

Title

Seductions of Form in Contemporary Autofiction

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Abstract

For many commentators, autofiction is defined by a particular mode of representation. Marjorie Worthington, for example, suggests that autofiction “revels in ambiguity” between fiction and fact, between life-writing and the novel. I’d like to propose that works fall into this murky category not only because they hybridize or destabilize questions of fact or fiction—in other words, not because of their approach to representation—but because these works express an agency relative to a larger social world. In so doing they render available images both of their artists and their audiences, images which can be abducted from the works themselves. More pointedly, I’d like to think of autofiction, as Alfred Gell might, as a trap. To that end I describe the agency of autofiction using the phrase “seductions of form.” In the two works I read in detail—*Trust Exercise* by Susan Choi (2019) and *Asymmetry* by Lisa Halliday (2018)—we encounter a sharp foregrounding of form, which in each case begins by dividing the text into three parts. These divisions, and the ways the parts are then made to bear on one another, incite practices of reading which make these texts irresistible, at least to some (at least to me), while making them insufferable for others. *Trust Exercise* and *Asymmetry* suggest that autofiction’s designs on its readers are not only more elaborate than may have been noticed, but also more fundamentally aimed at the reader’s experience of their own power and freedom. How could these authors do what they are doing? What unseemly courage licenses their acts of exploitation? Because we could not ourselves do what these authors are doing, they operate Gell’s magical mechanism: by a kind of enchantment, they transmute captivity into freedom.

Alfred Gell's anthropology of art, sketched in essays and substantially worked out in *Art and Agency* (1999), downplays representation and emphasizes the roles that artworks play in social, material worlds. Gell does not assert that art does not represent—and especially not that art “cannot” represent—but instead argues that the agency of artworks, their functioning, indeed their emergence as works of art, are not the direct result of representation. Instead Gell focuses on the social agency of the work itself and two further agencies that one can “abduct” (to use the term he borrows from Peircean semiotics) from the agency of the work. Via abduction we understand from the work itself both the artist and their agency and the audience and its agency. In a related essay, “Vogel’s Net: Traps as Artwork, Artworks as Traps” (1996), Gell asserts that by the terms of such a theory, neither anthropology nor aesthetic theory will find it possible to distinguish an artwork from a trap. A giraffe trap, to take his wry example, will tell us much about the shape of a giraffe (Gell 28), just as Damien Hirst’s *The Impossibility of Death in the Mind of Someone Living*—a shark trapped in a glass case—tells us something about ourselves (Gell 16).

The theory is suggestive for what has increasingly been described in contemporary literature as “autofiction.”ⁱ For many commentators autofiction is defined by a particular mode of representation. Marjorie Worthington, for example, suggests that autofiction “revels in ambiguity” between fiction and fact, between life-writing and the novel (4). I’d like to propose that works fall into this murky category not only because they hybridize or destabilize questions of fact or fiction—in other words, not because of their approach to representation—but because these works express an agency relative to a larger social world. In so doing they render available

images both of their artists and their audiences, images which can be abducted from the works themselves. More pointedly, I'd like to think of autofiction, as Alfred Gell might, as a trap.

To that end I describe the agency of autofiction using the phrase “seductions of form.” In the two works I read in detail—*Trust Exercise* by Susan Choi (2019) and *Asymmetry* by Lisa Halliday (2018)—we encounter a sharp foregrounding of form, which in each case begins by dividing the text into three parts. These divisions, and the ways the parts are then made to bear on one another, invite practices of reading which make these texts irresistible, at least to some (at least to me), while making them insufferable for others. The books function as Gell would predict. As they work as art, one can abduct from these two novels an account of the reader who might be lured into engaging with them. At the same time, “seductions of form” is intended to register that within their formalizing partitions, Choi and Halliday write about seduction. In Choi's novel this seduction is a violation, an abuse, an exploitation. As many have suggested, the book is an element of #metoo. Of Halliday some readers will have it that she also represents sexual misconduct, where others discern a taboo, inadvisable romance. There is a signal difference, and a statutory difference, between the stories Choi and Halliday tell, but the effect at which they strike is similar. These depictions of seduction produce uneasiness, trending toward repugnance.

Why might readers be seduced via their own unease? Here my reading turns along a path traced by Rey Chow in *Entanglements, or Transmedial Thinking about Capture* (2012). In her book's core chapter, Chow reads Jacques Rancière's essay “Why Emma Bovary Had to be Killed” (2008) alongside Alfred Gell and “Vogel's Net.” As Chow observes, both Gell and Rancière are concerned, as matters of decolonization and emancipation respectively, to override the analytical boundary between art and nonart. Rancière is reading Flaubert where Gell is

reading handmade fishing nets, but both are concerned to show that art is not and could not be a field of rarified proprieties disconnected from the practice of everyday life. Chow observes that as these critics connect art to life in the name of equality, they reintroduce inequality in the form of images of captivity. In Rancière, Chow notes the “killing” of Emma Bovary. In Gell, she notes that art is a trap. Chow hazards that:

The philosophical and social science attempts to realign art with freedom (especially in the form of the artwork or artifact that renders the distinction between art and nonart indistinguishable) tend to run into a paradox, one that revolves around the (knotty figure of the) trap . . . The paradox leads to the contentious conjecture that *what remains of art* in the age of medial liberalization is perhaps less a relation to freedom as such than a relation to capture and captivity. (43-4)

When we behold contemporary art, Chow goes on to suggest, we first attend to the ingenuity of the trap, the structure of the maker’s design—what I’ve described, for example, as the formalism of *Trust Exercise* or *Asymmetry*. But the work is only completed, Chow argues, when the trap closes around its prey, because otherwise the work itself does not captivate its audience. As the trap snaps shut, our investment extends from the maker to the captivated:

How to *count* [the prey’s experience of *being* captured] without simply collapsing it back into the intent or intelligence of the trap’s design, which is complete only when the prey gets caught? . . . Captivation, then, is the deranged remainder that is unassimilable to the metanarratives of freedom. (46, 52)

The theory itself is almost a work of art, yet the moment we ask it to operate, it is a scandal.

Chow is well-aware: “Whose captivation counts in the end, and whose captivation counts *as art*?

That of a male, a female, or . . . ?” (57).ⁱⁱ For Chow, art as captivity will directly reproduce historical patterns of inequality:

When politically progressive intellectuals think the democratization, indistinction, and liberalization of social boundaries, in a kind of conceptual fluidity between art and the everyday . . . they typically run up against some populations’ embodied states of captivity . . . [in the form of] the basic issues of terror and freedom, and (often) sadomasochistic pleasure and pain that, in refracted manners, surface in art and fiction. (11-12)

What merits the phrase “seductions of form” in Susan Choi’s and Lisa Halliday’s novels is the manner in which a liberalization at what we might describe as “the level of form,” in which the boundary between art and life is overstepped, is accompanied at “the level of content” by representations of “embodied states of captivity.”

This essay is not the first to ask what the similarities between Choi’s work and Halliday’s might indicate. Maggie Doherty has suggested that while these two authors’ turn to metafiction in the context of #metoo might be surprising, given the way that movement has sought to refute tendentious assertions about conflicting narratives, Choi and Halliday contest the (canonically male) writer’s dependence on “a troubling reality – one in which women’s wounds are seen as mere byproducts of making great work” (200). She concludes that books like these “[hold] up to the light the twisted events they describe” (201). Katy Waldman suggests that writers like Choi, and a bevy of autofiction-adjacent writers including Halliday, address the question of “who gets to narrate what” by interrogating a “fantasy of the artist: that you can say something so perfectly that it never needs another version, told from another point of view” (Waldman n.p.). And she notes as well—on the basis of her own experience—that being appropriated in literature feels very *feeling*: “flattering and violating and riveting and queasy and boring” (Waldman n.p.).

Indeed, the mutable affective intensity of autofictional texts, Alison Gibbons has suggested, is one reason readers have come to distinguish autofiction from other modes of contemporary writing (130).

To follow these critics' impulse is to follow Chow in querying Rancière about the highly theoretical death of Emma Bovary. In several further texts, like the 2014 essay "The Thread of the Novel," Rancière has reiterated that Emma Bovary must die in order to "secure the right relation between several plots" in Flaubert's prototypically "modern fiction" (205). In the same essay he adduces that for the same reasons, Proust had to kill Albertine, Woolf had to kill Septimus, and Faulkner had to kill Joe Christmas. Such deaths, Rancière says, amount to the "structural condition for settling the relationship between truth and plot" (205), a relationship which is troubled in fiction by the characteristically modern sense that to shape a narrative is to depart from the inchoate reality of everyday life. The deaths of these characters, Rancière asserts, are needed because

The poetic justice of modern fiction is based on that injustice. It thrives on a solidarity that it must ceaselessly break at the cost of seeing it emerge again and again. . . . Modern fiction wants to replay the struggle between forms of life in its own way and for its own benefit. It wants to isolate and keep for itself the luminous halo of life and the power of truth while dooming its characters to the old lie of the plot. (208)

To summarize with Maggie Doherty's words, the "wounding" of characters is not only the "byproduct" of making "great art," but the premise of literature insofar as it is modern. To this conjecture, at once beguiling and repugnant, Chow and other critics pose a sensible rejoinder, asking why these textual victims are typically minoritized subjects. For Rancière the answer is again structural. Because modern fiction is "linked with the upsetting of the old opposition

between active men and passive women,” it offers an egalitarian opportunity for characters to “live all those forms of experience that were previously reserved for men of action or leisure,” including for example “ideal love stories” (207). But because such narratives can no longer be the stuff of a modern fiction committed to the particularity of fact, they can only animate novels like *Madame Bovary* for a time. Ultimately lives like Bovary’s, bearing within them unsupportable claims of coherence and meaning, are cancelled to serve the work’s greater claim to truth.

When Chow queries how the critic can “count” the experiences of those captured by texts, authors, and theorists, she queries both the justice, and the necessity, of Rancière’s theory. Do Bovary and Septimus actually “count” if they are moments in modern fiction’s dialectic? Through how much history, literary and otherwise, might the murderous modality of Rancière’s modern fiction hold sway? What happens when the characters of a novel are not only characters, but authors, their friends, or their lovers? Like Rancière’s modern fictions, Choi’s and Halliday’s novels pose questions about the relationship between art and life, framing those questions via gender and violence. So in what follows, I turn to Choi and Halliday to ask Chow’s questions anew. While *Trust Exercise* and *Asymmetry* prove “typical,” to use Chow’s word, of the pattern of literary-theoretical captivity Chow identifies in Rancière and Gell, these books also suggest that contemporary autofiction involves a type of formal necessity which is distinguishable from Rancière’s claims about the egalitarian impulse of modern fiction. Indeed, contemporary autofiction suggests a different explanation for why the image of captivity tends to recur not only alongside, but *as* literary emancipation, an account that has more to do with Gell’s understanding of art as trap than with Rancière’s emphasis on representation. In this regard, *Trust Exercise* and *Asymmetry*—neither of which is quite simply or directly describable as “autofiction” in the sense

that we might apply that word to works by Rachel Cusk or Sheila Heti or Kate Zambreno—amount to *theorizations* of autofiction that demonstrate how autofictional texts in general participate in “seductions of form.” Ultimately, reading Choi and Halliday writing seduction can account for an unmistakable feature of the reception of contemporary autofiction: it makes its readers feel queasy.

In *A Face Drawn in Sand: Humanistic Inquiry and Foucault in the Present* (2021) Rey Chow proposes that confession as Michel Foucault articulated it—disciplinary, normalizing, truthful—has evolved in an era of proliferating media. In the contemporary sociotechnical milieu, selves project confessions into a wilderness of screens, a space of mirrors that Chow describes, using another of Foucault’s concepts, as “heterotopic” (158). Chow suggests that by emplacing our own words and images again and again in such media spaces, we accumulate coherence and power. With this strategy, whose genealogy encompasses both the ritualized autocritiques of Mao’s China and Oprah’s television innovations, we witness “the coming of age of . . . the smartself” (Chow 164).

Is this “smartself” sufficient to account for the recent efflorescence of literary autofiction? Book reviewers have not hesitated to draw the parallel. We want to see our own images out in a digital public, no matter how mediated or monetized, so literature mimics this desire. Authors publish versions of their smartelves as novels, and we observe this intriguing self-fashioning much as we watch one another perform online. If we add that the smartself is an “entrepreneurial” and “neoliberal” one (Chow 152) then we seem to have quite enough to understand the autofictional moment in contemporary letters. We might even add that autofiction handily remediates the nebulous distaste often felt toward social media, which we continually threaten to abandon but to which we are nonetheless lured back. The analysis is done; we feel

uneasy about autofiction because it entails engaging with contemporary capitalism's disappointing subjectivities. And we have, as Gell suggests we ought, an abduction of the autofictional artist (as smartself), just as we have an abduction of its audience (as neoliberal).

The plausibility of such an account is undeniable. But in thinking about Susan Choi and Lisa Halliday we should also be directed by Rey Chow's question about how to analytically account for the experiences of others captured in their texts. What would autofiction as "smartself" have to offer? Such an account will fall afoul of Chow's insistence that theory must account for "the prey's experience of *being* captured" while avoiding "simply collapsing it back into the intent or intelligence of the trap's design" (46). Nor does it enable us to analytically distinguish the experience of the captured, as Chow's "deranged remainder," from a narrative of emancipation in which "twisted events" are "held up to the light." I propose that Choi and Halliday have constructed novels which not only accentuate the experience of the captured, but which immunize this experience against the misreadings Chow identifies. Neither Choi's book nor Halliday's can be well understood as a literary analogue of online self-representation—not only because of their attention to the experience of the captured, but also because they do not foreground the representation of the self.

The utility of *Trust Exercise* and *Asymmetry* as theories of autofiction is that they point to the insufficiency of an account that renders the autofictional text as an instance of neoliberal, mediatized subjectivity. Although framing novels as theories scrambles, in a modest way, the usual procedure, Ralph Clare has already noticed that the autofiction boom has been accompanied by an "autotheory" boom and that some often-mentioned autofictional texts—like Ben Lerner's *10:04* (2014) and Maggie Nelson's *The Argonauts* (2016)—engage explicitly with critical theory. Placing Choi and Halliday in a similar role, I show that while autofictional texts

circulate images of the self, they foreground the fact that autofiction’s authors victimize the others they choose to represent—and they do so not as an ethical quandary to be resolved or a dialectical moment to be sublated, but because of a central impulse upon which their seductions of form depend.

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Trust Exercise is in three parts. In the first we meet Sarah, an outsider at a prestigious arts high school—both like and unlike, Choi notes in her book’s afterward, the one she attended. In the school’s intense theater program the students, under the guidance of the domineering drama teacher Mr. Kingsley, conduct “trust exercises” and other training for young performers, while they also fall in and out of love, grow up, and move on. In the second part we discover that Sarah has become an author and that the first part of the book, which we have just read, is her autobiographical novel. Sarah’s schoolmate, “Karen” in Sarah’s novel, who narrates the second section, sharply objects to Sarah’s writing, because it evades what Karen regards as the central event of their schooldays: In the wake of Karen’s sexual relationship with a teacher, Sarah betrayed Karen. The second section concludes with the characters reuniting to stage a play in a community theater, ten years after they graduated from high school. In the climax of the performance, Karen loads a prop gun with real bullets and shoots in the groin the man who impregnated and abandoned her. The third section belongs to Karen’s daughter, given up for adoption. Claire, in the present, returns to the school in search of her birth mother, only to be sexually assaulted by the domineering drama teacher “Richard Lord”—perhaps another name for “Mr. Kingsley.”

Asymmetry is in three parts. In the first we meet Alice, a twentysomething New Yorker with a publishing job, who falls into a relationship with Ezra Blazer, an eightysomething novelist

awaiting his Nobel Prize. This story has been widely understood to document a liaison between Lisa Halliday and the late Philip Roth. Awkwardly defying the asymmetry between them, the two have sex, watch baseball, and, in the background, work on their respective novels. In the second part of the book we encounter Amar Jaafari, an American economist born in Iraq. Returning to Iraq to visit family, he is detained at Heathrow and, in the course of a day and a night sitting in a holding pen, relates his story of emigration and the impact on his family of the 2003 invasion. As Amar tells the story of his Uncle Zaid, who is kidnapped and killed in the war's aftermath, the section abruptly ends. Asides from Part 1 of *Asymmetry* render unambiguous that in Part 2, we read the book that Alice has been writing during her liaison with Blazer. Him we hear once more in the book's brief third part. While being interviewed on a radio show, he tries to pick up the show's host.

What might it mean to understand these books as theorizations of autofiction? In *Trust Exercise*, Sarah has written Part 1 and Choi's interest is in how Karen, in Part 2, responds to finding herself represented. Halliday has written *Asymmetry* but her autofictional double, Alice, has written another novel, the story of Amar Jaafari and his family. In both cases, the passage from the first to the second sections produces moments when we learn that there are two fictional worlds in a determinate relationship to one another, in which a character in one world has written the other. This formalism is the lure in the trap of these texts: everything that can be said about these books begins by engaging this intriguing structure. As I explore below, the books are not the same. But as these synopses have started to suggest, the formalism works not only by passing from life to art and back, but also by offering us, as though incidentally, images of "some populations' states of embodied captivity" (Chow 12). For Choi, this population is the sexually exploited. For Halliday #metoo seems also to be at issue, but captivity is more apparent in her

vertiginous lurch into the racial politics of the “war on terror.” What does it tell us that these novels, with their seductive forms, also produce images of captivity?

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Susan Choi has repeatedly suggested that *Trust Exercise* imposed itself upon her, that the novel was written because she had to give a voice to a character who was angry at being spoken-for (Choi and Hood; Choi and Majeed; Choi and Prastien). Indeed, when Karen approaches Sarah after a public reading, Karen is furious. The two are seeing each other for the first time since high school, and they must confront the fact that Karen is not simply any reader of Sarah’s book. Sarah is on her guard, but Karen is determined to disarm her:

“I mean, you changed a lot. Wouldn’t you say? If you were worried that I’d recognize myself in your book, I didn’t.” Did Karen here lie, by omitting some facts? She merely spoke literally. I’ve said I recognized myself in Sarah’s story easily: recognized as in “identified” myself. I didn’t recognize to “acknowledge validity of.” I didn’t recognize to “accept.” Sarah failed to recognize the kind of recognition I meant, as I knew that she would. Sarah’s face bloomed with relief. “I can’t tell you how relieved I am,” she said. (Choi n.p.)ⁱⁱⁱ

Karen (passing in and out of the third person here) manipulates Sarah by speaking tendentiously about the notion of recognition. She pretends that what would matter would be an affective, ethical, and indeed political kind of recognition—something akin to the intersubjective valences of the word Charles Taylor describes in “The Politics of Recognition” (1992). Since Karen didn’t experience such a recognition in reading Sarah’s book, she can tell Sarah that the book did not bother her. Yet as she notes, Karen did experience a form of recognition in reading, a merely indexical “identification” in which she discerns herself as the unique source of Sarah’s literary

material. Contrary to her assumed casualness, Karen objects to Sarah's work fundamentally, so much so that even in this moment, Karen has begun to draw Sarah into her confidence. In pretending to distinguish identification from recognition in a way that helps Sarah avoid culpability, she means Sarah ill.

Sarah knows that Karen is not just any reader of Sarah's novel. But Karen must turn to us—who are “any reader”—to explain the difference between her reading experience and ours. Karen can match the book's characters to the people in her life just, as she says, like a school child filling out a worksheet:

It's not hard. If you knew me—if you knew Karen—or any of them, you could do it. In fact, the scheme is almost too simple—out of respect for the “truth”? From a failure of imagination? Is it better or worse that the code is so easy to crack? Sarah and David are the people they must obviously be Mr.. Kingsley, too, is the person Mr.. Kingsley must obviously be; his new name, too, is in the right spirit. If certain colorful revisions of his character have been undertaken, they don't serve to disguise the historical person, though they do disguise something. (Choi)

For Karen it is elementary to perform the task of identifying the players, matching one for one, one to one. But this task could only be completed by Karen herself, or David, or Mr. Kingsley. We do not even know there is a matching scheme until in her righteous indignation Karen explains as much, and indeed it is only in this passage that we learn that Part I of *Trust Exercise* is to be understood as a novel that Sarah has written. Karen's question is: why? Why is there a code and why is it easy to crack? And why does Sarah feel that hers is an acceptable use of Karen's identity?

Choi turns our attention away from the question of how Sarah represents Karen, and toward what it means to Karen to be able to identify herself in the text. Choi does so not only by focusing on Karen's experience, but by disaggregating from the general idea of recognition the specific sense of indexical identity which is at play in the autofictional text. In the novel's first scene, Mr. Kingsley, drama teacher and probable sexual predator, turns out the lights on his students in their windowless theater and enjoins them to explore. In the darkness, Sarah's distinctively embroidered blue jeans amount to a signature:

[T]hey were specific to her, very snug, with elaborate stitching. . . . She'd been found. A hand grasped her left knee, ran its palm down the front of her thigh, the swirled ridges of stitching. . . . The one hand remained on her thigh while another found her right hand and raised it, laid it flush on a lightly shaved face. It took her thumb, limp and helpless, adjusted its position, and pressed it as if meaning to make a thumbprint. She felt beneath the pad a slight bump, like a mosquito-bite welt. David's birthmark, a flattened chocolate-colored mole, the same diameter as a pencil eraser, on his left cheek, just offshore of his mouth. (Choi)

First Sarah and David will be an item, later not. Sarah will write a novel all about it in her thirties. For our purposes the key is Choi's double evocation of the notion of the distinguishing and uniquely identifying mark, associated twice with fingerprinting, which appears first in the form of the "swirled ridges" on Sarah's distinctive jeans, then as Sarah's thumb on David's mole. In this scene Sarah and David each execute an identity event which several theorists have described as "capture." The computer scientist and organizational theorist Philip Agre has distinguished capture from surveillance in order to suggest that modes of social organization have been increasingly premised not on visibilities, but on unique identities and identity

technologies, like bar codes and RFID tags (1994). Adopting the term from sensor technologies, Agre theorizes capture as the event which takes place when an identity, formerly known and recorded, is detected again in a new context. Giorgio Agamben subsequently used the term “capture” (32) in a similar way in “What is an Apparatus?” (2009), as has Johanna Drucker (2011), who would redescribe “data” as “capta” because it is taken rather than given. For all three theorists, capture emphasizes the extent to which indexical forms of organization and control are both individualizing and vacuous. The sense of identity they theorize differs from identities constructed via discipline or interpellation, and it contrasts vividly with the richly intersubjective encounters described as “recognition” by Charles Tayler (1992) or “acknowledgement” by Patchen Markell (2009).

Literature has always been able to frame identity as unique identification, as in Odysseus’ scar and the “recognition scene” in general. But while association with Aristotle, Shakespeare, or Eric Auerbach might suggest that such scenes are primarily elements of an earlier literary history, there is one area in which such scenes have recurrently appeared in contemporary literary discourse—the autofictional. In such works, a person otherwise known in life reappears in fiction. Indeed, the conceit of *Trust Exercise* is that some fictional characters from Part 1 can be recognized as their prototypes in Part 2. Karen’s claim—the claim of her anger—is that despite years, despite the passage from reality into text, Sarah has *captured* Karen by placing her identity in print alongside but apart from her “historical person.” Any changes that Sarah has made exacerbate rather than ameliorating this anger, as the book then purports not to violate while at the same time going ahead and doing so. For her part, Karen is above it. She will not participate by telling the truths that Sarah has obfuscated. What she tells us is all we will know: there are identities at stake in Sarah’s representation. Can we avoid the conjecture that,

among the alumni of Houston’s High School for the Performing and Visual Arts,^{iv} Susan Choi’s alma mater, there are similar reactions to *Trust Exercise*? Maybe the names have been changed, maybe gender or race; maybe roles have been combined or redistributed. Everything that would allow a disinterested reader to “recognize” a “historical person” in Choi’s novel may have been changed. But Karen is here to tell us that it remains not only possible, but simple, for her to identify herself in Sarah’s work. Whether there are similarly irate readers of *Trust Exercise* or not, in both its opening passage and in the major principle of its structure, *Trust Exercise* isolates and thematizes the identity event we can describe as “capture.”

To better understand Choi’s investment in capture, we require a fuller account of her plot. When Sarah and Karen were in high school, their school received a visiting troupe of English actors: the charismatic instructor, Martin; his protégé, Liam; and a gaggle of students. Liam and Sarah became involved. Martin seduced Karen. Karen later describes her motivation in this relationship, not incidentally, as a “crazy clamor for recognition” (Choi). When the English group decamped back across the Atlantic, Karen and Sarah followed, but upon arrival Martin failed to appear and could not be contacted. Karen was forced to fly back home alone, where she retreated into her strict father’s custody and gave her baby up for adoption. After Sarah returned home from England at the end of a freewheeling summer, she pretended that nothing had happened. The two did not speak for a decade.

In the second part of *Trust Exercise* Karen, in her thirties and in the wake of reading Sarah’s book, engineers Martin’s return to the US. He has in the interim lost his job due to his sexual relationships with students, but Karen convinces friends to stage a play Martin has written, then contrives to act across from him. There is a scene of recognition when Martin arrives in the US and Karen reappears in his life, but—just as with Sarah—Karen proceeds as

though willing to forgive. She ensures that at the play's climactic moment, she holds the loaded gun with which she shoots Martin in the crotch. As he screams on the floor, Sarah rushes in from the wings. Ignoring Martin, Karen turns to Sarah:

“What really pissed me off about what you wrote,” Karen tried to tell Sarah as Sarah knelt screaming by Martin, as if Sarah had just one stage direction but was going to do it for all she was worth, “is how you wrote so much just like it happened, and then left out the actual truth. Why even do that? Who do you think you’re protecting?”

“Oh . . . God . . .” Martin was keening, curled like a fetus on the floor, a fetus turning like a wheel. The way he was writhing in pain had him somehow rotating in place.

“What have you done to him?” Sarah screamed. As usual, not listening.

(Choi)

The genius of the scene is in Karen's confronting Sarah about her book at this moment. Karen ignores, for a paragraph, the man on the floor who she has (at minimum symbolically) castrated. By speaking first to Sarah, Karen intends to make clear to Sarah (as Choi makes clear to us) that she regards Sarah's transgression as an aspect of the one she has just revenged. To write as Sarah has done is to breach consent and indulge herself, to ignore Karen while at the same time exploiting her. Karen suggests not only that she is angry at both Martin and Sarah for reasons that are related, but even that their treatment of her amounts to two components of a single act.

Sarah's freedom to cross the boundary between life and art in the process of novelizing her experience depends on capturing Karen's identity. When Karl Ove Knausgaard, to take a parallel example, writes about his “struggle,” he writes about his family as well. Sometimes that family is voluble about that experience, and critics like Zachary Snider, to take an example, note

this and ask how the work Knausgaard is doing can be justified when balanced against his family's objections. But as both Choi and Chow suggest, the idea that self-representation and the representation of others are lamentably intertwined may simply underestimate the extent to which the autofictional formalism consists specifically in the entrapment of others. If so, rendering that entrapment as "experience" lures readers to the text not despite, but because it is lurid.

Choi has claimed that she wrote out of the desire to give back to Karen things that had been taken away from her by Martin and by Sarah. She also suggests, in Karen's highly gratifying entrapment of them both, that Karen has been well revenged. Thus Part 2 of Choi's novel could certainly be made to look like what Rey Chow describes as a "metanarrative of freedom," one that passes in familiar ways through categories like experience and voice. At the same time, *Trust Exercise* parses out how autofictional texts mobilize a concept of indexical identity that begins with authorial self-representation, but then extends to historical persons, recognizable or not, who are subject to a kind of entrapment within the fictional world.

By thematically isolating this kind of identity, Choi articulates a version of what Chow calls the "deranged remainder" that emerges alongside the "experience of the captured." But can this remainder result not from the use of identity without recognition, as in Choi, but instead what might be described as recognition without identity? In other words, what of characters in autofictional texts who are not historical persons, or who cannot, in fact, be identified? The variety of entrapment they undergo, the remainder defined by their experience, cannot of course be constituted by the capture of indexical identity. Yet Lisa Halliday's novel *Asymmetry* leads us to consider the matter from a similar vantage, because its formalism, its passage from a first to a

second part, specifically involves the literary use—Halliday’s word is “conjuring”—of one character by another:

“You’re writing. Aren’t you?”

Alice shrugged. “A little.”

“Do you write about this? About us?”

“No.”

“Is that true?”

Alice shook her head hopelessly. “It’s impossible.”

He nodded. “Then what do you write about?”

“Other people. People more interesting than I am.” She laughed softly, lifting her chin toward the street. “Muslim hot dog sellers.”

Ezra looked skeptical. “Do you write about your father?”

“No.”

“You should. It’s a gift.”

“I know. But writing about myself doesn’t seem important enough.”

[...]

For her part, Alice was starting to consider really rather seriously whether a former choirgirl from Massachusetts might be capable of conjuring the consciousness of a Muslim man, when Ezra turned back to her and said: “Don’t worry about importance. Importance comes from doing it well.” (Halliday)

Ezra Blazer, persona of Philip Roth, who wrote about himself and his relations throughout his career, naturally assumes that the subject of Alice’s writing is herself and her relations. Whether Alice tells the truth when she says that this is not the case is not entirely clear, because she may

or may not be construed as the author of Part 1 of *Asymmetry*. Of more import to us is her reply to Ezra: she wants to “[lift] her chin to the street” to find a subject beyond herself—one she specifically articulates as a figure of difference. Alice finds that subject in Part 2 of *Asymmetry*, although the street vendor has become an economist. Does class matter? Halliday’s choice of the orientalism “conjure” in this context signals that it does not.

Of course, there might well be a prototype of Amar Jaafari (just as Ezra Blazer is in any number of senses not Philip Roth). But as I have been trying to suggest, Halliday’s text does not, any more than other autofiction, invest in such questions except as a kind of beckoning. In its passage from Part 1 to Part 2, the book insists that we follow it through its announced sense of the difference between choirgirls from Massachusetts and American economists of Iraqi extraction. Although we might then expect that Halliday’s representation will indicate its own faltering, she gives us no reason to think that it does. Part 2 is a realist plane of representation in which we accompany Amar Jaafari as—to use loaded terms—he gives voice to his story during his experience of detention. Yet Halliday does register Chow’s sense of paradox, because Amar’s experience is specifically one of captivity. We experience his story in and as unfreedom. Then, much of the story itself is preoccupied with kidnapping, as when Amar remarks of an Iraqi taxi driver that “Quite possibly, this was an offer made with the intention of selling me to kidnappers in the desert” (Halliday). Indeed, Part 2 ends as Amar learns from his father that “even though Alia had wired the forty thousand dollars agreed for her husband’s release, Zaid’s body had been left in a plastic bag under the porch” (Halliday).

Halliday’s images of capture can readily be interpreted along either of two lines Rey Chow describes as unsatisfactory. Perhaps Amar’s capture by Alice is an emanation of the seduction of Alice by Ezra in the first part of the book, creating one of the ugly parallels that

gives the book its name. Because of that metanarrative formalism, and because of the way that recursive images of capture comprise what Alice has written about Amar, it looks difficult to read the work as a demonstration of Ezra's assertion about how books achieve "importance." No matter whether Alice has "done it well" or not, she has done exactly what Chow has predicted: she has expressed freedom by enacting capture. We might even suggest that for Alice as novelist, Amar amounts to the character who must be "killed," as Flaubert kills Bovary, to secure the novel's claim to coherence. For these reasons *Asymmetry* appears impossibly compromised if we try to understand it as an engagement with the widespread discrimination against Muslim Americans or with the human consequences of the invasion of Iraq. In such a reading, Amar's experience is not a remainder. Instead, it is assimilated into the ingenuity of Halliday's trap.

But the book can be made to look quite different: in *Asymmetry*, Halliday stages a generational rejection in which Alice bursts out of the confines of Ezra's assumptions ("do you write about this? About us?") and makes a leap of imaginative solidarity. Like Choi, Alice has taken to the page out of a sense that Amar's anger is justified, and she honors that anger by organizing its appearance via what Jacques Rancière describes as a redistribution of "the sensible" (2004). We discern that for Alice, Amar and his family are ciphers of difference. Yet have we not, at the same time, been angered by Amar's detention? Disgusted by the violence his family endures? In such a reading, the multiple, recursive framings of capture do not matter to the fact that the reader experiences, for a series of pages and during a period of time, a story which intervenes in a matter of ongoing public concern. Similarly, we can move into a position from which Choi's work can be understood not as a congeries of formalisms, but a book about #metoo.

These are readings Chow would describe as “metanarratives of freedom.” Yet there is a third way to frame Halliday’s dialogue with Chow, by emphasizing that Chow thinks of images of capture as “*embodied* states of captivity” (emphasis added). Indeed, embodiment is Halliday’s major strategy for maintaining the “experience of the captured” as “deranged remainder.” She announces as much when Sami, Amar’s brother, mysteriously disappears:

You would have thought there was no one less erasable than my brother. A tall and solid man who looks even taller and sturdier in his white laboratory coat, he speaks in a sonorous voice, voices vigorous opinions, and requires an average of four round meals a day. . . . But who disappears? Not a man with a belly laugh. Not a man whose hands, when he plays a piano, make an octave look like an inch. . . . But then he disappeared. (Halliday)

Sami’s fulness, his fulsomeness—Amar cannot understand where it could go. Especially since, as Amar recalls, his brother had just been talking about how, from his youth, he had written a diary so as to leave “a trace” in the world (Halliday). The passage cannot fail to remind readers of the way the Jaafari family’s story has been framed within Alice’s novel. The very materiality of Sami’s body gestures toward the textual nature of his existence. Yet we need not only interpret the passage as a piece of “autotheory,” an allusion to rather faded debates about language and reference. According to Rancière, Flaubert has to kill *Bovary* because *Bovary* combines art and life in the wrong way, seeking lyricism in the everyday, whereas Flaubert instead draws the material world into art (2008, 242-43). Has Halliday done the latter here? When Halliday “writes well” about Sami’s belly and hands or breaks off Part 2 by refocusing on Amar’s uncle’s body—rather than Amar’s own experience of airport detention or his eventual release—she doubles down on this emphasis on embodiment. We might say, in theoretical obeisance, that these are ineluctably figures rather than bodies. Or we might say that the

“formalism” that distinguishes Halliday’s Part 1 from her Part 2 recursively reappears in Part 2 as “content.” Yet the bodies of Amar’s brother and uncle gesture toward Halliday’s intention to move beyond paradox and organize her text around a remainder deranged by pointless violence.

Our affective engagement with *Asymmetry* moves as Chow predicts, from the ingenuity of the maker to the experience of the captured. Where Susan Choi’s *Trust Exercise* gives us what I have described, using her own categories, as “identity without recognition,” Halliday offers something like “recognition without identity.” Her novel urges us to understand and acknowledge Amar and his family, to recognize them in the sense of a politics of recognition. It does so, as Chow would expect, by offering an image of their violent captivity. That violence is in parallel to what Halliday announces from the outset: to “conjure” Amar Jaafari will amount to capture. Conjuring looks like a very different problem, a very different strategy, to the one pursued in Choi’s novel. But as I have tried to suggest, from the point of view of the autofictional formalism, which is to say from the point of view of the connection between Halliday and Alice, the difference between Sarah’s use of Karen and Alice’s use of Amar is a difference without distinction.

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Both *Trust Exercise* and *Asymmetry* have brief third parts. In *Trust Exercise*, we leap forward a generation, to learn that the teacher Mr. Kingsley, or somebody very like him named Richard Lord, is capable not only of seducing his students but of sexual assault. In *Asymmetry*, we listen to Ezra Blazer on a radio talk show, during which he persistently attempts to pick up the radio host. These events are not the same in law or in culture. But what does it mean that these authors end their novels by doubling down on their characterizations of Lord and Blazer as grasping, ignorant men? Especially when—as in *Asymmetry*—we had long left Blazer behind?

In these codas Choi and Halliday move to insist that there is a moral reality to the universe of their texts. Their condemnations of Lord and Blazer reassure readers that their novels are alert responses to violence and exploitation, that the seductions of form they enact elsewhere are not simply games with frames. For Rancière, the sense of a tension between such impulses has long determined the course of “modern fiction,” indeed of modernism as such. Yet in “When Reflexivity becomes Porn,” another essay from *Entanglements* (2012), Rey Chow observes that the connection modernism established between aesthetic reflexivity and emancipation—for example in Benjamin and Brecht—has become inert. Formerly, techniques of reflexive “staging,” which revealed how representation was done, could produce an estranging critical distance in which audiences practiced their freedom. Yet now such techniques, rather than interrupting representation, are ubiquitous features of the age of media. Chow traces the remnants of modernism’s estranging formalisms to the violent films of Michael Haneke, arguing that these no longer reveal the techniques of representation but instead indulge in “ripping off the medium’s clothes” (29). When modernist forms cease to signal cognitive freedoms, Chow suggests that they proffer a debased pleasure she likens to pornography. After the link estrangement once had with freedom of thought has broken, we merely enjoy and consume estrangement.

The third parts of *Trust Exercise* and *Asymmetry* amount to claims that we have not been engaged in pornographic reflexivity. But in making those claims these novels also direct our attention to a potential implication of Chow’s argument about art and captivity. *Trust Exercise* and *Asymmetry* intimate that the mechanism which has led from formalism-as-freedom to representations of pornographic violence can be operated (so to speak) in reverse. It’s not just the case that, as authors and critics pursue the alignment or realignment of art with freedom, they

find themselves offering images of capture, captivity, violence. Instead, Choi and Halliday suggest that the framing of those kinds of images itself acts, in a deranged way, to reestablish the text's relationship to freedom. In other words, when authors write capture, readers feel free—and they feel deeply uneasy.

To extend Chow's argument in this way is to suggest that autofiction has never really been about the self-representation of the author-protagonist, but rather about the text's captured victims. Once we suspect that we know, know that we feel, or feel that we suspect that we are reading in proximity to an author's life, then real others may also be involved. In every encounter and exchange the author-protagonist relates, we intuit, rightly or wrongly, that "material" is being used. We see that, as Karen makes clear in *Trust Exercise*, identities may be at stake. We see that, as Alice makes clear in *Asymmetry*, there is a politics of difference. In this, Choi's and Halliday's books, while different from one another and from autofiction more generally, are still not distinctive. Sheila Heti's *How Should a Person Be?* (2010) exploits a friend of the protagonist by using recordings of her voice. Teju Cole's *Open City* (2011) abruptly refocuses on a credible allegation of sexual assault. Much of Tao Lin's writing, including *Taipei* (2013), scrutinizes the careless ways his protagonists handle friends and partners. Ben Lerner's *The Topeka School* (2020) rotates, almost literally, around a representation of developmental disability. To note that these states of literary captivity evoke familiar forms of discrimination is merely to accentuate Chow's scandalous point. Indeed, Chow's argument aligns with recent sociological readings of technology and race. In *Captivating Technology* (2021), Ruha Benjamin observes that information technologies reproduce inequality precisely when and because they purport to do the opposite.

Is autofiction one such technology? Rey Chow notes that, for reasons deeply embedded in the history of modern liberalism and explored most fully by Jacques Rancière, contemporary art cannot cease to transgress the boundary between art and nonart. But the audience of autofiction is not primarily, or is only initially, engaged in playing a game of undecidability about fact or truth with the author. Chow points out that somebody will pay the price of these revels, and in books like *Trust Exercise* and *Asymmetry*, we find “embodied states of captivity” represented in and as the work. As Choi and Halliday carefully articulate, the reader of autofiction watches the author capture and violate other parties to the manuscript. But even more. Insofar as a text is autofictional, it traps prey, and this is why we read. If our initial investment in the work is an autobiographical one, we read on to see the pain of others. In the event of genuine discomfort, there is ready recourse to “metanarratives of freedom” to explain, in a major rather than a minor key, why we are doing what we are doing. Or we can turn away.

Trust Exercise and *Asymmetry* suggest that autofiction’s designs on its readers are not only more elaborate than may have been noticed, but also more fundamentally aimed at the reader’s experience of their own power and freedom. In “The Technology of Enchantment and The Enchantment of Technology” (1994), Alfred Gell argues that the experience of art is determined by the audience’s sense that they could not themselves do what the artist has done. This intuition enables the powerful aura that the work of art can make available to its audiences. Gell is thinking of feats of technique, scale, complexity, sumptuousness. But the account rings true, in another register, of the reader’s experience of autofiction. How could these authors do what they are doing? What unseemly courage licenses their acts of exploitation? Because we could not ourselves do what these authors are doing, they operate Gell’s magical mechanism: by a kind of enchantment, they transmute captivity into freedom.

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Notes

ⁱ For a genealogy of the concept and the term, which was coined in French in 1977, see Jones 2010, or the introduction to *Autofiction in English* (Dix 2018). The first monograph on the subject in the US is Marjorie Worthington's *The Story of "Me": Contemporary American Autofiction* (2018). Uses of the term in American book reviews and literary discourse make limited reference to the French theoretical and critical genealogy, instead attempting to name a distinctively contemporary phenomenon.

ⁱⁱ One example Chow uses to introduce her theory of captivation is *Lolita* (Chow 44), another story about the sexual exploitation of a minor. Susan Choi has mentioned *Lolita* as an example of the "fun rereading" that she enjoyed after publishing *Trust Exercise* (Choi and Wilson).

ⁱⁱⁱ *Trust Exercise* and *Asymmetry* are quoted from iBooks, which does not use stable page numbers. Subsequent citations will not repeat the n.p. designation.

^{iv} The school webpage is at <https://www.houstonisd.org/hspva>.