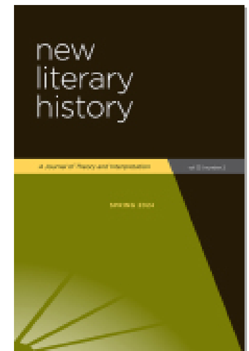
Exofiction as Autofiction: Contemporary French Fiction's Identity Crisis



Annabel L. Kim

New Literary History, Volume 55, Number 2, Spring 2024, pp. 175-194
(Article)

Published by Johns Hopkins University Press
DOI: https://doi.org/10.1353/nlh.2024.a938857

For additional information about this article
https://muse.jhu.edu/article/938857

[216.126.35.32] Project MUSE (2024-10-07 14:41 GMT) University of Virginia Libraries & (Viva)

Exofiction as Autofiction: Contemporary French Fiction's Identity Crisis

Annabel L. Kim

Abstract: In the context of contemporary French literature's turn toward the real, exofiction (fictionalized biography, roughly speaking) is often considered the antithesis to autofiction, its much better known and more visible literary cousin. Where autofiction is accused of being a narcissistic, navel-gazing form of writing, exofiction, as its prefix indicates, is framed as being turned outward, toward the world of history and the world of others, free from the self-enclosed reflexivity associated with autofiction. In this article, I take up the exofictions of three well-known contemporary French authors—Laurent Binet, Emmanuel Carrère, and Yannick Haenel—in order to argue against this definitional opposition to claim, instead, that exofiction is indeed another form of autofiction, one that taps into the *autos* of the French nation and is symptomatic of the collective identity crisis surrounding Frenchness in the twenty-first century.

Since Serge Doubrovsky coined the term *autofiction* back in the 1970s, contemporary French literature has remained firmly embedded in its investment in the *autos*.[1] Annie Ernaux, the 2022 Nobel Laureate and recognized as one of France's greatest living writers, has produced autobiographically inflected writing since the 70s, the point at which French literature began to move away from the avant-garde impersonality of the New Novel and make its oft-mentioned return to the subject. In the twenty-first century, Édouard Louis has emerged as one of France's newest literary wunderkinder, publishing bestselling works such as *En finir avec Eddy Bellegueule* (*The End of Eddy*) and *Histoire de la violence* (*History of Violence*), which narrate Louis's personal history in order to force readers to confront the violence of poverty, in the former, and the violence of rape (and of the police, as a structure of the state), in the latter. Over and over, even as autofiction is proclaimed to be outmoded and old hat, the numbers do not lie, and the success of autobiographical and autofictional texts continues to keep autofiction a dominant if not central force in contemporary French literature. To name just a couple recent examples, Emmanuel Carrère's *Yoga* is considered by many to have been a top contender for the Prix Goncourt in

[216.126.35.32] Project MUSE (2024-10-07 14:41 GMT) University of Virginia Libraries & (Viva)

2020, and Christine Angot's *Le Voyage dans l'Est* (*The Trip to the East*) won the Prix Médicis in 2021. The self sells, and self-writing is in no danger of disappearing from bookstore displays any time soon.

As the more prestigious cousin to autobiography, autofiction's significance has been established as fact: no one can argue, convincingly, that we can sidestep or ignore autofiction when it comes to understanding contemporary French literature. Trailing behind autofiction, however, as its less noticeable shadow, is exofiction, a term that refers, somewhat loosely and amorphously, to fictionalized biography, or, in Cornelia Ruhe's tighter, more precise definition, to "novels that take hold of a historical character to turn it into their subject."[2] Both autofiction and exofiction participate in what is often called a writing of the real—referential writing that points to real people, real events, real places. Where autofiction is the fictionalization of autobiography, the imbrication of the lived experience of a real self with the invention of fiction, exofiction is the imbrication of the lived experience of someone else's real self with the invention of fiction.

Exofiction, coined in 2011 by the author Philippe Vasset, explicitly points to its distinction from autofiction. Rather than a fictional production that is turned inward toward the *autos*, exofiction, as its prefix *exo* indicates, turns outward instead, toward the world that exists outside the self, outside the interiority of the first person—the world of others.[3] Vasset defines exofiction as "a literature that combines the narrative of the real as it is with the fantasies of those who make it."[4] Where autofiction combines the narrative of the real, embodied in the life and subjectivity of the author as protagonist and narrator, and said author's fantasies, exofiction turns the author's fantasies onto subjectivities other than the author's. In other words, autofiction mines the self for the material with which to construct a narrative, while exofiction mines other people's selves; the *fiction* in exo*fiction* allows the author to bypass the question of permission or consent and take creative liberties that the paratextual label of fiction accords to them. This shift in the directionality of the author's attention allows exofiction to appear to be transitive in a way that autofiction is not, to appear to break through the narcissism, or self-enclosed reflexivity, of which autofiction is accused. I reject this sharp, definitional distinction between auto- and exofiction, however, because of the way it artificially reifies a tenuous distinction between *Histoire*, history, as a collective narrative that pertains to corporate entities such as nations and states, and *histoire*, story, as a narrative on a personal, intimate scale. There is no nation without the individual subjectivities that constitute it and are themselves informed by the various collectivities and categories into which they are slotted. Given this

continuity between story and history, autofiction and exofiction cannot be defined in opposition to each other: what appears to be a shift in directionality—the inward turn of autofiction versus the outward turn of exofiction—is in fact simply a difference in scale, one that allows exofiction to reveal an author's (perceived) position in contemporary France, and within France's faltering identitarian structure. The self's identity crisis, which tends to be constrained to the limits of the self in autofiction, expands beyond the self to take history as the site in which the self can have its breakdown.

The scholarship on exofiction is quite sparse, despite the term's coinage over a decade ago.[5] I'm not interested in accounting for why the term, which is widely used by the French press, hasn't caught on in academic discussions, and there have been thoughtful critiques of its usefulness as a term: Alison James, for example, points to how "terms such as 'autofiction' or 'exofiction' risk obscuring . . . the extent of the factual turn in French literature at the end of the twentieth century," thus reminding us that the kind of authorial relation to the factual that these terms denote is not constrained by generic boundaries.[6] What interests me is the desire animating the gesture of coining a new term, i.e. the desire to differentiate a particular kind of writing of the real from the now venerable doyenne of "factional" writing that is autofiction. Underneath this nomenclatural activity and the will to differentiate is the uncomfortable truth, I argue, that exofiction is but autofiction by another name, where the sacrosanct *autos* that undergirds liberal democracy and life as we know it (what author Anne Garréta memorably describes as our tendency to "be punch drunk on our little selves") doesn't actually serve to protect and contain the individual self, but is the site of a troubling blurring of the boundary between the individual and collective.[7] With exofiction, we have an *autos* whose narcissism is literally boundless, exceeding the boundaries of the self (and of the nation) to penetrate other subjectivities (and other territories), seeping out and ceaselessly spreading like an oil spill in the ocean.

If the authorial *autos* in exofiction is so troubled and troubling, needing to transgress the boundaries that allow us to be individuals, it is because of a larger breakdown in the relation between *histoire* and *Histoire*. This breakdown stems from a collective identity crisis embodied in the *décliniste* (declinist) narratives of such reactionary white Frenchmen as Éric Zemmour and Pascal Bruckner, for instance, and the white women who seek to accede to their position by identifying with them and pronouncing the same kind of rhetoric, as embodied in the figure and political ambitions of Marine Le Pen (the son Jean-Marie Le Pen, founder of the xenophobic Front National, never had). As the increas-

ingly extreme discourse emanating from the highest ranks of French government indicates, in its sensationalist other-baiting through accusations of *islamo-gauchisme* (Islamo-leftism) and *wokisme* (wokeness) lobbed at higher education and the general populace, the myth of a unitary and coherent French identity looks mighty fragile these days.[8] With Histoire no longer an object that can be molded in service of a nostalgic *roman national* (a term that literally means national novel but refers to a nation's narrative of itself), as demonstrated by courageous attempts at writing history that force the French to contend with their collaborationist and imperialist past, the smaller, individual, personal histoire of the white Frenchman—that is, the subject position that, until fairly recently, was largely unchallenged in its appropriation of the universal, its sleight of identitarian hand that enabled it to pass itself off as neutral and abstract—is no longer able to take Frenchness as the unproblematic and unproblematized backdrop or ground for its subjective explorations. In what follows, I seek not to adjudicate the relation between factuality and fictionality or to interrogate referentiality, which is the angle that tends to dominate discussions of both autofiction and exofiction, but rather to proffer a diagnosis of what the authorial glomming onto someone else's individual history against the backdrop of collective History symptomatizes: an identity crisis of the abstract universalist subject in its death throes, which does not want to go gently into the night.[9] This identity crisis is echoed within fiction itself, which has lost sight of its right to transcend referentiality in a contemporary French ecosystem that encourages the proliferation of autofiction and exofiction at the expense of other types of writing.

Exemplary Europe

While exofiction, like autofiction (and like any kind of literary category), is heterogeneous and irreducible, and not the exclusive purview of white Frenchmen—women and people of color do produce exofictional texts as seen in the work of David Diop, Lola Lafon, and Nathalie Léger—I want to focus on three recent works of exofiction by white Frenchmen, each of whom is well respected and has a reputation beyond that of exofiction: Laurent Binet's *HHhH* (2010), Yannick Haenel's *Jan Karski* (2009), and Emmanuel Carrère's *Limonov* (2011).[10] This constellation of works represents a small but coherent subset of the exofictional genre—white Frenchmen writing about Eastern Europe—that, while it is not representative of exofiction as a whole, demonstrates the potential pitfalls of exofictional writing. It is not a coincidence that the reception

[216.126.35.32] Project MUSE (2024-10-07 14:41 GMT) University of Virginia Libraries & (Viva)

of the genre has focused on practitioners such as Carrère, Binet, and Haenel, leading to French media and literary critics (and the broader French reading public who look to them) privileging exofictional writing that projects identitarian anxieties onto displaced chronotopes—the past, non-French territory—over exofictional writing produced from the subject positions that trigger said anxieties.

I thus see exofiction as a kind of identitarian escapism into a whiter, more overtly patriarchal past that allows for both author and reader to avoid grappling with a reality characterized by minoritarian contestation led by women and sexual and racial minorities. This view is not shared by most readers and critics, who contribute, through robust sales and positive book reviews and articles, to the continued success of exofiction at each literary *rentrée*—the very mediatized moment in the fall when France's major publishers release the books they hope will be contenders for literary prizes. Ruhe, for instance, sees exofiction as a way of turning the past into a mirror onto our own present, a literary project that results in a greater self-awareness and historical consciousness.[11] In Ruhe's view, this pedagogical, edifying relation between the contemporary French reader and the history onto which exofiction opens, is what accounts for the primary interest of exofiction, which lies not in the way it combines fact and fiction, but rather the way it is a genre that is founded on what she refers to as exemplarity. Exofiction, in other words, inspires identification across temporal and cultural borders. As Ruhe describes this exemplarity: "These protagonists have been chosen as exemplary figures, because, as Petrarch said it so well, *Me quidem nihil est quod moveat quantum exempla clarorum hominum,* 'nothing moves us as much as the example of illustrious men.' It is thus not really through the relation to the historical novel or to historiographical metafiction that we need to, in my opinion, understand 'the return of the referent on the level of the character' that 'exofiction' is, but through its continuity with a much older genre, that of the example."[12] But where Ruhe frames exofiction as a *moral* site of identification, operating in a framework of self-improvement, I see the dynamic of exemplarity operating in the exofictions I discuss in a way that forecloses progress and is, if anything, the manifestation of the desire *not* to progress, but to return to a less egalitarian time and place, precisely because the temporal direction tends to be unidirectional: the present jumps back into a heroic past, but the heroic past does not irrupt into our present.[13] There is nothing about the example, or model, that guarantees that it will be replicated by the reader or receiver of such narratives of exemplarity: how many viewers of superhero movies themselves act heroically in the face of danger? The bystander effect, the social psychological theory that posits that the

presence of other people discourages individuals from intervening to help a person in need, would suggest that our relation to exemplarity is narrative, limited to the text, rather than moral.

Assuming a different relation to exofiction than Ruhe, Laurent Demanze defends exofiction not in terms of the salutary effects of taking exofiction as exemplary, but in the way it allows for a kind of freedom of movement, a circulation that liberates the subjects that we are from the vertical depth of an autofiction that fixes us through the legible individuality of its autobiographical narrators. What I view as exofiction's trademark characteristic—collapsing the collective with the individual, fusing Histoire with histoire, thereby allowing the white masculinity of the authors discussed here to take refuge outside the hexagon (as metropolitan France is called)—Demanze describes as a kind of interpenetration, of the one opening onto the other, so that the self can be placed within the larger (and by extension, more capacious) global cultural economy of stories that circulate.[14] Demanze sees this interpenetration and increased circulation as distinguishing exofiction from autofiction, but I see this dynamic as precisely the collapsing of autofiction with exofiction, where the impression of a greater freedom of movement is simply that: an impression, one that papers over the identitarian impasse France finds itself in, as we can see in the exofictional constellation examined here.

Binet's *HHhH* meticulously reconstructs the events that led to Slovak and Czech Resistance fighters Jozef Gabčík and Jan Kubiš's ultimately successful assassination attempt on Reinhard Heydrich, Heinrich Himmler's righthand man and an instrumental figure in conceiving of Adolf Hitler's Final Solution. Yannick Haenel's *Jan Karski* recounts the trajectory of Polish Resistance fighter Jan Karski from two different perspectives before delivering up an entirely invented account of Karski's meeting with Franklin Delano Roosevelt to plead on behalf of Poland's Jews; Emmanuel Carrère's *Limonov* narrates the tumultuous life of Soviet poet turned political dissident and badboy Eduard Limonov. These authors are not usually read together, but when viewed as an aggregate, these works, each of which turns to a distinctly non-French history as the fodder for their explicitly fictional productions speak to the kind of shifts we can see happening in contemporary French writing that mirror French political life.[15] The polite façade of republican universalism is cracking as France's white majority comes to grips with the reality that not only does it have to live with and alongside minorities, but that it is, like these others, endowed with an identity—marked as White in the same way that Blackness or Muslimness serves as a marker for racial, cultural, civilizational, biological, and linguistic alterity in the perspective of the dominant class.

Besides the turn to fiction as the means of renarrating or emplotting lives that have already been written, what these three works share is a turn toward and appropriation of histories that are white but not French; European, but, in their Eastern situation, cut from a decidedly different European cloth than that of France. It matters that Binet, Haenel, and Carrère, in retelling stories of white lives, are still writing European histories rather than, say, North or South American, or Australian ones. Their hexagonal gaze remains cast toward Europe for a reason, and that reason is the way Europe has come to stand in for whiteness in our contemporary cultural and political imaginaries as the birthplace of the white race, of which these other places are diasporic offshoots.

While Europe maps onto whiteness, this racial cartography is anything but simple, as "Europe" constitutes a complex and conflictual cultural and political identity (as seen in the history of wars in Europe and their continual attempts at redrawing boundaries): the European Union, as a political project that is increasingly under attack from both the right and the left, cannot be taken as representative of Europe, per se (even as its whole purpose is to represent Europe politically). Nonetheless, more than a geographical idea, Europe is a racial idea, as is patently clear in the 2016 creation of a US white supremacist group named Identity Evropa. Identity Evropa, which would change its name in 2019 to the American Identity Movement, was clearly not identifying itself or its members with Europe, culturally or politically speaking—it was, after all, a group dedicated to white US nationalism, invested in the creation of an *American* white ethnostate—but Europe, captured by the mythological name Europa (Zeus's consort after whom the European continent was named), served as convenient shorthand for the whiteness fetishized by the group's members. So it is that Russia is considered—despite being, geographically speaking, more Asian than European in its territory—to be culturally European, a status it is able to hold because of being a primarily Christian, non-Muslim nation and because of its being predominantly white.[16]

To read Binet, Haenel, and Carrère's exofictions, then, and to be confronted with their recuperation of European stories and histories, is to confront the way Europe serves as a kind of cipher for whiteness and all the things that go into constructing Europe as white. Just as one cannot gaze directly at a solar eclipse, with the eclipsing of whiteness in France, these authors turn their gaze away onto non-French Europe instead: to Czechoslovakia, Poland, and Russia—to Eastern Europe. They do so in order to recuperate the figure of the white man as a hero or martyr, in the case of Binet and Haenel, or as an antihero, in the case of Carrère. In both cases, however, the white man, as a political and

[216.126.35.32] Project MUSE (2024-10-07 14:41 GMT) University of Virginia Libraries & (Viva)

psychical subject, is in the Eurocentric position of being the center of the narrative, the locus where history both converges and originates—a position that serves to soothe the injury of becoming decentered at home, of being called on to give up the privileges that the position of white cishet masculinity has entailed. In other words, the literary, textual decentering of France only serves to displace the locus of its historically hexagonal Eurocentrism, reembedding it in Eastern Europe instead. The stabilization and reinforcement of white masculinity that comes with these extraordinary individual histories extends westward, reinforcing and stabilizing the hexagonal white cishet male *citoyen* (citizen) that feels increasingly beleaguered in a twenty-first-century context where France's sexual and racial minorities are increasingly vocal in claiming their right to equal status and treatment.[17] What seems like the writing of difference—national and temporal difference—functions instead as a writing of identification, where the French authors fold themselves and their identities into those of the men whose stories they renarrate, which serve as cover.

Binet's *HHhH* and Haenel's *Jan Karski*, despite both centering white masculine narratives of heroism in the face of colonization by the Soviet Union—a reminder that white people can also be victims of imperialism—are, in some ways, diametrically opposed texts. Binet meticulously documented his writing of his novel, working through, on the page, the temptation to invent scenes and garnish the historical documentation surrounding the events and persons in question, only to align himself, time and time again, with fact over fiction, chastising himself for those moments where he invented details to embellish his narrative. Haenel, by contrast, openly gave himself over to complete fabrication in the third section of *Karski*, writing against known fact. Binet's and Haenel's approaches to narrating Eastern European Resistance efforts in World War II were so different as to lead Claude Lanzmann, a guardian of Holocaust memory and testimony, to praise Binet as demonstrating "an unparalleled honesty and subtlety . . . an absolute originality" while excoriating Haenel for writing "the worst distortions" and, "having lost all connection to the truth," misrepresenting Karski. Where, for Lanzmann, Haenel is a "measly ideologue" driven by the moralizing desire to cast the Allies during the War as complicit, through inaction, with Hitler's genocidal project, Binet is on the other hand a true writer, in both senses of "true."[18] The desire to be "faithful" to history and the desire to have one's way with it, if we are to accept Lanzmann's readings of these two exofictions, converge in both writers' seizing on the lives of their respective Resistance fighters to bring them to a twenty-first-century French audience. Undergirding these similarly opposed literary projects is the

authorial desire to insert oneself into the diegetic and historical space of one's real characters. Exofiction serves, then, as a kind of metaleptic bridge connecting narrative space and historical space only to collapse them together, histoire and Histoire casting the same narrative, textual shadow. In a moment where the distinction between private and public, authenticity and performance, between reality and fabrication, fact and facture, has become worn away to the point of being completely translucent, this melding of personal story and collective history is but another manifestation of this boundary blurring, through which Binet and Haenel project themselves into their texts.

Throughout the text, Binet casually and continuously inserts his own subjectivity and life in the first person, musing on various girlfriends' reactions to his obsession with his protagonists, recounting his visit to the scene where the fateful showdown between Gabčík and Kubiš and Heydrich and his SS forces took place. Binet, in a masterfully metaleptic ending, forces his world and his heroes' to collapse when he ends the novel with a beginning: Binet imagines a boat on the Baltic Sea where Gabčík will meet his comrade and coassassin, Kubiš for the first time: "'Got a light, comrade?' Gabčík recognizes the Moravian accent. The lighter's flame illuminates his countryman's face. A dimpled chin, lips made for smoking, and in the eyes—it's quite striking—a little bit of the world's goodness. 'My name's Jan,' he says. Smoke curls into the air and vanishes. Gabčík smiles silently. They'll have plenty of time to get to know each other during the journey."[19] Binet could have easily ended the novel here, closing the circle of these two men's relationship, but he chooses to write a few more sentences instead: "Mixed with the shadows of the soldiers in civilian clothes who pace around the boat are other shadows: disoriented old men, misty-eyed lone women, well-behaved children holding a younger brother's hand. A young woman who looks like Natacha stands on deck, her hands on the railing, one leg bent up at the knee, playing with the hem of her skirt. And me? I am also there, perhaps."[20] The narrative focus zooms out from that fateful encounter between the two men, which will change the course of history, to pan across the anonymous masses of ordinary people—the old men, women, and children who will not be actors in the war the way those two men will be. Binet plucks out one silhouette in particular, making her resemble his ex-lover, Natacha, and uses that resemblance, which ties that woman crossing the Baltic Sea at the height of World War II to a woman living comfortably in peacetime in the twenty-first century, to project himself back into history. *HHhH*, which begins with Gabčík—"Gabčík—that's his name—is a character that really did exist"—ends with Binet, who posits his existence in more tentative terms: instead of the emphatic assertion

that Gabčík really existed, we have Binet saying that *perhaps* he, Binet, is there. [21] This tentativeness is disingenuously coy, because the text that we have just read is the evidence that Binet is there, on the page, on the boat insofar as it exists as a fabrication of Binet's imagination. The History in which Gabčík really exists converges with the Story in which Binet really exists. This is the authorial gesture by which Binet will make Gabčík's story his own, his subjectivity transposed onto Gabčík's like the overlays in depictions of the human body in encyclopedias.

A similar transposition occurs in Haenel's reinvention of Karski's meeting with FDR, when Haenel moves abruptly from the objectivity of the third person description of Karski in the first two parts of the text, and his paraphrase of preexisting narratives of Karski's life, to a first person narrative in the third and final part. This last part, which constitutes the fiction that enabled *Jan Karski* to be published with *roman* (novel]) on the front cover, begins as follows: "We/they [*on*] let the Jews be exterminated. No one [*personne*] tried to stop it, no one *wanted* to try to stop it. When I [*je*] transmitted the message from the Warsaw ghetto to London, and then Washington, they [*on*] did not believe me."[22] These opening sentences constitute a kind of pronominal drama in three acts that, through the way pronouns orient and constitute subjectivity, mirror Haenel's own relation to Karski.[23] We begin with the impersonal indefinite *on*, which both includes Haenel and excludes him, then move on to the negative *personne*, nobody, which is an empty, gaping pronominal and subjective space that evacuates the *on* that that was presented to us in the previous sentence. This open space is then occupied by a *je*, an I that refers to Karski, who, up to this point, had been a third person *il,* and to the authorial I (Haenel) that carries and contains it. Haenel, through his decision to narrate Karski's story in the first person here, effectively proclaims, "I am Karski, Karski is me." As with Binet, there is the will toward projection, toward the fusion of author and historical character. Both Binet and Haenel are eager to establish an identification with their respective characters, to replace a now problematic French whiteness with the heroic Europeanness of these Resistance fighters—at least during the duration of their novels.

At first glance, Carrère's Russian text would appear to eschew the identification and projection that operate in Binet and Haenel's texts. Carrère establishes a temporal and narrative distance, making explicit that the life he is recounting is not his own and is removed from his own. But *Limonov* still works to consolidate and shore up white French masculine subjectivity, not through projection either pronominally or metaleptically into its protagonists' stories, as with Haenel and Binet, but rather, through establishing Russia/the USSR as a parallel nation

[216.126.35.32] Project MUSE (2024-10-07 14:41 GMT) University of Virginia Libraries & (Viva)

to France, as matching France in its universalist ambitions and in its tainted history of violent imperialism and internecine conflict. France's bloody Revolution finds an analogue in the Bolshevik revolution that ushered in the era of the *tovarisch,* or comrade, the socialist counterpart to France's abstract universal democratic subject, the *citoyen,* or citizen. These two historically white nations stand apart from their other European counterparts through their singularly ambitious and totalizing universalist political projects. This shared exceptionality can give rise to either identification or disidentification, but both have the consequence of buoying Carrère's position as a representative of French white masculinity. In the case of identification, *Limonov,* as the narrative of an exemplary individual standing firm against the violent repression meted out by the State, situates Carrère as an individual who would rise above and be detached from the condemnation his State deserves. In the case of disidentification, just as the nation is a foil for Limonov, so too does Russia serve as a foil for France: it allows the French position to be one that claims that France isn't and hasn't been as bad as Russia under Vladimir Putin; in comparison, France is a beacon of democracy and human rights! Carrère's work, then, lends itself either to strengthening his individual identity through a possible identification with his ordinary (anti)hero (part of the point of *Limonov* is to show that Limonov is, at the end of the day, just a man), or to bolstering his national identity by establishing a clear contrast with a nation that some might argue has wrought more damage on the stage of global history than its hexagonal counterpart.

Using Russia as a negative foil against which France appears as a relatively less problematic nation is undoubtedly not Carrère's conscious intention, but rather a structural consequence of the comparison he sets up. Carrère professes an affinity for and a sense of connection to Russia, and this connection is personal: his mother, Hélène Carrère d'Encausse, a specialist in Russian history as well as the late *sécrétaire perpetuel* (perpetual secretary) of the Académie française, was of Georgian origin, and the daughter of a White Russian, Georges Zourabichvili, who fled to France following the Bolshevik revolution, worked for the Germans during the Nazi occupation of France, and was executed after the liberation for collaboration. Rather than turning, as do Binet and Haenel, to those Eastern European nations that were colonized by Russia in order to recuperate white masculinity, Carrère turns instead to Russia itself to find an instance of internal, homegrown heroic dissidence. The fact remains that Carrère must look outside France to be able to perform this recuperative narration. Russia, as seen in Carrère's *Un roman russe* (*My Life as a Russian Novel*) (2007), which narrates this shameful familial

history despite his mother's opposition, is the site of fraught identitarian stakes for the author, who, despite being thoroughly French in his upbringing, cannot but be haunted by his Russian roots, by the mother tongue that his mother did not transmit to him.[24] Carrère is hybrid: Russian roots onto which a French trunk has been grafted. The question of national and cultural identity is thus an ambivalent one for Carrère, but one dimension of his identity that never wavers is his alignment with masculinity. While Carrère's oeuvre, written from a firmly white and masculine perspective, is marked by a constant self-exposure that ostensibly renders his position vulnerable, I would argue that this vulnerability is but a performance of vulnerability, given how the introspective dimension his writing often takes on—as when he reflects on his shortcomings as a husband or partner, or recognizes his selfishness or failure to live up to others' expectations—never results in a destabilization or decentering of his identity as a white man, never questions these categories to which he belongs and the privileges that follow from that belonging.[25] This identification with white masculinity perhaps explains why, in *Limonov*, Carrère expresses a surprising amount of sympathy for Putin, who has constructed his entire persona around being an unapologetic exemplar of white masculinity vis-à-vis an emasculated Europe. Indeed, Carrère frames both Limonov and Putin's trajectories as twinned narratives of individuals who, in navigating the transition from Soviet to post-Soviet Russia, become extraordinary figures, leaders of opposing movements, and the common ground for their exceptional trajectories is virility, "these virile airs."[26] If Russia is virile, then France, as a representative of the European project, is not.

The Unbearable Whiteness of Being

I want to insist on the importance of the fact that the Europe to which these authors turn their attention is specifically Eastern Europe. They do not mine the histories of other Western European countries, or of Northern Europe. When it comes to narrating these incredible individual histories of resistance and of unwavering conviction in the face of colonization, in the case of Binet and Haenel, and unjust oppression or imprisonment, in the case of Carrère, these authors did not look to Scandinavia, passing over Denmark's rescue of its Jews during World War II, and they turned away from homegrown, well-trodden, and long critiqued French narratives of resistance. These hexagonal authors look east to the Europe that is geographically halfway between the Western Europe that stands in for Europe itself and the Middle East that repre-

sents the Orient, the exotic foil against which Europe derives its white, non-Muslim identity. Eastern Europe, oriental Europe, is a Europe where the sharp contours of national identity become blurred, suspended—it is the site in which the formation of whiteness, of Europeanness, plays out in its messiness (as is all too evident in Russia's invasion of Ukraine and the attempts at reorganizing and renegotiating Europe that it has caused). Eastern Europe is where difference (dissimilarity) clashes against identity (similarity): for example, Kubiš and Gabčík, a Czech and Slovak, are different from each other but can be assigned a unitary identity (that of Czechoslovakia) that unites them as being different from the Russians and the Germans, but they are closer to these foreign nations than they are to Western Europe's Romance heritage and culture.

In Eastern Europe, we can see the complexity of identity play out. Identity/difference is a matter of scale and comparand, but the underlying foundation is whiteness. And it is this unifying whiteness that allows authors such as Binet, Haenel, and Carrère to appropriate Eastern Europe for themselves, telescoping out far enough for France, with its imperialist and collaborationist history, to disappear from view, and shifting the focus instead onto white (masculine) heroic resistance. Christy Wampole has demonstrated in her examination of what she calls "degenerative realism"—a corpus that comprises reactionary figures like Michel Houellebecq and Frédéric Beigbeder, whose response to feeling attacked as white men is to write Francocentric books that announce France's demise and continued decline—that it is white men who, in the contemporary sociopolitical landscape, are the ones to feel most injured and targeted by wokisme and shifting cultural and demographic tides.[27] And while Binet, Haenel, and Carrère could hardly be characterized as reactionary or right wing, being more assimilable to a generally left, respectable French literary milieu, their Eastern European historical narratives serve as a buoy for a white male out at sea, buffeted by the waves of both increasing geopolitical irrelevance and the discomfort of being treated as White, as possessors of an identity, which is precisely what the *décliniste* authors in Wampole's corpus are writing against.

Exofiction is not the only genre in which white men take literary refuge, nor is referential writing closed off to the identities that are viewed as threats to white masculinity. Houellebecq's white male protagonists come to us in unambiguously fictional works, and autofiction, the best known genre of referential writing, includes authors such as Édouard Louis and Annie Ernaux, mentioned earlier, who write from a position of structural marginality (class and sexuality, in the case of Louis, class and gender, in the case of Ernaux) as opposed to the feeling of marginality that animates white male ennui. What distinguishes the exofictional

[216.126.35.32] Project MUSE (2024-10-07 14:41 GMT) University of Virginia Libraries & (Viva)

constellation I'm treating from reactionary fiction à la Houellebecq, on one hand, and progressive autofiction, à la Ernaux and Louis, on the other, is their relation to history and to universality, respectively. Binet, Haenel, and Carrère do not give succor to the position of white masculinity via fantasized or imagined events, as does Houellebecq. They turn instead to events that actually occurred, that are part of the historical record. They console their subject position with reality rather than unreality, thus maintaining a stronger tether to the extratextual world they inhabit. And, unlike Louis and Ernaux, who are fixed within the limits of their own individual identity, as both the principal narrative and narrated subjectivity—as both narrator and protagonist—and whose intersectional marginality renders them writers who occupy a position of particularity, these exofictional authors, by mining the lives of other individuals, are able to enjoy the pleasures of particularity without being constrained to it, since the particular life they write is not their own but someone else's. What I am arguing, then, is that exofiction lends itself to a recuperation of the subjective position of white masculinity whose operation of a temporal and subjective displacement—onto the past, onto another person—results in an occluding of its identitarian nature. In other words, the exofictional texts I examine are deeply identitarian ones, but are not recognized or treated as being identitarian, unlike autofiction, or explicitly reactionary, misogynist fiction.

These exofictional texts, rather than promoting narratives of French decline in response to feeling white masculinity to be under attack, or engaging in self-writing that reflects on and narrates the vagaries and vicissitudes of being and writing as a white man, disengage, opting for the kind of escapism afforded by inserting oneself into a past and another culture that really exist. Unlike their reactionary counterparts, who demonstrate a resigned cynicism, these exofictional authors are trying to recuperate white masculinity by laundering their subject position through stories from another time and another place, stories that, unlike autofictions, do not declare their identitarian nature, which, in the case of exofiction, is subsumed under the sign of History. Because the individual stories they are telling are read as being Histories, exofictions are exempt from the stigma of being personal.

These exofictions thus respond defensively (but their defensiveness is not aggressive, unlike that of the déclinistes) to a palpable shift in the French political landscape. It is interesting to note that the four works discussed in this essay are all published at around the same time—around the 2010s—that French white identitarian movements such as Le Bloc identitaire (The Identitarian Bloc, now Les Identitaires [The Identitarians]) and its youth wing, Génération identitaire (Identitarian

Generation), formed and became active. There are compelling points of similarity between the nostalgic and escapist European exofictions discussed here and such a far-right political movement: Beyond both exofiction and white nationalism being centered around white masculinity, exofiction and white nationalism are also both invested in Europe. Les Identitaires was founded in France but soon expanded to the rest of Europe to become a pan-European white identitarian movement. We can see this French white nationalism as itself a kind of political exofiction, projecting back onto an older, romanticized moment, before France became so multicultural (before France's colonial subjects migrated to the metropole). Whiteness has a temporality—the past. To be clear, I am not aligning these authors with the far right—their politics are clearly not the politics of these far-right political groups—but I am pointing out how a defensive white masculinity results in a similar relation to history, despite how dissimilar one's politics might be. This similarity serves as a cautionary note, one that asks us to question what motivates our investment in history and to pay attention to the way we understand the relation between our present and someone else's—and somewhere else's—past.

Monstrous Fiction

I want to conclude by returning to Ruhe's and Demanze's laudatory evaluation of exofiction. If we draw such different conclusions, it's because Demanze sees exofiction as a desubjectivating kind of genre, concentrating as he does on the work of Philippe Vasset, which, unlike the works discussed here, does not predicate the narration of real historical events and persons on the inclusion of an identifiable narrator. Demanze describes this desubjectivation as the "strategy of individual resistance of a mobile being, without a fixed identity, for escaping from the identitarian injunctions of globalized fiction."[28] I would argue that this perceived desubjectivation is but an illusion that covers the projected, displaced reinvestment in the self that exofiction realizes. To put it another way, Demanze treats exofiction as operating horizontally as a kind of surface that allows for freedom of movement, a circulation that liberates the self from the vertical depth of autofiction. There is freedom of movement indeed, displacement toward Eastern Europe, toward a heroic, Resistance past, in the case of the exofictions examined here, but where Demanze treats the exofictive subject as remaining in circulation, as always remaining in flight, I see the authorial subjects landing in order to dig themselves a different, non-French hole in

which to take identitarian shelter. The distinction that Demanze draws between Vasset's anonymous narrator and the well delineated (and often autobiographical) narrators we find in Binet, Haenel, and Carrère is immaterial: the problem with exofiction lies not with the narrator's identity, but precisely with the movement, the slippage between the past and present, that exofiction affords. It is this movement that allows both authorial subjects and the anonymous readers who pick up these books to project themselves onto people they are not as a way of avoiding who they are. The displacement and circulation that Demanze celebrates are not good in and of themselves, especially if they result in the kind of historical and identitarian appropriation or projection that cuts subjects off from the contexts in which they live, from the ethical obligations they have to the people—different from them—with whom they must coexist.

And when it comes to Ruhe's optimistic belief in the morally salutary effects of identification, exofiction does not provide us with an exemplarity that can make us into better people. Reading exemplary narratives of resistance to evil and injustice does not launder or reinforce our moral fiber and make us into heroes. Exofiction will not liberate us from the imperative to be subjects endowed with identities: taking a break from our identities is not the same as interrogating, destabilizing, and subverting those identities. The historical hiccup, the jump into the past that exofiction affords, only results in us landing back where we began. As the world continues to degrade—as evidenced by growing economic inequality; a global pandemic that has revealed how disposable we consider vulnerable lives to be if they impinge on our sense of normality and convenience; rapidly accelerating climate change; geopolitical instability and the increasingly plausible scenario of a nuclear World War III; the increase in racism, sexism, homophobia, transphobia, and xenophobia; and the decline of democratic forms of self-governance—it is only too clear that the reality we are living in is monstrous. In 2018, a collective of young French authors published a manifesto in *Le Monde* entitled "Pour dire notre époque monstrueuse, il faut des romans monstrueux" [To speak our monstrous time, we need monstrous novels], in which they castigated the French literary industry and readers for promoting autofiction and exofiction at the expense of literature that would seek to "invent new forms of writing and express a contemporary sensibility."[29] Both exofiction and autofiction, despite being framed as writing of the real because of the way they deploy referentiality and facts, are not actually realist in the way that our moment requires. The manifesto describes exofictional texts as "novels in costume that respond, in a simplistic and backward-looking manner, to our need for fiction by limiting

[216.126.35.32] Project MUSE (2024-10-07 14:41 GMT) University of Virginia Libraries & (Viva)

themselves to a History that is already understood, without looking at the history that is, that is coming—assuredly frightening, ungraspable but not unspeakable."[30]

Literarily, we are poised before the need for invention the way the New Novelists were after the catastrophe of the Shoah and World War II also presented society with the undeniable monstrosity of reality. For them, the conventional, traditional ways of writing fiction à la Balzac, with fleshed out characters and meticulously constructed plots, could no longer be literature's realism, literature's way of writing the real. The accumulation of catastrophes, disasters, and violence in the Anthropocene, the term that has given us the language for describing what it means to be suicidal as a species and live our way to mass extinction, imposes the evidence of the continued and evolving monstrosity of our reality. Exofiction and autofiction, as texts that dip into the referential to be coated with the patina of the real, as texts that give free rein to the desires and fantasies of the authorial subject, are not up to the task of describing and sounding out the monsters that we are. We need to attend not to the heroes that allow us to shift our focus away from the monsters that we were, not to the monstrosity of life on the individual level, but to the monstrosity of our species, of our collective existence in this present moment. The manifesto writers plead:

> We want to write novels because, confronted with a reality that some flee from and that others reduce to their navel, we think that fiction has a role to play. For us, fiction displaces reality: it has the strength to move our way of looking at the world and to move us.
>
> Certainly, this can lead to disorienting books. But perhaps, to speak our monstrous moment, we need monstrous novels. Deformed novels that brush up against catastrophe, dare to be poetry, and are not afraid of the new and the unspeakable. We want to wake up the monstrous power of the novel, its formidable capacity to make visible, its capacity to "break the frozen sea inside us" (Kafka). If not, we will all end up reporters, suffocated between autofiction and exofiction.
>
> We do not constitute a school, because there is no panacea in literature. We don't all agree. But something unites us: we want the novel to be more than merchandise, than a way-to-make-people-read, but a burning, necessary affair: a contemporary art.

This is the literary equivalent of Gen Z's climate strikes, of the mobilization against gun violence—a collective call to leave open the possibility of a future. The referential writing of the writing of the real, which has proven to be a formula for commercial literary success for decades now, is a dead end in the way it does not displace reality: it displaces

the subject only to put it back where it began. The desire expressed in the manifesto to displace reality through fiction is nothing more and nothing less than the desire for fiction to fabricate and reorder, not individuals—an individual inspired by an example to moral improvement as an individual; an individual allowed to, as an individual, take a break from subjectivation and identity, from, in the case of Binet, Haenel, Carrère, being French white men—but reality itself. There are already authors working in this vein, from Antoine Volodine's post-exoticism, his shamanistic landscape a very different way of working with Soviet history, to Céline Minard's cosmological species-transcending speculative fiction that breaks down the boundaries between science and literature, to Emmanuelle Pireyre's practice of turning literature into Frankenstein's monster, a patchwork of the real and unreal that reveals the novel to be, fundamentally, a chimera.[31] Perhaps these monstrous fictions will be no more capable of transforming the world we live in than the exofictions that reinforce the invidious structures that have gotten us to where we are today. Climate change is due to corporate, systemic structures of consumption and production, which cannot be offset by individual actions such as composting, recycling, and bicycling to work. Nonetheless, the overall inefficacy of individual action does not exempt us from trying to do the least harm and reduce our individual carbon footprint. Growing a pollinator garden in your backyard is not going to save monarch butterflies from extinction, but it serves as a microhabitat in which a living creature whose species is dying might thrive. Similarly, monstrous fictions might not be capable of displacing reality indefinitely and establishing a new reality in its place, but in their desire to do something to reality, to act on, rather than be acted upon, by reality, they constitute a sort of aesthetic and political microhabitat in which we, as living subjectivities whose species is dying, might be able to experience our tiny portion of the present differently.

Harvard University

NOTES

I would like to thank my anonymous reader for their generous and incisive comments and Hannah Frydman for their careful reading of multiple drafts.

1 Claudia Groneman writes that Doubrovsky coined the term on the cover of the novel *Fils* when it was published in 1977. See Groneman, "Autofiction," *The Handbook of Autobiography/Autofiction*, edited by Martina Wagner-Egelhaaf (Berlin: De Gruyter, 2019), 241.

2 Cornelia Ruhe, "L'«exofiction» entre non-fiction, contrainte et exemplarité," in *Territoires de la non-fiction: Cartographie d'un genre emergent*, ed. Alexandre Gefen, (Leiden: Brill Rodopi, 2020), 83. *Biofiction* is another term for the combination of biography and fiction. I opt for and concentrate on *exofiction* over *biofiction* because of the way exofiction,

as a term, displays its genealogical tie to autofiction in way that biofiction doesn't: *exo* and *auto* are clearly opposed whereas the relation between *bio* and *auto* is murkier, given that the *autos* also is a *bio*. All translations are mine unless otherwise indicated.

3 See Ruhe, "L'«exofiction»," 84, for a discussion of exofiction's relation to autofiction.

4 Philippe Vasset, "L'Exofictif," *Vacarme* 54 (2011): 29.

5 Outside of the mainstream press, Ruhe and Laurent Demanze are some of the only scholarly names to engage with exofiction in a developed manner. See Ruhe, "L'«exofiction»"; and Demanze, "Dernières nouvelles de l'exofictif: Autour des Journaux intimes de Philippe Vasset,» *Littérature* 203, no. 3 (2021): 26–37. See also Patrick Boucheron, "« Toute littérature est assaut contre la frontière »: Note sur les embarras historiens d'une rentrée littéraire," *Annales: Histoire, Sciences sociales* 65, no. 2 (2010): 441–67. While historian Boucheron does not employ the term exofiction, it is effectively the focus of his cogent, incisive overview of the contemporary penchant for such historical fictions.

6 Alison James, *The Documentary Imagination in Twentieth-Century French Literature: Writing with Facts* (Oxford: Oxford Univ. Press, 2020), 211.

7 Anne Garréta, *Pas un jour* (Paris: Grasset, 2001), 9; Garréta, *Not One Day*, trans. Emma Ramadan (Dallas: Deep Vellum, 2017), 3. The translation has been slightly modified.

8 This reactionary government engagement can be seen in the "anti-woke" conference, "Après la deconstruction: reconstruire les sciences et la culture" [After Deconstruction: Reconstructing Knowledge and Culture], held at the Sorbonne in January 2022, where the Minister of National Education, Jean-Michel Blanquer, delivered opening remarks, therefore putting the imprimatur of Emmanuel Macron's government on the conference proceedings, which, among others, held panels on the "impasses of intersectionality" and "cancel culture." "Annonce du colloque," Observatoire des ideologies identitaires, December 24, 2021, *https://decolonialisme.fr/?p=6333*.

9 See, for instance, Françoise Lavocat, *Fait et fiction: Pour une frontière* (Paris: Seuil, 2016); Alison James, "The Fictional in Autofiction," in *The Autofictional: Approaches, Affordances, Forms*, ed. Alexandra Effe and Hannie Lawlor (Cham: Palgrave, 2022), 41–60; Arnaud Schmitt, "Making the Case for Self-Narration Against Autofiction," *a/b: Auto/Biography Studies* 25, no. 1 (2014): 122–37; and Camille Laurens, "Marie Darrieussecq ou le syndrome du coucou," *La revue littéraire* 32 (2007): 1–14. Laure Murat, in an unpublished text, convincingly argues for the literary turn to the real as a multidimensional response to the social sciences in France, which have themselves made a fictional turn. Murat, "« La vérité, toute »: Le roman français du XXIe siècle aux prises avec la notion de vérité."

10 Laurent Binet, *HHhH* (Paris: Grasset, 2010); Yannick Haenel, *Jan Karski* (Paris: Gallimard, 2009); and Emmanuel Carrère, *Limonov* (Paris: P.O.L., 2011).

11 Ruhe, "L'«exofiction»," 90.

12 Ruhe, "L'«exofiction»," 100.

13 "Exofiction or biographical fiction needs to, in my eyes, attempt to respond to a new crisis through a new relationship to history and through a renewal of *moral reflection* via exemplarity." Ruhe, "L'«exofiction»," 100 (emphasis mine).

14 Demanze, "Dernières nouvelles," 36.

15 *HHhH* has *Roman* (*novel*) on the title page, *Jan Karski* has an author's note at the beginning identifying the third part of the text as being fiction and *Roman* on its cover, and *Limonov* is published as part of P.O.L's Collection Fiction.

16 Croatia, a predominantly Christian nation, is the only Balkan country to currently have membership in the EU, unlike Albania and Bosnia, which both have Muslim majorities. Islam is thus clearly not a racial category, as Albanian and Bosnian Muslims are white, but the specter of Islam makes them less white, similar to the way Irish and Italian immigrants to the US at the turn of the twentieth century were not considered white because of the heavy ethnic weight of the cultural difference of their Catholicism in a majority Protestant

nation. See Noel Ignatiev, *How the Irish Became White* (New York: Routledge, 1995); Matthew Frye Jacobson, *Whiteness of a Different Color: European Immigrants and the Alchemy of Race* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard Univ. Press, 1999); and Jennifer Guglielmo and Salvatore Salerno, eds., *Are Italians White? How Race is Made in America* (New York: Routledge, 2003).

17 The vanguard of social justice movements and activism in France is minoritarian, as minorities in France claim for themselves the central status of the universal. Recent work that reclaims universalism for minorities historically relegated to the lesser status of the particular, see Julien Suaudeau and Mame-Fatou Niang, *Universalisme* (Paris: Anamosa, 2022), which elaborates a vision of an anti-racist, anti-colonialist universalism, and Bruno Perreau's *Sphères d'injustice: Plaidoyer pour un universalisme minoritaire [Spheres of Injustice: A Defense of Minority Universalism]* (Paris: Éditions La Découverte, 2023), which examines minority politics and activism in France and the United States in order to theorize and call for a universalism that is based on the minority part that every person contains.

18 Claude Lanzmann, "*Jan Karski* de Yannick Haenel: Un faux roman," *Les Temps modernes* 657 (2010/11): 1–2; 1; 7.

19 Laurent Binet, *HHhH*, trans. Sam Taylor (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2012), 327.

20 Binet, HHhH, trans. Taylor, 327; Binet, 443.

21 Binet, *HHhH*, trans. Taylor, 3; Binet, 9. Translation modified.

22 Yannick Haenel, *The Messenger*, trans. Ian Monk (Berkeley: Counterpoint, 2011), 105; Haenel, 119. Translation modified.

23 "Now we hold that 'subjectivity,' whether it is placed in phenomenology or in psychology, as one may wish, is only the emergence in the being of a fundamental property of language. 'Ego' is he who *says* 'ego.'" Émile Benveniste, *Problems in General Linguistics*, trans. Mary Elizabeth Meek (Coral Gables: Univ. of Miami Press, 1971), 224.

24 See Florence Noiville, "Emmanuel Carrère: Un 'je' révélé par la langue russe," *Le Monde*, March 1, 2007, https://www.lemonde.fr/livres/article/2007/03/01/emmanuel-carrere-j-avais-l-impression-d-etre-enferme_877621_3260.html.

25 Indeed, this practice of self-exposure has been lauded as an ethical position of humility on Carrère's part, a throughline of the contributions assembled in Demanze and Dominique Rabaté, eds., *Emmanuel Carrère: Faire effraction dans le réel* (Paris: P.O.L., 2018).

26 Emmanuel Carrère, *Limonov*, trans. John Lambert (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2014), 333; Carrère, *Limonov*, 478. Carrère describes Poutine as being "Éduard's double . . . . the difference between him and Eduard is that he succeeded." (Carrère, trans. Lambert, 332, 333; Carrère, 477, 478).

27 See Christy Wampole, *Degenerative Realism: Novel and Nation in Twenty-First Century France* (New York: Columbia Univ. Press, 2020).

28 Demanze, "Dernières nouvelles," 37.

29 Aurélien Delsaux, Sophie Divry, Denis Michelis et al., "Pour dire notre époque monstrueuse, il faut des romans monstrueux," *Le Monde*, November 5, 2018, *https://www.lemonde.fr/idees/article/2018/11/03/pour-dire-notre-epoque-monstrueuse-il-faut-des-romans-monstrueux_5378351_3232.html.*

30 Delsaux, Divry, Michelis et al., "Pour dire notre époque."

31 See Antoine Volodine, *Des anges mineurs* (Paris: Seuil, 1999), *Terminus Radieux* (Paris: Seuil, 2014), Céline Minard, *Plasmas* (Paris: Payot & Rivages, 2021), Emmanuelle Pireyre, *Féerie générale* (Paris: L'Olivier, 2012), *Chimère* (Paris: L'Olivier, 2019).