To the Ear of the Other: Rhizome Self-Adaptation in the Works of J. T. LeRoy

Issei Wake

Abstract

In the late 90s, J. T. LeRoy’s purportedly semi-autobiographical tales became a cult hit. For around six years, a large number of readers believed that LeRoy was an HIV-positive boy who had experienced extreme poverty, drug addiction, and emotional and sexual abuse in his childhood and adolescence. However, LeRoy was unveiled, in fact, to be the pseudonym and fabricated persona of Laura Albert, who was a forty-year-old San Francisco woman originally from New York and who actually wrote these best-selling fictional novels and communicated with people in the persona of LeRoy via phone and e-mail. After the release of the first novel Sarah, Albert had her sister-in-law Savannah Knoop publicly disguise appearances as the supposed writer. The works and elusive appearance by LeRoy attracted a considerable amount of literary and celebrity attention. The authenticity of LeRoy has been a subject of debate, even as details of the creation came to light in the 2000s. This case lays bare the motives behind literary faux, and prompts us to reconsider LeRoy’s authorship.

When placed within the milieu of the Derridean trace, what Albert, Knoop, and the readers have been doing can be reinterpreted as tracking the residue of the relationship with others in autofiction that appears before and beyond language/writing. LeRoy’s work and its scandal embody how the concept of writing and the other (irreducible alterity) are inseparably linked. The texts as intersubjective dynamics offer an arena where traumatic past memories are always being inscribed with LeRoy and his/her autofiction are being opened up to endless future possibilities.

Keywords

J. T. LeRoy, autofiction, postmodern, Jacques Derrida, adaptation
At the very moment when we are instituted as spectators in (the) place of the mirror, no longer see the author as such, can no longer in any case identify the object, the subject, and the signatory of the self-portrait of the artist as a self-portraitist. (Derrida, *Memoirs of the Blind: The Self-Portrait and Other Ruins*, 62)\(^1\)

It is the ear of the other that signs. The ear of the other says to me and constitutes the autos of my autobiography. When, much later, the other will have perceived with a keen-enough ear what I will have addressed or destined to him or her, then my signature will have taken place. (Derrida, *The Ear of the Other*, 51)\(^2\)

**Introduction: The Scandal of J. T. LeRoy**

In the late 90s, J. T. LeRoy’s (Jeremiah “Terminator” LeRoy) purportedly semi-autobiographical tales became a cult hit, including the novels *Sarah* (2000), *The Heart is Deceitful Above All Things* (2001) and *Harold’s End* (2004). For around six years, a large number of readers believed that LeRoy was an HIV-positive boy who had experienced extreme poverty, drug addiction, and emotional and sexual abuse in his childhood and adolescence (pimped out as a cross-dressed prostitute at truck stops by his biological mother). However, LeRoy was unveiled, in fact, to be the pseudonym and fabricated persona of Laura Albert, who was a forty-year-old San Francisco woman originally from New York and who actually wrote these best-selling fictional novels and communicated with people in the persona of LeRoy via phone and e-mail. After the release of the first novel *Sarah*, Albert had her sister-in-law Savannah Knoop publicly disguise appearances as the supposed writer. The works and elusive appearance by LeRoy attracted a considerable amount of literary and celebrity attention. The authenticity of LeRoy has been a subject of debate, even as details of the creation came to light in the
2000s. This case lays bare the motives behind literary faux, and prompts us to reconsider LeRoy’s authorship.

Based on her/his authorship as a framework for my discussion, this paper will clarify how the boundaries between (fictional) auto/biographical information about the author and the author’s works are closely interwoven and interdependent. For this, I define the death of the subject in the autobiography based on the notion of “thanatography” by Jacques Derrida. Then, this paper traces the history of literary deception. I deliberate on the role of the author in respect to the genre of the autobiography as well as the function of the author in the context of contemporary literary hoax. After mapping out the critical points of autobiography as a genre, I examine fake memoirs as part of a genre “autofiction,” which involves various modalities of identity agency. This problematizes the issue of what Michel Foucault has called the “author-function,” as LeRoy’s texts continuously point to an authorial figure that is outside it and antecedes it (these are two of the misleading natures authorial attribution). The figure of LeRoy itself becomes an intersubjective screen onto which both readers and “authors” project themselves, particularly because a wholly invented author’s life is thoroughly connected to the name.

When placed within the milieu of the Derridean trace, what Albert, Knoop, and the readers have been doing can be reinterpreted as tracking the residue of the relationship with others in autofiction that appears before and beyond language/writing. This frame of reference comes from the concept that “the other is derived from that of the trace, which in turn pertains to that of writing,” and that “the self can relate to itself through the other without ever instituting itself as identity or negative alterity” (Thea Bellou 192).
LeRoy’s work and its scandal embody how the concept of writing and the other (irreducible alterity) are inseparably linked. The texts as intersubjective dynamics offer an arena where traumatic past memories are always being inscribed with LeRoy and his/her autofiction are being opened up to endless future possibilities.

1: Autobiography and the “Death” of the Subject

[T]races of a past that has never been present, traces which themselves never occupy the form of presence and always remain, as it were, to come-come from the future, from the to come. (Derrida, *Memoires for Paul de Man*, Italics original, 58).

In the discussion of Nietzsche’s autobiography, Jacques Derrida highlights the function of the other (especially the ear of the other) by which we alternatively construct our own identity. Derrida points out that “Nietzsche died as always before his name and therefore it is not a question of knowing what he would have thought, wanted, or done” (*Ear* 29). Derrida also writes “the effects or structure of a text are not reducible to its ‘truth,’ to the intended meaning of its presumed author, or even its supposedly unique and identifiable signatory” (*Ear* 93-94). Thus, by drawing on his basic notions of dissemination and (under) erasure, he introduces the notion of thanatography. What specifically does thanatography mean?

Traditionally, the notion of subjectivity places the self within the dichotomy between self and other. In his analysis of (auto)biography, Derrida attempts to deconstruct this and redefine the subject: Subject for Derrida is shattered and always displaced through representation. Extending his basic idea that there is nothing outside of the text, he contends that the notion of self is
To the Ear of the Other

predicated on the internalized other within oneself. Then, Derrida concludes that “the subject’s relationship to itself is a relationship with its own death.” Derrida posits thanatography as opposite to logograph that presupposes the “co-present subject and the opposition life/ death.” Writing indicates both the absence and the death of the subject, and in this sense, it deconstructs the dichotomy between life and death (writing “cannot refer to the life of a subjectivity”). For Derrida, writing constitutes a space of both continuous rewriting and renewal as its processes of dissolution and destruction are integral to the subject’s own production. In Bellou’s words, “our prime engagement is with the other: it belongs to and comes from the other, and inscribes all relations between self and other as non-relations. The notion of the subject and the self is subsumed under the notion of the other.” Just like “objet petit a” theorized by Jacques Lacan, deconstructive definition of autobiography refuses such an idea about it as “a singular or total narrative with both an origin and a destination” (23, 38).

Based on Derrida’s argument that writing forms a space of intersubjective rewriting, I focus on the analyses of J. T. LeRoy scandal, especially about the function of the authorial name LeRoy. In LeRoy’s case, questing for the author and authorship, the categories subject and object are deconstructed. The tales of LeRoy serve as exemplary works for the post-subjectivity that Derrida looked for in literature, by which he means a subject that predicates on “the conception of the other as an a priori for the emergence of subject and self” (Bellou 17).

2: History of Literary Deception

In Encyclopedia of Deception, under the title of “Hoaxes of 2003,” there are
several memoirs introduced as exemplary hoax memoirs. Critics have substantially scrutinized the authenticity of these memoirs through fact-checking procedures and some of them were labeled as deceptive. Among them, some were unveiled as hoaxes and were referred to as “Triple Crowns of hoaxes.” For example, the most outstanding one of these was referred to as “the James Frey scandal.” Frey’s memoir *A Million Little Pieces* (2003) describes a 23-year-old man who tries to overcome drug addiction and alcohol abuse after taking treatment and enacting his willpower. Frey fabricated great parts of his memoirs and exaggerated the details. Even Oprah Winfrey selected the book for her book club and later rebuked him on her television show “for lying about his past and portraying the book as a truthful account of his life.” Winfrey told Frey that “I feel duped,” and “But more importantly, I feel that you betrayed millions of readers.”

Another hoax discovered in 2003 was by the Navajo Nasdiji (a pen name of Timothy Patrick Barrus), who writes *The Blood Runs Like a River through My Dreams* (2000), *The Boy and the Dog Are Sleeping* (2003), and *Geronimo’s Bones: A Memoir of My Brother and Me* (2004). Nasdiji claimed race as his identity, but his identity was questioned when it was unveiled that he plagiarized other Native American authors.

The Third hoax revealed in 2003 was the fabricated identity and “real” life story of J. T. LeRoy, who writes *Sarah* (1999), *The Heart is Deceitful* (1999), *Harold’s End* (2005), and *Labour* (2007). LeRoy’s first publication was an autobiographical tale “Baby Doll” (credited to “Terminator”) and later his first name was revealed as Jeremiah Terminator. This tale was included in a 1997 anthology of autobiographical writing. These stories involve “LeRoy’s life of drug addiction, sexual and physical abuse, prostitution, and vagrancy”
(Encyclopedia of Deception 654), and LeRoy’s autobiographical tales of abuse as a young man became cult hits. Then the mysterious story of the author’s true identity was revealed as a fabricated construction by Laura Victoria Albert. It was Albert who kept LeRoy’s identity mysterious by emphasizing that he had an extremely traumatic boyhood (“dragged away from his foster parents by his truck-stop prostitute mother” and “a grueling gamut of rape, assault, exploitation, religious indoctrination and general abuse” that he was insecure about his transgendered identity.)

In January 2006, The New York Times (an article by Warren St. John “The Unmasking of JT LeRoy: In Public, He’s a She”) disclosed that LeRoy was a literary hoax, Albert / LeRoy was convicted of fraud because LeRoy had a contract with a publisher and also gathered a lot of financial support from fans for his treatment of HIV (Albert even “signed legal documents with her fictional character’s name”).

3: What is the author?

What do these literary hoaxes do? As Christopher L. Miller defines, they shed light on two aspects of writing. One is concerning the way they represent truth, particularly about the identity of the author. Readers have faith in them. The other is about the way they create and distort reality. Miller focuses on the word “play” to elucidate the effects of literary hoaxes: he writes “the word ‘play’ is useful here because it suggests both the ludic (fun) and the theatrical masking, role-playing, impersonating” (6). One question one should address here is “What is the author?”

Roland Barthes’s essay “The Death of the Author” deals with Balzac’s Sarrasine, which is a novel of a male castrato who passes as a female, and questions such as “Who is speaking?” Barthes’ answer is literature (écriture)
Who is speaking thus? Is it the hero of the story . . . ? Is it the individual Balzac . . . ? Who is speaking thus? We shall never know, for the good reason that writing [écriture] is the destruction of every voice, of every origin. Writing is that neutral, that composite, that oblique space where our subject slips away, the [photographic] negative where every identity is lost, starting with the identity of the very body which writes.10)

Furthermore, Barthes adds “All writing is itself this special voice” and “The voice loses its origin, the author enters his own death, writing begins.”11) According to Barthes, if the identity of the author is lost, “hoax is both totally permissible and utterly inconsequential. There is no identity, no origin to steal, so . . . what? Have fun. ‘Language itself’ reigns.” (Miller 6).

How can we categorize the works by LeRoy which are entirely mixed with facts and fiction after the “real” author was revealed? Considering the fact that Laura Albert insists that the works by LeRoy are authentic autobiographies mixed up with some fictional elements, this work can be considered to be either a (semi-)autobiography or memoir.12) For example, the definition of memoir ranges from “a document note or a record, a record of historic events based on writer’s personal knowledge or experience, an autobiography or biography, an essay, or a memory kept of someone.”13) One of the most persuasive critics of the genre Julie Rak contends as follows:

Very much like the relationship of “writing” to plenitude in spoken language that Jacques Derrida explicates in his reading of Rousseau’s
“Essay on the Origin of Languages,” in autobiography criticism memoir presents itself as a threat to autobiography because it points out that there is a lack in the genre in the first place. Then, like writing, memoir offers itself as a substitute, or sublimation to what should be complete without it. (“Are Memoirs Autobiography?” 317)

Based on the notion of “supplement” by Derrida, Rak emphasizes how unstable the boundary between autobiography and memoir is. Some critics like Lee Quinby differentiate them by the standard of the extent to which the work deals with one’s life.

Whereas autobiography promotes an “I” that shares with confessional discourse an assumed interiority and an ethical mandate to examine that interiority, memoirs promote an “I” that is explicitly constituted in the reports of the utterances and proceedings of others… Unlike the subjectivity of autobiography, which is presumed to be unitary and continuous over time, memoirs… construct a subjectivity that is multiple and discontinuous. 14)

Hence, for Quinby, the function of “I” imbedded in the economy of memoirs posits resistance to the “modern era’s dominant construction of individualised selfhood” (299). In contrast to autobiography, Quinby continues, memoirs serve as a countermemory. As we have seen above, unlike static, consistent, and unified memory of self-knowledge about one’s own identity and its past histories, the memoir’s apparent discontinuity and multiplicity present digressive impressions to the readers through
inconsequential self-contained episodes that are only thinly woven in the recognition of the protagonist’s memories.

In this sense, one can contend that the works of LeRoy highlight the discontinuously connected stories about the identity formation of LeRoy through the mixture of fiction, facts, and overtly asserted “author’s” intervention into the interpretation of the works. The incongruously associated stories present a self in the middle of individual history in a way that avoids placing the self at the center of attention or interpretation. Not surprisingly, the conclusion of the texts is ambiguous and indeterminate. The young narrator bundles together everything of his youthful life so forcibly that just about everything is left to readers to be understood. What marks these texts by LeRoy are digressions, repetitions, and absences which vividly reflect fragmented inscriptions of the self.\(^{15}\)

Regarding what differentiates autobiography and memoir, Sidonie Smith and Julia Watson define these terms in *Reading Autobiography*. The memoir, they assert, is “a mode of life narrative that historically situates the subject in a social environment, as either observer or participant; the memoir directs attention more toward the lives and actions of others than to the narrator” (198). Thus, drawing on their argument, in this paper, I will regard autobiography and memoir as interchangeable.

LeRoy’s works are published and read as autobiography in the first place, and later after its disclosure as fiction, it is read as a novel or memoir. It is hard to distinguish how much they are fictional and factual. By extending the idea that the dominant figure of autobiographical discourse is the voice from beyond the grave (a variant of prosopopoeia),\(^{16}\) de Man writes that “we assume that life produces the autobiography as an act produces consequences,
To the Ear of the Other

but we cannot suggest, with equal justice, that the autobiographical project may itself produce and determine the life” (RR 69). What de Man means by this is that the “life” narrated by autobiography does not necessarily correspond to the same life that was spent by the author. Its narration is affected by “the technical demands of self-portraiture and thus determined, in all its aspects, by the resources of [the] medium” (ibid). The writing of autobiography is interrupted and disrupted by the arbitrariness of language. To de Man, it is a difficult task to determine whether a moment in a novel is fictional or autobiographical/factual. As Martin McQuillan summarizes, “what we know about figuration suggests that it is impossible to decide whether figuration produces reference in a text or whether reference produces the figure” (75). Thus, autobiography “is not a genre or a mode, but a figure of reading or of understanding that occurs, to some degree, in all texts” (RR 70).17

Based on the discussion above, this paper further takes the works by J. T. LeRoy as autofiction. Autofiction constitutes a liminal arena between fiction and nonfiction that requires continuous adjustments to the reading process as the novel vacillates between biographical fact and outright fiction” (Marjorie Worthington 471).18 Gerard Genette writes:

[T]he relationship between author and character is judicial (the author is [S]emantically responsible for the hero); between narrator and character, it is syntactic (usually based on the linguistic use of first-person I to conflate speaker with subject); and the relationship between author and narrator is pragmatic because . . . it “symbolizes the author’s serious commitment with regard to her narrative assertions.” (78)
Though LeRoy does not necessarily talk directly to readers in the way Genette has defined it, LeRoy assumes a central role of performing the autofiction in which the protagonist shares a name with the author, but the work itself is fictional. For my argument, it is not significant to identify the strict boundary or boundaries where novels’ modes change from fact to fiction. Rather, what this paper seeks to clarify lies in the narrative effect these novels perform through its relationship to a nonfictional reality.¹⁹)

4: *Author: The JT LeRoy Story* (directed by Jeff Feuerzeig 2016)

Jeff Feuerzeig’s documentary film *Author: The JT LeRoy Story* (2016) is about the scandal that erupted from Laura Albert’s literary hoax. It is Albert who always takes the lead and keeps replacing one myth with another. She claims that LeRoy does exist in her mind as another persona and LeRoy comes from her traumatized experiences during her childhood.

The popularity of the genre autofiction has much to do with the boom of memoir. Ben Yagoda has pointed out in *Memoir: A History* that there are double primary reasons for it; “as a market commodity and as a part of discourses about personal identity that appear in many aspects of American public life.”²⁰) Furthermore, he argues, “Memoir has become the central form of the culture: not only the way stories are told, but the way arguments are put forth, products and properties marketed, ideas floated, acts justified, reputations constructed or salvaged” (28). Indeed, sales figures in personal memoirs increased by 400% from 2004 to 2008 (Rak 8).

The movie *Author* retold by his inventor involves the account of the dazzling bestselling non-fiction writer who actually did not exist. As the title shows, this documentary film has to do with authorship as its central
To the Ear of the Other

concern. When LeRoy was still “alive,” his works were considered to be autobiographical. Still, when LeRoy is proven not to exist, the fact shows Laura Albert has broken the “autobiographical pact” as defined by Philippe Lejeune in *On Autobiography* (1989).

“[T]he autobiographical pact,” a tacit agreement a reader makes with the author of a text which has non-fictional truth claims. The reader has to assume that the author’s proper name in the world outside the text matches the name on the cover of the book, and the first-person pronoun within the narrative itself. If any of these elements do not match, the book is considered to be fictional. The autobiographical pact proved to be a useful tool in the attempt to understand what the generic properties of autobiography might be (or, to the skeptical eyes of Paul de Man, what autobiography could never be).²¹)

With the advent of the disclosure article, the autobiographical novel then transformed itself into a novel. The status of LeRoy became a fiction and a protagonist/author became a narrator.

Should we say that LeRoy has completely stopped being an author? The answer is no. As Michel Foucault writes in “What is an Author” (1979), LeRoy still assumes an author function. It can be summarized as follows:

(1) the author function is linked to the juridical and institutional system that encompasses, determines, and articulates the universe of discourses; (2) it does not affect all discourses in the same way at all times and in all types of civilization; (3) it is not defined by the
spontaneous attribution of a discourse to its producer, but rather by a
series of specific and complex operations; (4) it does not refer purely
and simply to a real individual, since it can give rise simultaneously to
several selves, to several subjects–positions that can be occupied by
different classes of individuals.\(^{22}\)

After the discussions by Barthes and Foucault, the intention of the author no
longer works as the final order in judging and interpreting meanings of texts,
nor does the author’s biographical background. This does not imply the
death of the author, but LeRoy still is an author in terms of its author
function. LeRoy as an author is a construct by Laura Albert.

Since the movie is in the total grip of an unreliable narrator (Albert), it
rather renders many questions mysterious. When LeRoy becomes a
celebrated star of the literary scene, Albert has established complete set-ups
to implement the plan with her husband Geoff and Savannah Knoop, who
becomes more used to playing LeRoy’s role in public than Albert expected.

5: The Death of “I”-ness

After the premises of autobiographical pacts are broken, what is left with
LeRoy? What does it indicate? Some call LeRoy a con, and considers him just
a fabrication by Albert. Others still believe that LeRoy does exist and believe
in him. Still others contend that the fact of its identity itself is another
fabrication. Either way, LeRoy still works as an “author” of his works. How
about Laura Albert?

In the case of Albert, things are more complicated. We come to ask
questions like: What motivates her to create LeRoy and why does she
attempt to make readers read her book as LeRoy’s autobiographical novels? When one investigates these issues, Derrida’s analyses of the function of subject in autobiography serve as a useful reference.

I have never said [he tells Richard Kearney] that the subject should be dispensed with. Only that it should be deconstructed. To deconstruct the subject does not deny its existence. There are subjects, ‘operations’ or ‘effects’ (effets) of subjectivity. This is an incontrovertible fact. To acknowledge this does not mean, however, that the subject is what it says it is. The subject is not some meta-linguistic substance or identity, some pure cogito of self-presence; it is always inscribed in language. My work does not, therefore, destroy the subject; it simply tries to resituate it. 23)

Thus, it is revealed through the interview with Kearney what matters in Derrida’s discussion about the deconstruction of the subject is highly embodied in the form of something autobiographical. As we can infer from above-quoted passage, the subject is displaced through writing, interpretation and communication. In this procedure, like making a signature by the “I” who signs the work, Derrida finds reproducibility and iterability. Unlike Austin and Searle who regard signature as a stable bridge between presence and origin, Derrida finds the divisions of the sameness. In Derrida’s fashion, there stands “no self-present and conscious subject who… can denote its undivided identity, intention and origin” (Bellou 165). The iterability of the signature / self dislodges and deconstructs the notion of a singular author and an individual self. As Bellow stipulates,
Iterability fissures the concept of the subject by introducing distance, delay and division into writing. What is taken to be the expression of an undisputed source or origin—the signature—demarcates either the limits nor the author of a work. Instead, it opens up the work to a multiplicity of traversing, competing, intervening and generally delimiting textual operations.\textsuperscript{24}

Then, Derrida extends the notion of autobiography to such notions as “heterography,” “Allobiography,” and “thanatography.” As Bellou explains, heterography and allobiography indicate “the deconstruction of narrative identity, and thanatography the death of the author as an identifiable and empirical subject within wiring” (165), with the latter questioning the genre of biography itself. What Derrida does here is to reorganize the autobiographical tales related with the death of the subject, the death of “I”-ness. All writing, Derrida contends, especially autobiography, is “of a testamentary nature” (Bellou166).

As long as autobiography always supplements and displaced itself (as displaced others), it always has to closely deal with others that people have contact with in their lives. In this respect, Peggy Kamuf notes:

There is autobiography circulating through all the transfers of meaning. The circulation of readability, of iterability, is the circulation of a deviation and of autobiography as always already the autobiography of the other. Or, in still other terms, one could say that there is autobiography of a “we” given by the division, the deviation, and the sharing of voices. (Kamuf 126)\textsuperscript{25}
Based on the notion of iterability, what Kamuf characterizes as autobiography is its natures of division, deviation, and others’ voices in it. When one writes about one’s own life, his autobiography needs to be about one’s family members, friends, family’s friends, lovers, friends’ friends, colleagues and so on.

6: Fake Autobiographies

[W]hen I wrote *Sarah*, I was male-identified, and now, I’m not. I don’t know what I am. So it’s easier if people decide it is not me, then I won’t be held down. So many people have claimed me as their own, so I guess the best thing is to confuse them all. (LeRoy)²⁶

Considering the fact that LeRoy’s/Albert’s autobiographical works implicate trauma narratives, his/her works can be read as evidence, as examples of testimony. For instance, in “Disappearances,” the first tale of *The Heart is Deceitful*, the 4-year-old boy Jeremiah was compulsorily taken away from caring foster parents by his atrocious and destructive mother. Sarah, his mother, both verbally and physically abuses (like scalding baths and constant beating that eventually lead to his self-mutilation) Jeremiah. How can we interpret this kind of evidence?

In his interpreting Maurice Blanchot’s fictional text *The Instant of My Death*, Derrida attends to the difficulties posited in testifying to the encounter with death. In my own analyses of Albert’s traumatic writings, I find it extremely important to refer to the way Derrida theorizes the encounter with death, since the encounter with death shares a number of features of traumatic experiences that hinder the articulation of such experiences.²⁷ Though turned out to be fictional, the texts nevertheless
provide testimonial evidence of trauma experienced by characters and Albert, whose nature of trauma complicates the articulation of traumatic experiences. Because of their ambiguous status between fiction and autobiography, they open up possibilities for readers’ intersubjective reading.

As to the performativity of autobiography, Leigh Gilmore states as follows:

The performative aspect of life-writing—the capacity of utterance in an autobiographical speech act to materialise the “I” narrated—intertwines with the constative aspect of autobiography—its capacity to describe past aspects of one’s life. Both are part of a textual system—language, broadly, but self-representational speech acts more narrowly—in which telling the truth necessarily emerges within a tropological system of substitutions involving the “I.” For de Man, the fundamental tension between the transparency autobiography seems to offer and the impossibility of making good on this offer is inescapable. (25)

By contrasting performative and constative, Gilmore focuses on the performative aspect of the autobiography. Even though LeRoy’s autobiographical works are “faked,” they still are contingent on the ideologies of a particular time.

[F]akes suggest that fakery is a product of its time and part of larger discursive formations of power. They emerge in specific and contingent historical moments, within particular discourses, and our susceptibility to them is partly attributable to the politics of particular time periods. (22)
Likewise, Gillian Whitlock highlights that fakery is a product of specific discursive schemes emerging from particular and contingent historical moments. She contends that a “literary hoax is a definitive event: it brings to light social, political, and ethical investments of narrators, readers, and publishers of life narrative” (165). Rather than making fiction/nonfiction dichotomy in understanding fake memoirs, what matters is to regard “the literary and the testimonial as twin properties of memoir broadly.” Rather than arguing that “fakes threaten memoir because they are unlike it, that they are fiction rather than nonfiction, that they are lies and not facts,” one could contend that “fakery teaches us about vulnerabilities at the heart of memoir” (Gilmore 23).

Thus, instead of repeating that LeRoy’s works’ unveiled fictionality that just betrays readers who believed in its own authenticity, this paper emphasizes the importance attending to the literary and the testimonial elements in it. This way, the discussion can avoid falling into the bane and unproductive analyses of whether one work is fiction or nonfiction and instead open up new possibilities of life writing.

7: Life Writing and Norms

It is Judith Butler who analyzes several discourses surrounding the subject when one establishes one’s identity. In Giving an Account of Oneself, she takes into consideration ethics in life-writing and difficulties in testimonial acts. In the following excerpt, Butler indicates how much “I” has always already been “usurped” its own authenticity by the social norms from which one’s identity emerges.
the “I” has no story of its own that is not also the story of a relation—or set of relations—to a set of norms. Although many contemporary critics worry that this means there is no concept of the subject that can serve as the ground for moral agency and moral accountability, that conclusion does not follow. The “I” is always to some extent dispossessed by the social conditions of its emergence. (8)

Butler maintains that there are no conditions for giving a complete and transparent self-representation of oneself because subjects are produced in specific and contingent historical contexts. As Gilmore explains, “[t]his is not because people are duplicitous or lying is unavoidable, but, rather, because the conditions for offering such an account do not simply exist, transparency should not be the standard” (29). Whereas Albert keeps telling her harmful and painful experiences, such testimonial and documentary accounts cannot meet such a standard of transparency (there always involve mismatches, opacities, and dissonances). Following this discussion, Gilmore asks whether Butler’s argument only holds good when there is good faith “with the standard of transparency in place, blame, censure, and gullibility abound” and raises the following questions:

[D]oes the site of negotiation between the “I” and the conditions of its emergence name the precise location where both fakes and other accounts of the self emerge? Does the demand that such accounts be transparent—along with the claim that fakes and memoir, like fiction and memoir, are non-identical—permit fakery to take hold?28)
In life-writing, every time one makes judgements, these judgements implicate ethical choices and contain within themselves the traces of their negotiations and oscillations among social norms. Then literary hoax highlights the judgements that always are accompanied in the usages of the autobiographical “I.” Whenever this autobiographical “I” are constructed and rewritten, there emerge hierarchies of value and the discourses of race, class, gender, and sexuality through the enactments of the normativity. Gilmore continues as follows:

[F]akery does not defile the truthfulness of autobiography so much as challenge the unspoken values on which it rests, namely, a hostility to otherness at the normative core of life-writing, masking now as at other times (if in different ways) as an admirable desire to engage with transparent and knowable others.29)

Through the destabilization of enshrined normative discourses, fakery incites epistemological unease and performatively produces a porous space in truth-telling.

8: Intersubjective Autobiography

Thus, one of the important performative aspects in autobiography contains testimony as we have confirmed above. If we annex fake memoirs with testimony narrative, then we need to attend to the discussion of trauma and testimony presented by Shoshana Felman / Dori Laub. In a section titled “In an Era of Testimony” in “Education and Crisis, or the Vicissitudes of Teaching,” Felman stresses the importance of the function of testimony and
its performative nature in memoir and autobiography.

What the testimony does not offer is, however, a completed statement, a totalizable account of those events... Testimony is, in other words, a discursive practice, as opposed to a pure theory. To testify—to vow to tell, to promise and produce one’s own speech as material evidence for truth—is to accomplish a speech act, rather than to simply formulate a statement. As a performative speech act, testimony in effect addresses what in history is action that exceeds any substantialized significance, and what in happenings is impact that dynamically explodes any conceptual reifications and any constative delimitations. (Italics original, 16–17)

Placing the above discussion in the conversation with the next argument by Gilmore, one can approach the analyses of life-writing (such as memoir and autobiography) by focusing on how testimony works in it and several issues involved in it. Gilmore states,

[F]ake memoirs tell us less about the line dividing fiction from nonfiction, and its putative correspondence to facts and truth, and more about the limits of our current response to representations of life, especially when they involve trauma, the complex affective demands trauma imposes, and the insufficiency of genre to underwrite an adequate ethic of engagement with truth-telling in memoir. (21)

As Gilmore suggests, this type of analysis that delves into traumatic
representations sheds light on what might have been overlooked or remained uncovered otherwise. This testimony requires the intersubjective correspondence between narrator and listener and writer and reader. Harriet Davidson also writes:

The act of witnessing, as a performative act, unsettles established boundaries between writer and reader (or speaker and audience), between fiction and history, between experience and ideology, even between the past and future of memory and desire. The positions of speaker and audience are crucial here, and in fact testimony establishes a contract with its audience different from a literary one. The testimony demands belief (though it may not always get it), though not in the historical accuracy of its story.³⁰

This is because of the act of testimony, especially its performative oscillation between text and context. In other words, it is the interpretative enterprise of reading autobiography that posits the process as a mutual and intersubjective process. As shown above, Davidson contends that “[t]he testimony is not a recital of history, but is the creation of a history through an intersubjective process in which both the speaker and hearer gain their witnessing subjectivity through the new knowledge of a shared situation.” It constitutes an ideological intersection where “subjectivity and knowledge are created in the testimony.” Thus, both “witnessing and testifying are always, in literature as much as in the legal system, performative acts, relying on complex notions of being here and being there” (Davidson 165).
9: Hybrid Testimony and the Rhizome Adaptation of LeRoy Scandal

The testifying traumatized subject discussed above corresponds to Laura Albert as a “narrator” through LeRoy / Knoop in the works of LeRoy. It also involves us readers to be her trauma’s witness who are required to resituate her narratives. Now that a series of turmoil exists around LeRoy scandal, Albert has started to talk again about the scandal in a semi-documentary film by interweaving her own traumatized autobiographical facts and fiction. What Albert does in the film provides a process of creating an intersubjective space between author and reader and creator and viewer.

In order to articulate such mechanism of discursive intrusion, one can refer to the next excerpt from Derrida’s *Dissemination*: For Derrida, autobiography does not mean a form of self-representation, but rather it creates an in-between space. As Derrida writes:

> But who is it that is addressing you? Since it is not an “author”, a “narrator”, or a “deus ex machina”, it is an “I” that is both part of the spectacle and part of the audience; an “I” that, a bit like “you”, attends (undergoes) its own incessant, violent reinscription within the arithmetical machinery; an “I” that, as functioning as a pure passageway for operations of substitution is not some singular and irreplaceable existence, some subject of “life”, but only, moving between life and death, reality and fiction, etc., a mere function or phantom.31)

This reconceptualization of auto/biography delves into searching for a closing interpretation of who LeRoy is. As a narrator who repeatedly intrudes
into the works through the form of comments on an extradiegetic scale. Because of the repeated intrusions by the narrator and authors (J. T. LeRoy, Savannah Knoop, and Laura Albert), the subjectivity of LeRoy has been overwritten again and again.

In the case of Laura Albert, she continued to overwrite new identities one after another through LeRoy to find her own way of life-writing as if to fill in the blanks of her blankness. Investigating the construction of self in autobiographical work problematizes Paul John Eakin’s observation that “the autobiographical self is whole, stable, and continuous.”\(^32\) Regarding the struggle for a lost identity, Amy-Katerini Prodromou writes,

> On the one hand, the loss of a stable self through the disorienting experience of illness acts as catalyst for the search for a unified, whole self. On the other, the same experiences can be destabilizing that writers’ sense of a core being is left damaged in many ways and identity as a shifting, flexible concept becomes necessary to understanding the complex nature of recovery within the subgenre of narratives of loss that I call “memoirs of textured recovery.” (60)

After the search for a unified identity, what Albert has left with readers is traces of fragmented identities that are exactly the traces of her textured recovery. LeRoy’s works involve the problem of an author who pretends to write as a male, transvestism, transgender, racial passing, reality show culture, mass media and public consumption, postmodern fictionality. The film *Author:* traces the complex process of Albert’s struggle to recover from mental illness and traumatic experiences, and continues the discussion of
Albert’s loss in endeavoring to come to terms with the falsified identities. She had desperate needs to falsify herself.

The rhizome adaptation of LeRoy scandal has led to the film adaptation of *Heart Is Deceitful above All Things* by LeRoy, the documentary film *Author*, and the most recent *Jeremiah Terminator LeRoy* (the film based on the memoir *Girl Boy Girl* [2008] by Savannah Knoop, who disguised herself and pretended to be the celebrated author LeRoy) in 2018. This whole process of rhizome adaptations in life-writing constitutes “hybrid testimony” of one’s traumatic pasts.

Hybrid testimony clearly not a documentary form concerned to establish bare facts, like a news report, nor is it a mode of engagement with the past that is born entirely of the imagination, like a work of fiction. It specifically demands that we navigate beyond the oppositional logic of silence and language, inside and outside, fact and fiction, truth and lies, that has dominated critical responses to Holocaust literature, refusing the absolute dominion of any of these terms. This resistance to clear epistemological categorisation links to the way that these works suggest meanings whose enormities are equally difficult to grasp. (Matthew Boswell 153–4)

By avoiding reading the texts only through the lens of the binary of (in)fidelity, this reading enables readers to engage with the paratextual surround (Smith and Watson, 100), and intersubjectively witness the affective resonances of the texts. LeRoy’s works offers a comprehensive configuration on which one can analyze the function of hybrid testimony.
Conclusion

Drawing on Smith and Watson, we can say that when we address such self-referential writing like LeRoy’s works “as an intersubjective process that occurs within a dialogic exchange between writer and reader/viewer rather than as a story to be proved or falsified.” We can shift the focus of analysis “from assessing and verifying knowledge to observing processes of communicative exchange and understanding.” This particularly applies to autobiographies of mental breakdown filled with uncertainties in which the boundary between the fabled and the documented is unstable (Smith and Watson 145–46). By redefining the terms of “truth,” one cannot just perceive autobiographical writing “as either factual truth or simple fact.” As an intersubjective mode, it displaces “the authority of the autobiographical” and it does not reinforce or validate notions of objective truth. Instead, it refocuses the tracks of “previously uncharted truths of particular lives” (Ibid 16–17). The body of LeRoy’s writing attests to the importance of documenting/narrating for the individual/collective history of trauma. Yet these life stories are not works of historiography. How these autobiographical memoirs are read, interpreted, and witnessed is central to the collective memories of America’s past traumas.

When Author: The JT LeRoy Story was released in 2016, The Oxford Dictionary picked up the word “post-truth” as the word of the year. It is defined as “relating to or denoting circumstances in which objective facts are less influential in shaping public opinion than appeals to emotion and personal belief.” In this sense, our human recognition can all be subjective. As the critic Ronald Sukenick: “All versions of “reality” are of the nature of
fiction. There’s your story and my story, there’s the journalist’s story and the historian’s story, there’s the philosopher’s story and the scientist’s story—Our common world is only a description . . . reality is imagined” (113). In E. L. Doctorow’s words, “There is no fiction or nonfiction as we commonly understand it: there is only narrative.” For Hayden White, historical narratives are figurative fictions, “the content of which are as much *invented as found* and the forms of which have more in common with their counterparts in literature than they have with those in the sciences” (82, italics original). In his later works, he further emphasizes the important role played by figurative language in forming historical narratives.

Albert herself writes:

Everything you need to know about me is in my books, in ways that I don’t even understand. I think some people take it for granted to be acknowledged and not overlooked. My experience was to be completely ignored and disregarded and disdained. That’s what I write about. [And yet in my writing and in my life] something gave me hope. This hope is in the books too and of course the ultimate hope is that I can reveal myself and you won’t go away. (Laura Albert in Nathaniel Rich, 167)

In a time when we have to “choose” which reality to be true, Albert produces J. T. LeRoy, through whose works s/he prescribes her/himself as traumatized subject. Rather than trying to determine whether the works are autobiographical enough or not, the question at issue is how autofictions like LeRoy/Albert’s elicit readers’ expectations of memoir/autobiography by featuring an authorial protagonist.
What is gained by this narrative maneuver? This paper’s interest lies in the narrative effect these works perform by evoking the traditions of memoir/autobiography. What kind of voices are heard by readers? How are they produced and consumed? Due to its nature of autofiction that fluctuates between biographical fact and total fiction, they occupy “a liminal space between fiction and nonfiction” (Worthington 151). The works by LeRoy require readers to make continuous adjustments in the reading process. In other words, this vacillating intersubjective reading offers the possibility of narrative suture by repeatedly evoking the presence/absence of the author-figure outside the text where the author’s actual life may or may not be correctly depicted. Writing self into self-writing by Albert calls readers’ attention to its own fictionality and this autofiction forces readers living in an age of poststructuralist view that “any attempt at narrativization is fictional by its own nature” to reconsider the dynamics around hybrid testimony surrounding (fake) life-writing (Worthington 152).

It is in the dynamics of the conversation between de Man, Derrida, and trauma theory that the potential of literature as a vehicle for articulating testimonial evidence to, and memories of, trauma emerges. The interaction among these texts present readers with insights into significant glimpses that trauma might otherwise have rendered inaccessible.

When interpreted within the matrix of the Derridean trace, what Albert, Knoop, and the readers have been doing is tracing marks of the relationship with others under erasure in autofiction that appear before and beyond language/writing. LeRoy’s works and its scandal embody how the concept of writing and the other (irreducible alterity) are inextricably interwoven. Through its intersubjective dynamics where traumatic past memories and
mourning are always being inscribed, LeRoy and his/her autofiction open up endless future interpretive possibilities.

Notes
1) This work is supported by JSPS KAKENHI Grant-in-Aid for Young Scientists (B) [15K16704].
2) For the sake of brevity, I use the following term “Ear” for this work.
3) For this discussion, I referred to Jannah Loontjens.
4) I looked to Bellou for this interpretation of Derrida’s argument, especially 153. In the following excerpt, Derrida further develops this discussion:
   
   [T]he movement through which the book becomes a subject in itself and for itself, is not critical or speculative reflection, but is, first of all, poetry and history. For in its representation of itself the subject is shattered and opened. Writing is itself written, but also ruined, made into an abyss, in its own representation. Thus, within the book, which infinitely reflects itself and which develops as a painful questioning of its own possibility, the form of the book represents itself. (Derrida 1997, 65)
6) Kevin Young’s Bunk: The Rise of Hoaxed, Humbug, Plagiarists, Phonies, Post-Facts, and Fake News offers a thorough sketches of the cons from P. T. Barnum to Donald Trump. In this book, he compares the case of Nasdiji to that of Rachel Dolezal’s false racial claims of blackness and Grey Owl’s claim as a First Nations person. In the latter case especially, after his death, it was unveiled that he was not Indigenous and fabricated some autobiographical details.
7) This argument is built on Sue Vice, 49.
8) I referred to Steve Rose.
9) Encyclopedia of Deception, 654. With regard to fake memoir, we have Forrest Carter’s (Asa Earl Carter) The Education of Little Tree (1976), Fank McCourt’s Angela’s Ashes (1996), Margaret Seltzer, Love and Consequences: A Memoir of Hope and Survival (2008), all of whom use deception in publishing. In Seltzer’s case (she used Margaret B. Jones as a pen name), she claimed herself to be half-Native American and “wrote about life as a foster child adopted by African
American parents and as a Bloods gang member.” Later, Seltzer’s identity was unveiled as totally white. Along with these, four fake Holocaust memoirs include Helen Demidenko’s *The Hand That Signed the Paper* (Australia 1994), Binjamin Wilkomirski’s (Bruno Grosjean) *Wartime Childhood* (1995), *Fragments* (USA, 1996), Misha Defonseca’s (Monique de Wael), *Misha: A Mémoire of the Holocaust Years* (1997), and Herman Rosenblat’s *Angel at the Fence: The True Story of a Love That Survived* (2009).

10) Roland Barthes, 142.
11) Also quoted by Miller, 6.
12) See, for example, the documentary *Author: The JT LeRoy Story*, which was released 2016, recounts Albert’s trajectory largely from her perspective.
13) *OED Online*. Also referred to by Rak (2004), 317.
14) Quinby, 299.
15) One example of the repetitions can be found in a magic-realist road narrative, *Sarah*, where the image of lizard is repetitively employed not only to reflect LeRoy’s emotion but to depict the dangerous lives of prostitute.
16) I referred to Patrick Riley, 16.
17) Also quoted by Martin McQuillan, 75.
18) It was French writer Serge Doubrovsky who invented the word “autofiction” in 1977. There is a lack of consensus about the definition of autofiction and critics differ in their definition of the word, especially about which element (autobiography or fiction) should be viewed as central in the genre. For Doubrovsky, autofiction employs fiction to enact the self and highlights the realm of the self, whereas, for Gerald Genette, autofiction prioritizes fiction to the self. However, the boundaries of the self and the fictionality of self among autofiction, autobiography, and literature are blur and cannot be separable at all. In this paper, I base my discussion on Gerard Genette’s definition of autofiction “as a narrative helmed by a characterized version of the author who is by design partly based on biographical fact, but also admittedly—sometimes flamboyantly—fictional” (Worthington 481).
19) For this analysis, I referred to Worthington, especially 472.
21) Also quoted by Rak (2004), 17.
22) Foucault, 113.
23) Kearney, 125.
24) Bellou, 165.
25) Kamuf, 126.
26) Quoted in Jannah Loontjens.
27) On this point, I referred to Jessica Murray’s analyses of Yvonne Vera based on Derrida’s notions, especially 3.
28) Gilmore 29.
30) Davidson, 165.
31) Derrida, Dissemination 325.
32) I referred to Prodromou, 60.
33) I referred to Simon Gunn, 29.
35) My argument draws on Worthington’s.

Bibliography
———. *The Heart is Deceitful Above All Things*. Bloomsbury, 1999.


Film

Author: The JT LeRoy Story (DVD) 2016.