while Waltzer argues that ‘there are no redemptive endings in the Holocaust. In this case, the dark truth was hidden to spin a story of romance, to portray the universe as an orderly and just place and that, to me, is a denial of the substance of the Holocaust’ (Waltzer). Yet in line with Furedi’s argument that
victimhood is culturally fostered, Waltzer suggests that the popularity of the text and its ensuing scandal evolved 'because of enticements in culture and the active intervention by culture-makers who helped sponsor and generate new opportunities for Herman'. According to Waltzer, 'our culture underwrites this sort of mythmaking. The culture and the culture-makers work to turn traumatic stories into narratives with a happy ending'. The result, Waltzer suggests, is that Rosenblat fashioned the memoir 'with help from others like ready-wear clothing for market', as 'the camp and real camp experiences were airbrushed as backdrop for a love story' that abandoned the true – and redemptive – narratives of both Herman and Roma.

Certainly, the most curious element of the Rosenblat scandal is that it concealed a true Holocaust survival story. Unlike de Wael, who lived through the war in relative safety and yet whose narrative focuses on violent horror, Rosenblat's love story functions to mask experiences that are the antithesis of romance. He and his three brothers were transported in 1942 from the ghetto in Pirotkow, Poland, to Schlieben, where their mother – along with 90 per cent of the inhabitants of Pirotkow – was immediately sentenced to a death camp. Encouraged by his brother Isidore to lie about his age, 11-year-old Herman claimed to be 16, escaping the gas chambers by his labour value. The television producer Debi Gade recounts that Rosenblat 'told me that he was once beaten so badly by the guards that he was blind for several days and couldn’t tell them because they would have killed him' (qu. Day). While Day acknowledges that since he 'lied about one aspect of his experience, the natural inclination is to question what else Rosenblat may have been tempted to exaggerate', an 'authentic' experience does seem to have been rejected in preference for a more saleable commodity; suggesting the appeal of fake memoirs to both authors and readers in line fulfilling both commercial and aesthetic interests. As Day rather sympathetically concludes, for 'all the fabrications and lies' that Rosenblat constructed, perhaps the most revealing aspect of the scandal is that he 'did not believe his own survival story was enough'.

These examples of fake memoirs are interesting to consider in light of what postmodern theorist Jean Baudrillard in Simulacra and Simulation would describe as a 'triumph of superficial form' or the 'hallucinatory resemblance of the real to itself' (87), a process in which reality is replaced by simulation, 'the production and reproduction of the real' (23). Baudrillard claims that contemporary society has exchanged 'true' reality and meaning for symbols and signs, and that human experience has been reduced to a simulation of the 'real' in which 'the object and substance have disappeared' (4). In these terms, Baudrillard argues that authenticity is nothing more than a slippery illusion, as capitalist societies have replaced reality with commodified versions of the 'real'. These representations saturate our
existence until they construct understandings of reality and make meaning meaningless by being endlessly mutable and transformative. Baudrillard contends:

By crossing into a space whose curvature is no longer that of the real, nor that of truth, the era of simulation is inaugurated by a liquidation of all referentials – worse: with their artificial resurrection in the systems of signs, a material more malleable than meaning, in that it lends itself to all systems of equivalences, to all binary oppositions, to all combinatory algebra. It is no longer a question of imitation, nor duplication, nor even parody. It is a question of substituting the signs of the real for the real, that is to say an operation of deterring every real process via its operational double, a programmatic metastable, perfectly descriptive machine that offers all the signs of the real and short-circuits all its vicissitudes (2).

If the ‘real’ itself is only an effect of the symbols and signs of representation, then the relationship between literature and reality is an intertextual one that holds no promise of the ‘truth’ or, indeed, as Baudrillard suggests, the existence of anything at all (5).

The notion that the ‘real’ is constituted by a series of images and narratives accepted as true is exemplified by the scandal evoked by Binjamin Wilkomirski. The memoir of a child surviving the Nazi concentration camps Majdanek and Auschwitz, Wilkomirski’s Fragments was internationally celebrated as a narrative of profound importance. As a critic for The Nation adoringly wrote, ‘this stunning and austerely written work is so profoundly moving, so morally important, and so free from literary artifice of any kind at all that I wonder if I even have the right to try to offer praise’ (Maechler 114). In The Guardian, Anne Karpf described Fragments as ‘one of the greatest works about the Holocaust’, while Wolfgang Benz, the director for the Berlin Centre for Anti-Semitic Research, certified that the narrative possessed ‘not only authenticity, but also literary importance’ (qu. Maechler 116–17). Ranked among the testimonies of Elie Wiesel, Anne Frank and Primo Levi, Fragments portrayed an image of the Holocaust that convinced renowned scholars and emotionally engaged a worldwide reading audience. The memoir was rapidly translated into twelve languages, and won the National Jewish Book Award in the US, the Jewish Quarterly Literary Prize in the UK, and the French Prix de Mémoire de la Shoah in 1997. Wilkomirski himself enthusiastically participated in and contributed to interviews, newspaper articles, radio presentations, readings throughout Europe, and a fundraising tour of American cities for the Holocaust Memorial Museum in Washington, D.C., where he gave a video interview for the Holocaust remembrance authorities, Yad Vashem and the Survivors of Shoah (Maechler 117).

As with Angel at the Fence, the popularity of both Fragments and Wilkomirski prefigured a hostile public downfall in the wake of revelations that the memoir was fictitious. While doubts about the veracity of the narrative were tentatively
circuiting from an early stage, these concerns were often ameliorated. Stefan Maechler observes, for example, that Gary Mokotoff, a board member of the Jewish Book Council, wrote to the jury for the National Jewish Book Award questioning the authenticity of the memoir. Mokotoff, notes Maechler, ‘found it unbelievable that a three- or four-year-old child would have survived for more than a few days in a camp’, yet also offered an explanation for the construction of memories belonging to someone other than the implied author: ‘If you take each of the events he describes, they seem to be the sum of the experience of all survivors’ (qu. Maechler 115). Arguably, the quelling of concerns also relates to how the memoir ought to be consumed; as the epitextual material suggests, the narrative is ‘not read but experienced’, insisting that the reader renounce the self in imagining the other: ‘[W]e too become small again and see this bewildering, horrifying world at child’s height. No adult interpretations to intervene’ (Wilkomirski).

But, as Fiachra Gibbons and Stephen Moss narrate in The Guardian, another critic did pursue his scepticism about the authenticity of the text:

Wilkomirski toured the world relating his life story, breaking down as he told it, moving interviewers, audiences, hard-bitten journalists to tears. Except one: Daniel Ganzfried, a young Swiss Jew who was sent to interview Wilkomirski by a magazine called Passages. The interview should have been a routine piece for a regular column about a creative person who has achieved success in another discipline (Wilkomirski was a musician being feèed as a writer). But Ganzfried, who had written an account of his father’s experiences in Auschwitz, didn’t believe Wilkomirski’s account, and dug a little deeper.

Ganzfried’s exposé revealed that Wilkomirski was not a Latvian Jew who had spent his childhood in Majdanek and Auschwitz, nor was he brainwashed, which the memoir also claims, by his adoptive Swiss parents to believe that he did not experience the Holocaust. Instead, Binjamin Wilkomirski was the pseudonym of Bruno Dösserker, the child of an unmarried Protestant woman and adopted by a prosperous Swiss family in 1945 (Gibbons & Moss). Ganzfried obtained a birth certificate and other documents that indicated Dösserker spent the war years in Switzerland and started school in 1947, a year before Wilkomirski says he arrived in the country. Ganzfried thus argued that Wilkomirski could never have been in a concentration camp except, perhaps, ‘as a tourist’ (qu. Gibbons and Moss). As Gibbons and Moss so eloquently conclude, ‘while “Binjamin” watched rats gnaw at the dead and dying in Auschwitz and babies suck their fingers to the bone in Majdanek, Bruno was being taught the clarinet in the comfort of his wealthy adoptive parents’ villa in neutral Zurich’. When Ganzfried’s accusations were later officially validated by the historian Stefan Maechler, Dösserker refused to answer to accusations of fraudulence, stating that it was the responsibility of the reader
to discern the truth of the memoir: 'It was always the free choice of the reader to read my book as literature or to take it as a personal document. Nobody has to believe me' (qu. Gibbons and Moss).

What is interesting about the imposture committed by Dösseker is the refusal of the author to acknowledge the fraudulence of both Fragments and his 'adopted' self, despite detailed evidence that conferred a 'real' identity. Indeed, according to Gibbons and Moss, when confronted by his 'agent with 100 pages of documentary evidence proving he was not Binjamin Wilkomirski at all but Bruno Dösseker, he stood up and shouted, "I am Binjamin Wilkomirski!"' Unlike Rosenblat and de Wael, who eventually admitted to constructing false identities and experiences, Dösseker continues to assert the authenticity of his memoir, raising complex questions about the psychological consequences of identity appropriation, as well as leading to some provocative suggestions about narrative and the construction of self.

However, despite Dösseker's refusal to confess to imposture, Fragments repeatedly alludes to issues concerning the construction of history, memory and identity. Indeed, the memoir begins with an acknowledgement of the instability of historical truth in terms of the experiences of the individual. It also frequently refers to the gap between representation and reality. Dösseker describes his earliest memories, for example, as a 'rubble field of isolated images and events', a 'chaotic jumble' resisting the 'orderly grain of grown-up life and escaping the laws of logic' (Wilkomirski 377). The very title of the memoir is a suggestion of the fragmentary relationship between memory, history and truth, and a caution or reminder, perhaps, of the impossibility of a cohesive, unproblematic vision of the 'real'. History as told through Dösseker is consistently framed as 'murky, a blur' (652), while motifs of dreaming and haunting are used to heighten the surreal nature of the text and to further obfuscate the relationship between narrative and 'fact': 'I fell asleep, and dreamed the terrible dream again about the dead world, the black sky, the insects eating me, and the iron cars going up the mountain in their endless chain and disappearing into the yellowish brown jaw under the helmet' (472). By situating the memoir in the hazy recollections of a nightmare, Dösseker emphasises the sensational effects of the narrative and defamiliarises notions of space and time in order to blur distinctions between the real and the imagined.

Arguably, the constant references made by Dösseker to the unreliability of the memoir to recognise the limits and problems of the genre. Fragments, however, also uncannily focuses on anxieties relating to subjectivity and the re-construction of self. The memoir recounts the identity growth of Dösseker through stages of acculturation, from the acquisition of language to the self-conscious recognition of the systems that determine socially normative behaviours. Indeed,
the memoir describes the processes through which he erases his former identity as a victim of the Holocaust and gradually adopts an alternate persona as the son of Swiss parents as a journey akin to rebirth, beginning with a disorienting entry into a world which lacks logic and order: ‘Everything seemed to be dissolving […] I didn’t know enough to make sense of it, the constant changes confused me. The days suddenly had no set order, none of the regular timetable they’d had before. There didn’t seem to be any rules anymore’ (452). Progressively, as Dösserkker becomes aware of the various spaces he occupies, such as the camp for Holocaust orphans and Switzerland, he develops a notion of self as an entity distinct from others. When first introduced by his full name to his adoptive parents, for example, he discovers a sense of identity that begins to situate him more fully in the cultural realm: ‘I was very surprised and proud that I now had two names’ (464). As Dösserkker struggles in school to internalise the rules and nuances of language, he remains a being in flux, detached from the activity of the social world and ‘baffled by what was going on around me’ (475). But with the eventual acquisition of complex language skills, Dösserkker emerges as a subjectivity self-consciously aware of the performative nature of identity. Believing that he is being brainwashed into forgetting the experience of the Holocaust, for example, he acquiesces – if only temporarily – to the need to conform to social expectations and disguise his ‘otherness’: ‘I’ll learn the rules of your games, I’ll play your games, but that’s all I’ll do – play them’ (493).

As Dösserkker reveals the possibility for a radical re-visioning of identity, he provokes anxieties about the potential loss of an authentic self by exposing the intimate connection between language and subjectivity. Indeed, it is a theme also embraced by Defonseca, who describes a transformation to animality during her time in the forests of Europe and a loss of self in which she is entirely ‘other’: ‘Though I began life as a human being, the forest had changed me and now I was no longer human. The only part of my former self that remained was my outside shell, my girl’s form. Everything else about me, everything inside, was like an animal’s: my reactions, my sensibilities, my very soul’ (205). But with her re-entry into society at the end of the war and the use once more of language, Defonseca – like Dösserkker – re-appropriates a civilised self and regains her humanity, albeit in a radically altered form: ‘The soul of an animal; the body and desires of a human being – that was me’ (222). Takolander argues that language ‘lies at the core of self and society, a radical force that ‘provides us with not only a personal identity but also a social environment’. In the context of the reading experience and the connection forged by a reader possessed by a text, Takolander contends that language is a source of ‘vitality and possibility’, of ‘freedom and potential’ that is liberating yet deeply unsettling (180). Indeed, while the transformation of Dösserkker into Wilkomirski illustrates what Jens Brockmeier and Rolfe Harré
might term the ‘plasticity of the human being’ (2001, 56), the idea that a reader has intimately related to an identity that is not ‘real’ is profoundly unnerving.

The Australian scandal of Helen Demidenko similarly illustrates the possibility for identity to be re-narrated, and engages with ideas relating to the question of ‘authentic’ and performative selves. Characteristic of fake life narratives, The Hand That Signed the Paper was a literary tour de force, receiving the 1993 Vogel Prize, the 1995 Miles Franklin Prize and the 1995 Australian Literature Society Gold Medal. The text, while not strictly a memoir, purported to be an autobiographical account of a young Australian woman, Fiona Kovalenko, who discovers that her father and uncle joined the SS in the Ukraine during the Second World War, and that her aunt married a German SS officer in charge of an Einsatzgruppe – a mobile killing unit dedicated to murdering Jews en masse throughout eastern Europe. According to the narrative, Kovalenko’s father participated in the massacre at Babi Yar, while her uncle – soon to face trial – worked as a guard at Treblinka and committed acts of horrific barbarity. The Australian journalist David Marr described Demidenko as ‘astonishingly talented...with the true novelist’s gift of entering into the imagination of those she is writing about’, while the Miles Franklin judge Jill Kitson called the memoir a ‘searingly truthful account of terrible wartime deeds that is also an imaginative work of extraordinary redemptive power’ (qu. Middlemiss). While these reviews already highlight the complex relationship between The Hand That Signed the Paper and categories of truth and fiction, the scandal surrounding the text was associated less with the controversial contents of the novel, than with the public performances of its faking author.

Winning the Vogel Prize when she was only 22-years old, Demidenko was a striking public figure and, in the weeks before the revelation of fraudulence, a media darling. Anthony Daniels observes that when appearing in public, Demidenko was ‘stridently self-confident and opinionated’, chose to adopt the Ukraine national costume and ‘rarely lost an opportunity to break into a Ukrainian folk dance’ (Daniels). This is in line with Groom’s arguments that forgery is not simply imitative, but also constructive:

 Forgery is an extreme, but an extreme of invention. In literature, it is not satisfied by staying on the page. It goes beyond the confines of text, beyond the textual entirely, into the realms of arts and crafts, performance and posture, fighting and murder – proving, somewhat surprisingly, that there is everything outside of the text (49–50).

Increasingly, however, The Hand That Signed the Paper attracted criticism for its anti-Semitic content, while questions about the validity of Demidenko’s Ukrainian identity began to emerge. With the final revelation that Demidenko was a fake, the text was excoriated by critics who had previously expressed suspicions about the author and, at the same time, steadfastly defended by the judges of the Miles
Franklin Prize. Demidenko unapologetically confessed to being Helen Darville of ordinary English extraction, and claimed to have taken a Ukrainian name 'in empathy with the characters I was creating...This was my creative world...The persona adopted for my writing took over my life – this is the way I write' (qu. Mendes). According to Daniels, Darville was a 'chronic fantasist' who variously claimed to be of French, Czech and Belgian origin (Daniels 5–6), while Philip Mendes notes her various claims to be a lecturer of English, a student of mathematics, a physics tutor, a lawyer, a ballerina, a model and a champion gymnast. While the scandal surrounding the imposture was complicated by the classification of the work as fiction, the behaviour of Darville and the narratives she related outside the text confirmed its contents as autobiographical. Mendes notes, for example, that when Darville received the Miles Franklin Award, she explicitly claimed to be of Ukrainian origin, wearing a 'peasant blouse and delivering part of her acceptance speech in Ukrainian'. In an earlier presentation at the Sydney Writers Festival, Darville 'spoke about her grandmother's poor English, her childhood involvement in Ukrainian youth organisations, and her embarrassment at her parent's foreign behaviour and appearance' (Mendes).

The intense vilification of Darville after her exposure revealed the pleasure of a reading public in the outing of a fake, yet unlike Dössekker, when exposed as a fraud, Darville unhesitatingly confirmed that she had purposefully misrepresented her 'real' identity. Indeed, Darville actively engaged with anxieties relating to the authenticity of subjectivity, asserting that the furor occurred because 'some people are conflating "credibility" with "authenticity". There's been a perpetual search on lately for this or that "authentic" voice [...] with almost no appreciation that authenticity is entirely culturally constructed [...] I freely admit my inauthenticity, but since authenticity doesn't exist, I'm not particularly worried' (qu. Westbury). Similarly, in an interview with the ABC journalist Lynne Malcolm, Darville argued that identity is 'more of an issue for other people than it is for me'. Whilst admitting to 'feeling trapped' and tiring of performing a 'very silly little dance', Darville proudly recounted the simplicity of co-opting an ethnic identity:

I can pull the wog accent, and sound like Effie and do the Ukrainian-Australian accent really well. It's not hard to do. I grew up around these sorts of people [...] People seem to have some idea in their head that you have to be authentic to do all of that. Anyone who's got any sort of acting skill, and I don't believe I have very much, can pull that off. And completely convincingly (qu. Malcolm).

Demidenko reveals here the ways in which cultural identity is not only performative but also commodified. Indeed, Demidenko's parody of a Ukrainian identity arguably exposes race as culturally rather than biologically inscribed.
Unperturbed by the political and historical implications of faking a Holocaust narrative, Darville rejected notions of a stable self, claiming to be 'persuaded by Gayatri Spivak's argument that there's "no possibility of knowledge on identity" and that writing cannot be linked to any sort of "real" identity position' (qu. Westbury). Finding 'the idea of identity oppressive' (qu. Westbury), Darville thus exemplifies a fluid subjectivity that is transformative and cultural, unable to be definitively fixed. Moreover, in line with Butler's arguments about gender, Darville highlights the extent to which the self is 'tenuously constituted in time, instituted in an exterior space through a stylised repetition of acts' (179). Indeed, impostors such as Darville displace and reveal identity as a 'stylised configuration', undermining notions of a stable self by creating a gap between the genuine, and the effect of the genuine – both of which, however temporarily, are accepted as 'real'. According to Butler, the possibilities of identity 'transformation are to be found precisely in the arbitrary relation' between a performed and an authentic self, 'in the possibility of a failure to repeat, a de-formity, or a parodic repetition that exposes the phantasmic effect of abiding identity' (179).

Interestingly, de Wael, Dössekker and Darville each represent a sense of being removed from their own identities, of being distant from their imagined and performed selves. Dössekker, for example, often describes a disconnection between the conversations and behaviour in his mind with those that are occurring in reality. On moving from an orphanage in Krakow to a foster home in Switzerland, for example, Dössekker experiences a splitting of consciousness in which his internal and external selves appear to exist in alternate spaces:

I yelled and struggled. But to my complete astonishment, there wasn't a sound. And in the middle of the silence, I heard a voice saying quietly and clearly, 'Yes, I'll come too.'

This unknown voice! Or was it my voice? I heard myself wondering.

I was horrified. I tried again. I took the deepest breath I could manage. I wanted to scream so loud that everyone would hear!

'No – I belong here! I live here! I don't want to go away!'

And again I heard the unmistakable sound of my own voice, as if it was someone else's, loud and clear:

'Yes, I'm coming too' (384).

This notion of a displaced self is integral to the construction of fake memoirs. As Dössekker recounts the split between the two versions of his identity, his memoir demonstrates how the relationship between representation and the truth is little more than an effect of the 'real', an artifice that promises only other constructions. For Darville, this identity split or illusion is something natural and unexceptional, yet for figures such as Dössekker, Rosenblat and de Wael, the potential thrill or even release that comes of reinvention has effected profound new contexts for
their sense of self. As Baudrillard radically suggests, the ‘real’ has disappeared ‘to make room for an image, more real than real’ (144) – endlessly open to re-configuration as other images, and thus other truths.

**Fake Revealing Fake: Authenticity as Effect**

According to Ruthven, forgeries are ‘even more anarchic than literature because they question those institutions which identify and process the “genuine” article’, exposing the ‘weaknesses in those publishing, reviewing and prize-giving practices which constitute the literary world’ (198). Moreover, they also point to the demands and pleasures of the literary marketplace. As trauma is commodified by fraudulent authors and enraptured audiences, narratives of otherness become literary and cultural capital, offering sensational experiences that transgress the sacred for the pleasures of a reading public. Yet as this paper has argued, the rebellious possibilities of fakes extend further than literary culture, subverting traditional notions of self and the historical past as they challenge fixed understandings of authenticity. Indeed, while forgeries are frequently pilloried for their use of history as a feeding ground for lucrative fiction-making, the anxieties revealed by fakes are much more profound. As the four case studies discussed here suggest, the outrage surrounding the exposé of a fraud is less about the use of the Holocaust as a narrative commodity, than the suggestion that history is not hermetically sealed, locked within one set of records of truth.

Alternatively, in line with Groom (following from Nietzsche and Foucault), they evoke ideas of the past as ‘discontinuous, composed of a gigantic mass of tiny and irreconcilable detail’ (298). It is a view that is echoed in Hutcheon’s theorisation of a postmodern subjectivity, which is ‘no longer assumed to be a coherent, meaning-generating entity’ (11) but provisional, heterogenic and a product of a series of told and re-told narrations, as so well demonstrated by Demidenko in the performance of an acquired Ukrainian selfhood. It is a vision of both history and identity that fakes undoubtedly exploit, and in doing so, deeply unsettle those survivors and critics who interpret such an approach as a flattening out of experience, in which victims and impostors exist on the same scale of experience; the real and the unreal made, however temporarily, uneasily ‘equal’. As a result, all history becomes questionable and tenuous, leaving the Holocaust – a phenomenon made sacrosanct – vulnerable to the claims of deniers.

If frauds are viewed as a form of parody or ‘shadow’, to use Groom’s terms, however, that mimic ‘real’ lives and experiences in order to highlight the problematic nature of authenticity – historical or otherwise – then their cultural role is less scandalous than it is functional. Indeed, rather than being made separate from
the discourses that surround the problematising of ideas about history and identity, fakes should, as Groom has argued of forgeries more broadly, be seen as ‘a contribution to the discourse, rather than as a repetition’ (17), or in the context of public scandal, an aberration. While Groom cautions against too much theoretical ‘play’, in which ‘postmodern iconoclasts are perpetually juggling signs and mixing codes’ at the risk of ‘estrangement from one’s own humanity’ (299), fakes remain central to understanding constructions of the genuine, from the textual to the subjective. As the ‘shadows of authenticity’, frauds expose the ‘ghosts’ that ‘worry [...] originals’ (Groom 3), suggesting that it is not only the faking text that is a fabrication.

Works Cited


