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American Literature in the Era of Trumpism

Alternative Realities

Edited by Dolores Resano

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Dolores Resano
Editor

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CHAPTER 1

Introduction: On the Meanings of 'American Reality'

Dolores Resano

We land in the ultimate dystopia, a world where we cannot make a distinction between what is false and what is true, what happened and what did not happen, who is honest and who is a liar, who is guilty and who is innocent, what is genuine and what is fake.
—Lubomír Doležel (1998, 792)

Abstract This chapter begins by considering the dominant affective state that came into being after the election of Trump in 2016, namely shock and disbelief, and contextualizes it through two opposed yet complementary impulses. First, it illustrates how political and cultural derealization was actively promoted by Trump himself and his administration, to then

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consider the liberal biases that were already implicit in the widespread perception that reality was collapsing. In the context of the emergence of two and seemingly irreconcilable American realities, ever more polarized along partisan lines, the literary world felt compelled to respond and did so publicly. This chapter considers various initiatives but focuses in particular on the insights provided by writers Aleksandar Hemon, Jan Clausen, and Viet Thanh Nguyen, who denounced the exceptionalist rhetoric that was often employed and called for a more engaged and less self-deluded American literature. It then proceeds to map the emerging corpus of 'Trump fiction' and existing scholarly studies, and argues that the analyses offered in *American Literature in the Era of Trumpism* contribute not only to the continued understanding of the landscape of American literature after 2016, but also to the long-standing scholarly tradition of decentering the notion of 'America.'

In 2010, David Shields's *Reality Hunger* presciently diagnosed an era of performativity, 'post-truth,' and 'post-fact' where we would long for reality because we would hardly experience any. Concerned mostly with the act of writing, but delving into the arts more generally, Shields's manifesto begins by stating that a work of art is essentially an artist's view of what constitutes reality and that, given the specific and renewed challenges posed by the twenty-first century to its own representation, Shields intuits that an artistic movement is forming—even if still unstated and diverse—one that is aiming to respond to this age where we are at once "desperate for authenticity and in love with artifice" (Shields 2010, 5)—an assessment that is somewhat reminiscent of Umberto Eco's and Jean Baudrillard's notions of hyperreality (Eco 1973, 1986; Baudrillard 1981).[1] Shields identifies a growing body of written work, starting in 2003, that seems to anticipate and yet somehow exceed the coordinates of what has been theorized as the 'realist turn' in twenty-first-century fiction, works that Shields argues are characterized by the "blurring (to the point of invisibility) of

[1] When a collection of translated essays was published in 1986, Eco wrote about embarking on a "journey into hyperreality" in "search of instances where the American imagination demands the real thing and, to attain it, must fabricate the absolute fake; where the boundaries between game and illusion are blurred, the art museum is contaminated by the freak show, and falsehood is enjoyed in a situation of 'fullness,' of *horror vacui*" (Eco 1986, 21). Similarly, for Baudrillard, hyperreality is "the generation by models of a real without origin or reality" (Baudrillard 2010 [1981], 1).

any distinction between fiction and nonfiction: the lure and blur of the real" (Shields 2010, 5). Particularly evocative is Shields's suggestion that this era of "reality hunger" is defined by the awareness that we lack and long for a shared sense of identity, one that can in turn shape a shared worldview, and that such reality no longer exists.

Six years later, the rise of Donald Trump to the highest office in the United States made Shields's speculations urgently real and posed valid questions regarding the fictional representation of a reality that was perceived as outpacing fiction. While there is much to be said about Trump's stoking of divisiveness, xenophobia, and ethno-nationalism, his populist appeals and a host of other issues—all of which are being expertly analyzed in a growing body of writing and scholarship about the Trump presidency, and some of which are also examined by the authors in this volume—perhaps the dominant affective state during his early presidency was the (for some, shocking) realization of the coming into being—or rather, the foregrounding—of alternative and seemingly irreconcilable realities in the vast territory of 'America.'[2] In such a context of disputed narratives, this collection of essays is interested in the examination of U.S. literature in the age of Trumpism—the latter understood as an ongoing sociopolitical and affective reality—and seeks to offer analyses of some of the ways in which American writers have responded to the experience of a 'new' American reality after 2016, without any claims to a supposed exceptionality of the moment but acknowledging that there is indeed a paradigmatic shift in politcal culture underway, not just locally but globally. Faced with the evidence that 'American reality' had ceased to be a shared notion—if it ever was—many of the works analyzed here probe deeper into what is implied in this notion of 'America' that is suddenly perceived as collapsing, while at the same time the analyses offered are cognizant of the

[2] 'America' is understood here as a cultural construction, a self-representation that often falls into the traps of exceptionalist discourse, and as such it is used throughout this chapter with inverted commas, as opposed to the more neutral designation 'United States'. Throughout the book, as well as in the title, however, the adjective 'American' is often used, reflecting the standard use in English. I acknowledge the contradiction and hope nonetheless to draw attention to issues of cultural imperialism, especially as regards the rest of the American continent.

devastating effects of Trump's project of reality distortion, that goes well beyond the mere peddling of falsehoods and fake news.[3]

In purely aesthetic terms, perhaps one of the most unsettling and effective strategies Trump put to use was the combination of populist rhetoric with politics-as-reality-television, a performative understanding of politics for which he showed remarkable skill. Trump's own status as a reality-TV personality—honed through fourteen seasons of *The Apprentice* franchise, his recurring presence in the New York tabloids, the *Howard Stern Show*, and the gossip pages[4]—and his deft command of the televisual and social media—superseded any previous understanding of politics as spectacle and, as has been argued by Liam Kennedy (2020) and others, does in fact represent a paradigm shift in terms of the derealization of political and cultural discourse in the United States. This is not to say that the aestheticization of American politics began with Trump—an otherwise long tradition that gained impulse especially after the advent of television and the presidencies of Kennedy and Reagan[5]—but the rise of Trumpist politics

[3] A lot (too much) can be said in this respect, but I find the analyses offered in Liam Kennedy's edited collection *Trump's America* quite insightful: Donald E. Pease, "Donald Trump's Settler-Colonist State (Fantasy): A New Era of Illiberal Hegemony?," 23–52; Patrick McGreevy, "Angry at the World: Progressive Possibilities in Trump's Disruption of the Current Order," 135–149; Diane Negra, "Ivanka Trump and the New Plutocratic (Post) feminism," 268–288; Scott Lucas, "Spectacle of Decency: Repairing America after Trump," 335–365; and Liam Kennedy, "'Reality Has a Well-Known Liberal Bias': The End(s) of Satire in Trump's America," 310–334.

[4] Ben Fountain notes how Trump perfected his acting skills through fourteen seasons of *The Apprentice* and *The Celebrity Apprentice*, where he "starred as Himself, the celebrity billionaire Donald Trump" (Fountain 2018, 59); that is, where he played himself as a fictional character. Moreover, as Fintan O'Toole reminds us, Trump had previously "created himself in the gossip pages of the New York tabloids, where celebrity is manufactured by planting outrageous stories that you can later confirm or deny depending on how they go down. And he recreated himself in reality TV where the storylines can be adjusted according to the ratings" (O'Toole 2018). In other words, Trump himself was already 'a work of fiction' before he entered American politics, and in this process fiction and reality reinforced each other *ad infinitum* in an endless loop (Fountain 2018, 59).

[5] See Liam Kennedy's chapter in this volume for an account of Philip Roth's and Norman Mailer's analyses of how JFK's presidency contributed to the aestheticization of American politics. See also Liam Kennedy, "American Realities," *The Routledge Companion to Transnational American Studies,* eds. Nina Morgan, Alfred Hornung, and Takayuki Tatsumi (London: Routledge, 2019): 299–301. For Reagan's presidency, in particular as it relates to the handling of the American War in Vietnam, a great analysis is to be found in Michael Rogin's article "'Make My Day!' Spectacle as Amnesia in Imperial Politics." (*Representations* 29 [1990]: 99–123)

did entail a new level of political, and even cultural, derealization, one that today is finding echoes in other administrations around the world.

As many commentators have noted, the singularity of Trump's approach to politics was already evident in the way that he ran his presidential campaign as a "structured reality show"—a hybrid format that combines scripted dramatization with 'real' life, "real enough to be compelling but fantastical enough to be entertaining" (O'Gorman and MacLaren 2017). With the onset of his presidency, the daily occurrences at the White House began: the leaks, the staff's recurring shakeups, the looming threat that somebody would be unceremoniously fired (which in itself opened a whole new referential universe associated to Trump's famous catchphrase in *The Apprentice*, "you're fired!"), and constant spats on Twitter that captured the public's imagination, as if politics itself had been reprogramed into a reality-TV show. *The New York Post* brilliantly caught the mood in its July 28, 2017 front page with a "Survivor White House" theme, featuring members of the Trump White House in various stages of undress and 'jungle attire' under the motto "Outspin. Outlast," which it updated on August 18, 2017 after the ouster of senior advisor Steve Bannon and again on March 13, 2018 after the firing of the Secretary of State, Rex Tillerson, with tweets that read "The tribe speaks again" and "Another one bites the dust," respectively.[6]

Even with his first nomination of a judge to the Supreme Court—a most solemn affair, and especially so because it was the seat that had been kept from Obama's nominee Merrick Garland—Trump teased the public with successive and increasingly narrower shortlists of candidates, playing with suspense until finally 'revealing' his nomination of Judge Neil Gorsuch in what Andrew Restuccia of *Politico* called a "reality show reveal" (Restuccia 2018): a televised ceremony on a Monday at 9 pm, perfectly timed to maximize TV exposure, and with the necessary collaboration of the losing 'finalist,' Judge Tom Hardiman. In early December 2018, Trump staged a meeting with Minority Leader Chuck Schumer and soon-to-be House Speaker Nancy Pelosi in the Oval Office in front of TV cameras—which would be mocked on both sides of the aisle as the "Chuck & Nancy Show"—with the aim of showing himself in the very real business of doing

[6] And it continued on July 6, 2018 after the ouster of EPA chief Scott Pruitt. Covers can be accessed via Press Reader. See https://www.pressreader.com/usa/new-york-post/20180706/page/1.

politics, performing his deal-maker role as he tried (unsuccessfully) to negotiate with the Democratic leadership (who would later became a meme sensation on Twitter for their clumsy staging of a joint appearance behind a podium).[7] A rerun of the meeting took place in April 2019, drawing much derision from the journalists tasked with covering it, as can be seen in the opening paragraph of the *Los Angeles Times* coverage of the same:

> On paper, President Trump's schedule Tuesday looks like something drawn up by the producers of a White House reality show with a plot line that combines the president's long-running "Chuck and Nancy" melodrama with his struggle to make any progress on rebuilding America's infrastructure. (Stokols 2019)

More than can be accounted for in this introduction was to come—Kellyanne Conway's affirmation of "alternative facts," Rudy Guliani's claim that "truth isn't truth"[8] and his crackpot demise at Four Seasons Total Landscaping, and even the emergence of a peculiar type of (fiction/nonfiction) genre, the ousted 'Trump insider' narrative, to name but a few instances in a daily deluge of impossible stories. In short, it can reasonably be argued that Trump spent the first years of his presidency still performing his reality TV shtick, executing the famous "You're fired!" by proxy and bringing into use a new favorite catchphrase against the oppositional media: "You're fake news." In light of this performativity-laden presidency, many analysts, commentators, and scholars did not hesitate to examine the early Trump administration within the logic of popular

[7] See, for example, Danielle Garrand, "Schumer and Pelosi's Response to Trump's Address Becomes Instant Meme Sensation on Twitter," (*CBS News*, January 9, 2019, https://www.cbsnews.com/news/schumer-pelosis-response-to-trumps-address-becomes-instant-meme-sensation-on-twitter/) and Andrea Park, "Nancy Pelosi and Chuck Schumer: The Best Memes of Their Response to Trump's Prime-Time Address" (*W Magazine*, January 9, 2019, https://www.wmagazine.com/story/nancy-pelosi-chuck-schumer-response-donald-trump-memes).

[8] On August 19, 2018, during a televised interview with Chuck Todd's *Meet the Press* (NBC), former Mayor of New York City and then-legal adviser to the president, Rudy Giuliani, declared: "Truth isn't truth" but "somebody's *version* of the truth, not the truth" (*Meet the Press* 2018). While Giuliani and Todd did not engage in what would have been a very necessary examination of the philosophical underpinnings of the term 'truth' and of its devalued state after postmodernism, the contentious exchange that followed on the nature of truth itself and its apparent duplicity—where 'truth' was now closer to 'opinion'—soon became, in the first two years of the Trump presidency, a relatively normal debate among politicians, pundits, journalists, and commentators in general.

culture and, in particular, of reality television, in fact arguing that Trump's was "a presidency consistently conducted with television in mind" (McNally 2022, 8).[9] And while a certain derogatory tone could be identified in many of the analyses published in the mainstream media, there was a kernel of truth in what they exposed. For example, Chris Cillizza of CNN observed that

> the best way to understand Donald Trump's approach to the presidency is to think of him as what he was before politics: The star and producer of a reality TV show. Trump is forever programming the show—aka his White House and the country—in ways he thinks will entertain, provoke and amaze the audience. (Cillizza 2018)

Novelist Ben Fountain had noted as much in his coverage of the 2016 presidential campaign for *The Guardian*,[10] where he noted that Trump's "performance of authenticity" through his fictional persona as a self-made businessman hinged and relied on his audience's "understanding of performance as the ultimate authenticity" (Fountain 2018, 60). Just as in reality TV, to presume that Trump supporters were 'duped' by his performance and his falsehoods is to completely misunderstand both the moment and the genre—the reality-TV watcher knows that the 'reality' is staged, and this is precisely its lure. As Fountain noted in his incisive and hilarious coverage of the campaign—where he attended rallies by all the candidates, including Ted Cruz, Hillary Clinton, and Bernie Sanders—"For millions of Americans there is nothing so real as Trump's performance of himself" (Fountain 2018, 59). Conceding that "Perhaps this is the most elaborate

[9] Karen McNally's edited volume *American Television During a Television Presidency* offers a comprehensive analysis of how politics became transfixed by television and vice versa (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 2022).

[10] Fountain's coverage of the 2016 campaign for *The Guardian*, which ran his chronicles from February to November 2016, was later published in book format (with added chapters) in *Beautiful Country Burn Again. Trump's Rise to Power, and the State of the Country that Voted for Him* (Edinburgh: Canongate / New York: HarperCollins, 2018). Although technically a nonfiction book, Fountain's novelistic style transpires through the pages and establishes striking resonances with his earlier work, the novel *Billy Lynn's Long Halftime Walk* (2012), especially in its depiction of the frenzied crowds during the Super Bowl whenever the flag, the anthem, or any other patriotic appeal come into play. Whether there is a fictional quality to the reality he is depicting, or whether his narrative style makes it especially so, or both, I believe Fountain's *Beautiful Country Burn Again* can in many ways be considered part of that blurring of the fictional and the real that Shields refers to in *Reality Hunger*.

performance in the history of American politics, by a master of the psyche who knows better, who *is* better, than the troll he seems to be," Fountain speculated that "perhaps he really is putting on an act, an act within an act such as double agents perform" (Fountain 2018, 61; emphasis in the original) and went on to reflect on the desire for spectacle of "an electorate that allows the phony to succeed" (Fountain 2018, 119). Even as he acknowledged that "Reality has been irrelevant for many months now" (Fountain 2018, 74) and that "facts [had] stopped mattering" (Fountain 2018, 68), Fountain was not as shocked by Trump's performance so as to ignore precedent, and rightly placed him within a longer tradition of performativity, or what he called "the long con of our politics [that is allowed] to go on and on" (Fountain 2018, 119).

In this respect, it is quite surprising that in their initial framing of the rise of Trumpism as an unprecedented shock to the system, mainstream media commentators seemed to have forgotten a very recent precedent that, all things considered, was a harbinger of things to come. In 2008, then-governor of Alaska Sarah Palin ran as vice-presidential candidate for John McCain's presidential bid against Barack Obama and based her campaign on a "divisive, personality-driven populism" (Couric and Goldsmith 2018) that, together with her charisma, would also help her to become a prominent figure in the Tea Party movement from 2009 onward and to land—surprise!—her own reality TV show, *Sarah Palin's Alaska* (TLC, 2010–2011). In hindsight, Palin's histrionic style of doing politics, her self-proclaimed identification with 'real' Americans, her rejection of the 'establishment,' and her appeals to foundational ideas of minimal government and conservative motherhood clearly anticipated that a twenty-first-century strain of right-wing populism was on the rise, signs that the liberal establishment seemed to have (dis)missed when it showed itself so shocked at Trump's win over a candidate—Hillary Clinton—whose victory, they had been told, was almost guaranteed.

It is worth remembering how the election of Trump as 45th president shook so many people's sense of 'reality' in the United States and around the Western world, as if his unexpected win had opened the door to a parallel universe—a universe seemingly located in 'Middle America' and inhabited by the inscrutable 'Trump voter' who, reportedly and inexplicably, voted against their own interests (a similar claim to that made roughly

six months earlier when a slim majority of British people had voted to leave the European Union).[11] The first airing of *Saturday Night Live*—usually credited as a good barometer of liberal sensitivities—after the inauguration did well to capture this widespread mood, the feeling of living in a counterfactual, alternative timeline and how this had upended liberals' sense of reality, with Trump impersonator Alec Baldwin declaring to the audience: "Yes, this is real life, this is really happening" (*SNL*, "Press Conference"). As I argue elsewhere (Resano 2022a), this line of argument had been running since Trump had become a realistic contender in the Republican primary, but it was never more incisive than in the November 20 post-election show when, in a brilliant exercise of parodic self-awareness, *SNL* had aired the skit "The Bubble," which referred to a closed community-housing project where "life continues for progressive Americans as if the election never happened" (*SNL*, "The Bubble"). The admission that a bubble existed and that objecting to its bursting was deeply tied to certain liberal values, was not, however, so readily

[11] It is not inexplicable, and many scholars and commentators have delved into it. For example, in *Mistaken Identity. Race and Class in the Age of Trump* (2018), Asad Haider traces the "decomposition and disorganization of the working class" movements in the UK and the United States from the postwar period to the rise of Thatcherism to the present, and how their demands grew increasingly detached from "the grassroots mass mobilizations that could advance [them]" (Haider 2018, 99). Largely based on the ground-breaking work of Stuart Hall in the late 1970s, Haider details the rise of what Hall termed "authoritarian populism"—a "rich mix" of Austrian liberalism with "popular sentiments regarding 'nation, family, duty, authority, standards, self-reliance'" (Haider 2018, 94) and coupled with an ideology of "law and order"—and how the progressive languages of the Left would later become co-opted and "appropriated as a new ruling-class strategy" (Haider 2018, 99) by the governments of Bill Clinton and Tony Blair, who closely followed from Thatcher and Reagan. As a result, Haider notes, when "an industry of commentators continues to ask why working-class Americans vote against their 'interests,' inviting us to pit Kansas against Connecticut, red state against blue state […] it is in fact in the decomposition and disorganization of the working class that we must seek an explanation for the rise of the right" (Haider 2018, 100). Even if the numbers show that working-class Americans tend to vote more Democratic, it also became evident to them that their voting practice did not in any way increase their power or their control over their material conditions of existence. As Hall observes, the "success and effectivity" of authoritarian populism "does not lie in its capacity to dupe unsuspecting folk but in the way it addresses real problems, real and lived experiences, real contradictions" (Hall in Haider 2018, 94–95), regardless of whether it may or may not really address them later in practice. Very interestingly, Haider also shows through the work of Hall and Paul Gilroy how racism became an integral part of neoliberal transformation, deployed and promoted in the effort to make strategic alliances among the working classes and new social movements impossible.

acknowledged in the mainstream coverage of Trump's shocking win, which insisted on the bizarre and unprecedented nature of the event, among calls to 'resist' that drew the crowds to the streets.

Among the most visible of these efforts was the Women's March 2017. With a flagship march in Washington DC that was simultaneously replicated in 400 other cities in the United States and drew support in at least 600 cities worldwide on the day after Trump's inauguration, the march was organized to protest Trump's "anti-women" stance and the policies that ostensibly would follow from it.[12] Another initiative, called Writers Resist, had been jumpstarted earlier by poet Erin Belieu, following Trump's election in November. Writers Resist was announced as a grassroots literary movement in defense of the "most basic principles of freedom and justice for all."[13] In their launch event, the president of PEN America, Andrew Solomon, called on people "to remain shocked and revolted" (qtd. in Gradinaru 2018). This mobilization of American literati followed from an earlier effort in May 2016, when 450 writers had signed "An Open Letter to the American People" (published in *Literary Hub*) in which they "unequivocally" opposed the candidacy of Donald Trump and argued that

> the rise of a political candidate who deliberately appeals to the basest and most violent elements in society, who encourages aggression among his followers, shouts down opponents, intimidates dissenters, and denigrates women and minorities, demands, from each of us, an immediate and forceful response. (Altschul and Slouka 2016)

They also decried that "American history, *despite periods of nativism and bigotry*, has from the first been a grand experiment in bringing people of different backgrounds together, not pitting them against one another" (Altschul and Slouka 2016; my emphasis). The Open Letter was just one among many instances of the literary world feeling compelled to voice its rejection of not just sexism, xenophobia, and racism, but the very

[12] Today, the Women's March has evolved into a national, intersectional coalition "committed to dismantling systems of oppression through nonviolent resistance and building inclusive structures guided by self-determination, dignity and respect." See https://womensmarch.com/.

[13] Their website no longer exists but information about their guiding principles can be found at https://www.awpwriter.org/magazine_media/writers_news_view/4167/new_writers_resist_movement_to_highlight_social_justice_issues_across_the_country.

possibility and reality of a Trump presidency,[14] and while some of them were incisive and clear-eyed, others betrayed their own "cognitive and cultural traps"—as Teresa Botelho calls them later in this volume—and sadly engaged in a rhetoric of exceptionalism that, as I will argue in upcoming sections, also deserves closer examination. Author Daniel José Older was swift to respond in *Electric Lit*, chastising the Open Letter for engaging in "a continuation of the ongoing legacy of sanitized lies America has shoved down its own throat since its creation" and thus continuing to shun "we, the people who continue to struggle in the face of that lie, and whose ancestors suffered and died from the reality that lie conceals" (Older 2016). In other words, and as many writers noted, to question and examine the nature and rhetoric of these calls to resist is not to negate the true and real aberrations that were predicted, feared, and later confirmed during Trump's presidency—and that continue to be pushed by a GOP that has fully embraced Trumpism—or to dismiss the importance of committed acts of resistance: In the face of racism, misogyny, and xenophobia, and when lives are at stake, that is when there is a call to be *truly* political. But when honest expressions of shock, disgust, and rejection fail to acknowledge their own ideological positionality and resort to a problematic and deluded rhetoric that continues to exclude and oppress, we are bound to question the level of self-awareness, the potential to actually effect change, and ultimately the relevance of such reactions.

A Corpus of Trump Fiction?

Under the impression that any notion of a 'shared reality' had been effectively overhauled, liberal America not only marched in the streets but also rushed to read books like J.D. Vance's *Hillbilly Elegy* (2016) as a possible sociological explainer for this (apparently) until-then-unknown species of

[14] This newfound sense of mission was echoed in numerous newspaper articles; see, for example, Maddie Crum and Claire Fallon, "What It Means to Be a Writer in the Time of Trump," *The Huffington Post*, November 17, 2016, at https://www.huffpost.com/entry/what-it-means-to-be-a-writer-in-the-time-of-trump_n_58261ee0e4b0c4b63b0c7f3f and "Aftermath: Sixteen Writers on Trump's America. Essays by Toni Morrison, Atul Gawande, Hilary Mantel, George Packer, Jane Mayer, Jeffrey Toobin, Junot Díaz, and more," *The New Yorker*, November 14, 2016, at https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2016/11/21/aftermath-sixteen-writers-on-trumps-america. For a thorough overview of similar efforts, see Carme Manuel, "Los escritores norteamericanos en la era de Trump: entre la metáfora moribunda y la hipérbole veraz," *Pasajes*, 53 (2017), 48–72.

Americans—a book that was included in some universities' undergraduate study programs and that has now been turned into a Netflix series[15]—and similar volumes that could explain the 'redneck' stereotype to them (Fields 2017). For example, Nancy Isenberg's *White Trash* (2016), Carol Anderson's *White Rage* (2016), Robert P. Jones's *The End of White Christian America* (2016), and Russell Hochschild's *Strangers in Their Own Land* (2016) were all published in 2016, not by coincidence. It also soon became a trope in mainstream liberal media coverage to recommend going back to the classics of dystopian fiction in order to gain some insight into what felt like a surreal present—Sinclair Lewis's *It Can't Happen Here*, George Orwell's *1984*, Aldous Huxley's *Brave New World*, and new classics like Philip Roth's *The Plot Against America* and Margaret Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale* all saw a spike in their sales (cf. Alter 2017, Gilbert 2017, Raynor 2017). All of a sudden, the role of literature in the examination of a fractured sense of reality came newly into the spotlight, and soon cultural critics and commentators started to envision that a corpus of 'Trump fiction' would emerge in due time, very much like the corpus of post-9/11 fiction had emerged after the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001. This new corpus would address the aftermath of what was initially framed as a watershed moment in American history, the presidential election of a reality-TV star who showed no respect for the norms and traditions of the office (or any other institution, as it would turn out) and who displayed an "inventive relation to reality," to put it in Claire Colebrook's words (2019, 40). Although later analyses would firmly establish the election of Trump as a logical outcome of previous and long-running social, economic, cultural, and political processes, and while it is still uncertain that a solid corpus of Trump fiction *sensu stricto* will come to

[15] For an insightful critique of this work and its place in the post-election environment, see Hamilton Carroll's chapter "'If You Want to Know Why 2016 Happened, Read This Book': Class, Race and the Literature of Disinvestment (the Case of *Hillbilly Elegy*)" in Liam Kennedy (ed.) *Trump's America. Political Culture and National Identity* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2020). It is also interesting to read the revised appraisals of said work and its author in 2021, in light of J.D. Vance's running for a Senate seat in Ohio and his seeming capitulation to Trumpism, as he has backtracked past tweets in which he had condemned Trump's divisive style. Additionally, there is a—in my estimation—much better, less self-promoting, and earlier book that offers a similar type of 'insider' outlook into this particular milieu in American society, Joe Bageant's *Deer Hunting with Jesus. Guns, Votes, Debt and Delusion in Redneck America* (London: Portobello, 2008). In a different tone, also of note is George Packer's *The Unwinding: An Inner History of the New America* (New York: Farrar, Strauss & Giroux, 2013).

fruition—and by this I mean a narrow definition of the genre, as I will argue below—a first wave of fiction emerged in the first years of the Trump administration impelled by a felt sense of urgency to capture the zeitgeist and under the premise that the exceptionality of the moment posed particular challenges to its representation.

Among the first examples in this body of work that felt compelled to come to terms with the results of the 2016 election was *The Trump Story Project*, commissioned by *Slate* magazine and edited by Ben H. Winters—whose 2016 novel *Underground Airlines* is analyzed in Karen Hellekson's chapter in this volume. The project consisted of ten short stories by contemporary writers of genre fiction published between January 26, 2017 and March 7, 2017, when the series was closed with an interview by Chau Tu with Ben H. Winters and one of the authors in the series, Héctor Tobar, entitled "The Urgency of Writing Fiction in the Trump Era." In it, Winters clearly laid out the motivation for the project: Once Trump's election had become a reality, he wanted to imagine what the future—that allegedly dystopian future that, in their view, could only happen in a counterfactual—would look like, and none better than writers of genre fiction to speculate about "the real ways that lives are going to change" (Winters in Tu 2017).[16] Writing from a seemingly counterfactual present in which the election of Trump was both the imagined divergent event and the reality—in fact reversing the basic premise of counterfactuals, which is to write about 'what could have happened' but did not happen—the project turned to narrative fiction as that which had "the power to clarify, to galvanize, to prophesy, and warn" (Winters in Tu 2017), to create "something human from this cruelty" and also "something joyful" from "a surreal event" (Tobar in Tu 2017). Tobar also noted that in an environment of fast-paced and overwhelming superficiality, where Twitter had

[16] The project included writers of speculative and science fiction, counterfactuals, mystery, fantasy, paranormal fiction, and/or writers who tend to display a high degree of experimentation in their writing: Héctor Tobar ("The Daylight Underground"), Ben H. Winters ("Fifth Avenue"), Edan Lepucki ("Chorus"), Saladin Ahmed ("Clay and Smokeless Fire"), Jeff VanderMeer ("Trump Land"), Lauren Beukes ("Patriot Points"), Elizabeth Bear ("What Someone Else Does Not Want Printed"), Nisi Shawl ("Slippernet"), Kashana Cauley ("Clippers"), and J. Robert Lennon ("The Museum of Near Misses"). A similar initiative, the *Trump Fiction Project*, was commissioned by the *Washingtonian Magazine* in December 2017. As Teresa Botelho explains in her chapter in this volume, that project was "explained by its editor in terms of the implausibility of the very existence of a Trump election and presidency, which 'would have been panned for being ludicrous' if it had been imagined as a novel (Means, 2017)."

become like "a horrible Greek chorus," fiction could provide a space of "thoughtfulness of language" where "a deeper and more honest appreciation of our reality" might be achieved (Tobar in Tu 2017).

Covering a wide range of issues, from immigration policy, abortion rights, and racism to attacks on journalism and the rewriting of history, some of the stories in the *Trump Story Project* proved indeed prescient or at least very accurate in their speculations, and some were delightfully funny as well. Three stories stand out, in my estimation, for the way in which they addressed the derealization of the American present and how they complicated the notions of 'reality' and narrative realism as an adequate means to address the Trump era. J. Robert Lennon's "The Museum of Near Misses" plays with genre in ingenious ways: The story is a counterfactual in which Hillary Clinton has won the election and a fictional J. Robert Lennon has become famous after writing a counterfactual in which Trump wins. As part of a publicity tour, he visits the titular museum—where the 'near miss' of Trump's win is on display—and once there a guide named Virgil (who would not think of Virgil guiding Dante through Hell and Purgatory in the *Divine Comedy*?) tricks him into an 'alternative reality' from which he can't escape: a world that closely resembles the reality that the real J. Robert Lennon has been asked to imagine for the *Slate* project, and to which he devotes a single line, and that the fictional J. Robert Lennon had already imagined in his counterfactual account. Another interesting inclusion in the series is "Trump Land," by Jeff VanderMeer, whose fiction is usually described as part of the New Weird subgenre of fantasy, "a type of urban, secondary-world fiction" that claims to use realism as a way of subverting the conventions and tropes of science fiction and fantasy (VanderMeer 2008, xvi). As the story opens, Trump Land is an amusement park that is being built by a Never-Trumper millionaire "as a kind of joke," featuring "a giant building shaped to look like a reclining Trump on his side" and which is entered "through the ass—Trump's asshole, to be clear" (VanderMeer 2017a). As the narrator warns, "This was not metaphorical any more than Trump Land was metaphorical" (VanderMeer 2017a), and as the story progresses the joke turns into a dystopian, authoritarian work camp in the middle of the desert where the structure is continually reconstructed and deconstructed, after the "Bureau of Make America Great Again (BOMAGA) visited the site" and declared "the project un-American. Un-great. Ungrateful. Ingrates. Followed by Trump's 'pardon' of the site in a typo-filled tweet and his magnanimous agreement that construction could continue, so long as it

reflected his vision for a 'respectful' tribute" (VanderMeer 2017a). As VanderMeer noted in his blog, the story was a response to "the current era of false news and the conflation of the political and entertainment, so I chose to create a story in which the satire becomes subsumed by the real" (VanderMeer 2017b). Finally, Lauren Beukes's "Patriot Points" takes the shape of an application form for a seemingly innocent commercial "program that rewards YOU for being a proud American" by offering "huge discounts on popular all-American brands, TSA Precheck approval, and priority boarding on U.S.-carrier flights" (Beukes 2017). As the questionnaire unfolds, with questions listed under the categories "Your Roots" ("How many generations has your family been in America?"), "Economic Expedience" ("Do you buy American?" "Do you have any chronic diseases or conditions that may make you a drain on the economy?"), "All-American Values" ("Do you own an American flag?" "Do you own a gun?" "Are you active in your local church?") and "Complete the Sentence," the application form lays out a culture where the possibility of being a proud American is not the result of civic engagement but a matter of birth and of very specific ideological commitments, delineating the increased levels of xenophobia, chauvinism, racism, white supremacy, and violence that it would become acceptable to openly display during the new administration.

Other early works also engage with a derealized political culture and in turn pose questions about the adequacy of realism to address it, for example Salman Rushdie's *The Golden House*, published in August 2017. As I argue elsewhere (Resano 2021), the timeline of drafting and writing the novel firmly places it in a time before Trump's election, but as Rushdie himself noted, in the revision of the final manuscript, as the 2016 campaign and election were under way, he gave the main character "some Trumpy echoes" (Rushdie in Raphael 2017), but no important changes were made. Although in interviews he minimized these resonances as responding to merely comedic reasons, they are deliberate and striking, and the premise of the novel itself invites its labeling as 'Trump fiction': The novel is concerned precisely with the years that lead to the Trump presidency, opening with Obama's first inauguration in 2008 and closing with the 2016 election, and charts the rapid deterioration of the notion of 'truth' in a United States that has "left reality behind" (Rushdie in Doherty 2017), to the point that toward the end of the novel the until-then realist narrative logic is taken over by the comic-book universe of The Joker, Catwoman, and The Suicide Squad (who have unambiguous referents in

Donald Trump, Hillary Clinton, and the Republican Party). As Rushdie suggests, the "demolishing of reality" undertaken by Trump and his allies had already started before his arrival and is very much a concern in the novel, which depicts a world in which "people are ruled by cartoons" (Rushdie in Doherty 2017).

The sense that any firm grip on reality is collapsing, of living in a moment of transition, is also present in other novels published during the same period, but whether we could call them part of a corpus of 'Trump fiction' is more uncertain. For example, novels as dissimilar as George Saunders's *Lincoln in the Bardo* (2017) and Barbara Kingsolver's *Unsheltered* (2018) both narrate, from very different narrative proposals and styles, unsettling moments of paradigm shift when the coordinates of one's epistemic processes seem to be shifting, a pervasive sense that the ground is being pulled from under one's feet. While Kingsolver establishes clear referents to the world of 2016 and features Trump and Trumpism by name,[17] the associations that could be drawn from Saunders's narrative are diffuse, not to say nonexistent. And yet, the novel speaks volumes to the present moment, albeit indirectly. The same could be said of an earlier novel, not in any way related to Trump, Viet Thahn Nguyen's *The Sympathizer* (2015), if one wants to read how reality collapses. In other words, it is pertinent to ask what we mean exactly when we speak of 'Trump fiction,' for while echoes of the 2016 campaign and Trump himself—or alter egos—figure prominently in many of the works published in the immediacy of Trump's election—for example, Jonathan Lethem's *The Feral Detective* (2018), the aforementioned *Unsheltered* by Kingsolver (2018), Gary Shteyngart's *Lake Success* (2018), and Mark Dotten's *Trump Sky Alpha* (2019), the last two analyzed in Teresa Botelho's chapter in this volume—a label centered exclusively around the figure of Trump would seem to eschew the full range of concerns addressed by many of these works. If we were to think, borrowing Raymond Williams's terminology, about the "structure of feeling" of much of the fiction published since 2016, a window is opened onto a changing world of shifting cultural paradigms, ongoing precarization in a relentlessly neoliberal and globalized world, class division and oppression, and impending environmental collapse, eliciting a range of affects in which anxiety, frustration, and disorientation play a major role. How to distinguish the latter from a specifically Trumpian fiction? Would the novella by Danielle Evans, *The Office of*

[17] For an analysis of Kingsolver's novel, see Resano 2022b.

Historical Corrections (2020), in which "a national network of fact-checkers and historians" (Evans 2020, 164) is charged with the task of "making the truth so accessible and appealing it could not be ignored" (Evans 2020, 165), be considered part of that very corpus? Probably yes. And what about the parodic short story by Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie, "The Arrangements" (2016), which rewrites Virginia Woolf's Mrs. Dalloway from the perspective of Melania Trump during the 2016 campaign? Most certainly. Karen E. Bender's thoughtful and witty collection of stories *The New Order* (2018) has, as the title suggests, the times written all over it. Would Don DeLillo's *The Silence* (2020), which imagines the collapse of digital civilization, be part of the same corpus? What does it mean to speak to the 'Trump Era'?

One of the earliest attempts to define the coordinates of a corpus of 'Trump fiction' is offered by Stephen Hock in one of the few sustained scholarly volumes about fiction and Trump, the edited collection *Trump Fiction. Essays on Donald Trump in Literature, Film, and Television* (2020).[18] As Hock explains in the introduction, the lens through which the authors examine Trump fiction includes not only those works of fiction written in direct response to the 2016 election but also "what in retrospect can be read as the cultural prehistory of President Trump" (Hock 2020, 5), which includes a wide range of "cultural artifacts that predate his presidency" (Hock 2020, 1) and that is explained by the fact that Trump was already a public figure who had taken pains to create a public persona, as I have argued earlier. As Hock notes, "novelists, screenwriters, cartoonists, and other writers […] had been writing about Donald Trump for

[18] Two other volumes address Trump and fiction directly, but I've found them less relevant to our exploration here: *Utopia and Dystopia in the Age of Trump: Images from Literature and Visual Arts*, edited by Barbara Brodman and James E. Doan (Fairleigh Dickinson University Press, 2019) and *Foreshadowing Trump: Trump Characters, Ethics, Morality and Fascism in Classic Literature*, by Thomas Fensch (New Century Books, 2017). The first is the fifth volume in a series concerned with the evolution of utopian and dystopian imagery in literature, film, and visual arts more generally; therefore, Trump simply provides the context for larger critical evaluations of the utopian and dystopian genres in a variety of media. Fensch's work, rather than examining literary responses to the Trump years, looks instead at literary texts that "foreshadow" him in character *type* in works by Melville, Twain, Lewis, Orwell, and Roth, a kind of analysis that Hoch would define as the "rereading in the age of Trump" of previous work. Additionally, works like *The Work of Literature in the Age of Post-Truth* by Christopher Schaberg (Bloomsbury, 2018) have touched on adjacent themes, as well as a growing number of scholarly articles that are expanding the corpus of Trump cultural studies.

years before he became the forty-fifth president of the United States, often in terms that uncannily prefigure the discourse that has since grown to surround his presidency" (Hock 2020, 1). These works include, for example, Bret Easton Ellis's *American Psycho* (1991), where Trump is Patrick Bateman's object of hero worship, Thomas Pynchon's *Bleeding Edge* (2013), where the villainous tycoon Gabriel Ice is compared to Trump, and even a post-9/11 novel like Amy Waldman's *The Submission* (2011), where Hock argues that both Trump and Hillary Clinton are unambiguously treated, even if not referred to by name. As a result, only the last section of the volume ("Trumpocalypse Now") is devoted to fictional works—not restricted to literature—that would fit a narrower description of a nascent corpus of fiction that is expected to address the outcome of the election, offering analyses of Howard Jacobson's *Pussy* (2017), Mark Dotten's *Trump Sky Alpha* (2019), Showtime's animated satirical series *Our Cartoon President* (2018), FX's television series *Pose* (2018–2021), Olivia Laing's *Crudo* (2018), and Salman Rushdie's *The Golden House* (2017). In this sense, Hock's definition of Trump fiction, although seemingly restrictive in its requirement for a certain referentiality to Trump, aims to be located within a broader 'age of Trump,' a time frame that is not about "just (or even necessarily primarily) Trump himself, but rather those larger cultural, historical, and political structures ordering life in the United States, of which Trump stands as an effect, in which he is a willing participant" (Hock 2020, 4). In other words, and as Carlos Lozada argues in *What Were We Thinking: A Brief Intellectual History of the Trump Era* (2020), many of the best books about Trump are not about Trump at all.

Echoing Boxall in his study *Twenty-First-Century Fiction* (2013), we might ask then if there is such a thing as an 'age of Trump' and, moreover, whether it has impacted in any way the writing and reading of American literature. Are there any thematic or stylistic characteristics to be identified that would allow us to speak meaningfully of an age of Trump? Is there "a character, a mood, a structure of feeling" (Boxall 2013, 1) that we can ascribe to American literature in an age of Trumpism? How would that differ from a more broadly defined twenty-first-century fiction? As Boxall admits, such questions are very much framed by the moment in which we ask them, and I may add by the short period of time that has elapsed since Trump burst more broadly into our public and political consciousness, and as he continues to inhabit it through the affective hold that Trumpism still has on American politics and culture. Any such reflection is inevitably entangled with our experience of the twenty-first century, with being

contemporaneous with it, and the inherent difficulty that, as Giorgio Agamben notes, "being contemporary" entails: having the capacity to keep a distance from one's own time so as to be able to represent its point of fracture (Agamben 2009, 39), being able to identify its particular (if any) predicament or sensibility. In this spirit, this volume refers to American literature in the era of Trumpism (rather than of Trump) as an acknowledgment of the need for a longer historical view, of the time that may have to pass until we fully grasp it, immersed as we are in the immediacy of a shifting and rapidly changing world. For now, the analyses included here work to identify, disentangle, and make legible a range of concomitant concerns and affects that, sometimes more overtly, sometimes in more nuanced ways, appeal to us from the pages of American literature post-2016, while at the same time they probe into, and on occasion challenge, certain structures of thought that stubbornly remain.

Against Literary Nationalism

While acknowledging that the initial feeling of estrangement and disorientation may itself be a corollary of the normalization of American liberal values as the 'natural' state of things, there is no denying that Trump's tenure was initially successful in impeding critical interpretation by its subversion of the very grounds for analysis, raising valid questions about the state of American liberal democracy beyond the tired (and tiresome) debates about 'the soul of America.'[19] In this context, we are also called upon to reflect on the role that literature plays in the efforts to name, explain, understand, and imagine the present and the futures of a United States where Trumpism still retains such a strong affective hold.

The genesis for this volume is very much inspired by one of the earliest calls to "Stop Making Sense" of the election of Trump as if it were an unprecedented, bizarre occurrence, an article published in January 2017 by Aleksandar Hemon in *The Village Voice*. As a Bosnian-American who had witnessed the rapid disintegration of his home country after the siege of Sarajevo—indeed, as the former Yugoslavia ceased to exist—, Hemon was able to identify "how the piece-by-piece dismantling of familiar and

[19] To mention but two recent instances of the recurrent use of this catchall phrase, see Joe Biden's 2020 campaign slogan, "battle for the soul of America," and the volume by presidential historian Jon Meacham, *The Soul of America: The Battle for Our Better Angels* (New York: Random House, 2018). Donald Trump also used the phrase "Save America's Soul" to pick on Democratic in-fighting during his 2020 reelection bid.

comfortable reality commences," and insisted on the imaginative impossibility of processing this crumbling sense of reality when one is still beholden to nostalgic visions of "who we are" (Hemon 2017a). With a deep understanding of how the foothold of reality can be radically shaken, and of how we tend to take continuity for granted, Hemon questioned the perceived assumption that, all of a sudden, Americans had woken up in "a revengeful country of disgruntled racists, who elected the worst person in America as a gleeful punishment for whatever white grudges had been accumulated" in previous years (Hemon 2017a). Comparing the wake of the election to the feeling at the beginning of a war, "when what cannot possibly happen begins to happen, rapidly and everywhere," Hemon dissected how moments of rupture like these break the illusion of a self-evident reality that can't be otherwise; as Hemon wrote, "the human mind is dependent on the delusion of ontological, psychological, and moral continuity" (Hemon 2017a), a "reality inertia" that offers the comfort of 'knowing,' deep down inside, that what is happening is not really happening, that the world as we know it is not disintegrating. But as Hemon argued in a later interview with *The Common*, "to own the destruction, the rupture, is to accept the fact that this country is not what we thought it was" (Hemon 2017b).

Addressing himself directly to the writers of literature, and after declaring somewhat tongue-in-cheek that "a good writer should never let a good catastrophe go to waste" (Hemon 2017a), Hemon reflected on how American literature had to address the "absolute and total failure in American society, including its literature and culture and art, and politics, and democracy" that Trump represented, and that not to do so would be "complicit and propaganda" (Hemon 2017b). Hemon was particularly explicit in condemning how, more often than not, literature has become a bourgeois endeavor, "a machinery for making reality appear unalterable," and was not shy to denounce that "The vast majority of Anglo-American literary production serves that purpose, confirming what is already agreed upon as knowable" (Hemon 2017a). Therefore, he called on American writers to "imagine the unimaginable," and "to transform shock into a high alertness that prevents anything from being taken for granted" (Hemon 2017a). Hemon concludes the January piece thus:

> What I call for is a literature that craves the conflict and owns the destruction, a split-mind literature that features fear and handles shock, that keeps self-evident 'reality' safely within the quotation marks. Never should we assume the sun will rise tomorrow, that America cannot be a fascist state, or

> that the nice-guy neighbor will not be a murderer because he gives out candy at Halloween.
>
> America, including its literature, is now in ruins, and the next four years will be far worse than anyone can imagine. Which is why we must keep imagining them as we struggle to survive them. To write in and of America, we must be ready to lose everything, to recognize we never had any of it in the first place, to abandon hope and embrace struggle, to fight in the streets and in our sentences. It will not be even close to comfortable.

Other voices were equally critical in their demands for an engaged literature that refused to serve as "ontological propaganda" for a teleological construction of a pre-Trump 'America,' or what Jan Clausen denounced as "literary nationalism" in a *Jacobin* piece in March 2017. Clausen pointed out how, in their reactions of outrage and shock at Trump's election, and in their calls to remain shocked, American literary circles had also done it in "the language of American exceptionalism," appealing to liberal-nationalist clichés like "this isn't who we are," and "the city upon a hill" that conveniently elided the most problematic aspects of the recent past and the continuity with a history of racism, imperialism, violence, and xenophobia. Clausen denounced the mythmaking implicit in the literary establishment's nostalgic framing of the outgoing Obama presidency as a lost Camelot "of elegance, grace, literary sophistication, and arts patronage"—a mere "veneer of decency"—and their appeal to a rhetoric that, in her view, only "sprea[d] the dangerous idea that comforting falsehoods can become the foundation for effective resistance" (Clausen 2017).[20] As Clausen put it, "American writers must renounce the destructive fantasies of [what Aziz Rana called] creedal nationalism" (Clausen 2017), a narrative according to which 'America' always progresses toward liberty and equality for all. Instead, he called on writers to follow "the tradition of radical dissent embodied by James Baldwin, Audre Lorde, and Adrianne Rich" (Clausen 2017) and which Frances Stonor Saunders defined as that "where intellectuals took it upon themselves to probe myths, interrogate institutional prerogative, and disturb the complacency

[20] As Clausen notes, Obama appealed to liberals across the board but to writers in particular, and made "unprecedented efforts to engage with the nation's culture makers" who perceived him as "our sort of person." As she laments, "Never mind the cognitive dissonance required to reconcile this attractive figure with the POTUS of the hit lists reviewed on 'Killer Tuesdays,' the Nobel Peace laureate who bombed seven countries and planned a trillion dollar update of the nation's nuclear arsenal, the 'deporter-in-chief' who expelled more undocumented people than all twentieth-century American presidents *combined*" (Clausen 2017; emphasis in the original).

of power" (Stonor Saunders in Clausen 2017). And this implied, for Clausen, doing a number of things, like renovating the language by eschewing "sentimental nationalist rhetoric," shunning appeals to "American values" as "embarrassing platitudes," and casting off "the 'nation of immigrants' trope, which obscures the sordid histories of settler colonialism and the Middle Passage" (Clausen 2017). She also called for "reconstructing international solidarity among writers" based on "explicit anti-imperialism" and anti-racism, for practicing "active dissent," and for raising the voices of those who "like novelist Rabih Alameddine, recognize, 'We are not better than this. We are this'" (Clausen 2017). And only then, argued Clausen, American literature could take up the task of imagining, and then building, "communities geared to sustain a world beyond the follies and crimes of 'America'" (Clausen 2017).

Clausen's denunciation closely resembled some of the arguments voiced by Hemon in June 2016, when he explained why he hadn't signed the "Open Letter to the American People" that had been signed by 450 writers and was later endorsed by more than 24,000 people: after admitting that he also deplored "Trump and everything he and his squirrel-pelt hair stand for" and applauding some of the ethical and philosophical reasons that the letter argued, Hemon suggested that the letter also belied a nostalgic and exceptionalist vision, one where Trump is perceived as "tarnish[ing] the comforting picture of American history," which the letter had defined as a "grand experiment" that brings people together despite "periods of nativism and bigotry" (Hemon 2016), as noted earlier. Hemon suggested that writing might be better served by shifting the focus from Trump as the "false cause for our discontent" and by exploring instead "what made Trump and Trumpism possible" (Hemon 2016). Hemon concluded his piece by reflecting that if one positive could be drawn from the rise of Trump and the outrage he elicited, it was that maybe it would "get American writers back to politics" (Hemon 2016), shedding the comforting apolitical tendencies that lay at the heart of the literary establishment. Four years later, in a piece titled "The Post-Trump Future of Literature," Viet Thanh Nguyen concurred that Trump had indeed "destroyed the ability of white writers to dwell in the apolitical"[21]

[21] Nguyen makes the argument against apolitical literature by framing it as a sign of privilege, in the context of a "publishing industry whose editorial staff is 85 percent white, and whose fiction list is 95 percent white." In contrast, he writes, "Explicit politics in American poetry and fiction has mostly been left to the marginalized: writers of color, queer and trans writers, feminist writers, anticolonial writers" (Nguyen 2020).

but wondered whether, once "the outrage is over," the "normative center of [American] apolitical literature" would go back to "writing about flowers and moons," back to "the politics of the apolitical" which was the privilege of only a few (Nguyen 2020).

Aims and Organization of the Volume

While it may still be early to fully assess what 'the age of Trump' has yielded in the field of American literature and the directions that it may take in years to come, this volume is interested in examining some of the early works of this period and how, from an initial sense of a fractured reality, many writers of narrative fiction have attempted to ground that reality in the history and politics of 'America.' The ascendancy of Trump brought into sharp relief not only the increasingly divorced realities of the United States along lines of race, class, gender, and ideology—as part of an agenda centered on science denialism, divisiveness, ethno-nationalism, polarization, and the active attempt to dismantle the structures of American liberal democracy—but it also made manifest a crisis that is not just epistemic—that is, how we arrive at knowledge, what counts as knowledge—but ontological—what is 'America,' who is 'American.' The cognitive dissonance between the imagined national self—the benign idea of 'America' as a coherent set of foundational values and naturalized beliefs—, and the less flattering and contradictory realities that the election of Trump and his presidency laid bare, demands a reexamination of those hegemonic narratives where American reality is stable, coherent, and unalterable, and of the means by which such national fantasies are constructed and upheld in cultural terms, and in which American literature is so hugely invested. The reexamination of these fantasies as the symbolic apparatuses that interpellate and bind together a national polity has a rich scholarly tradition in American Studies[22] and demands its continued renewal in the face of the challenges posed by a transnational and globalized world in the twenty-first century. In this sense, in their analysis of a number of contemporary novels and other pieces of writing published in the immediacy of Trump's ascent to American politics, the essays in this volume consider the potential and politics of literature as critique.

[22] See, for example, Slotkin (1973, 1986), Bercovitch (1978, 1993), Nash Smith (1986), Baudrillard (1986), Berlant (1991), Pease (1994, 2009), and Rose (1996), to list but a few.

From this perspective, the corpus of fiction associated to the era of Trump may be defined in the future as works that go beyond the representation of an initial sense of shock and/or that engage in superficial satirical exercises—as was the case with many early examples of so-called Trump novels—, and that instead pose deeper, even ontological questions about the nature and trajectory of this 'America.' Many, if not most, of the works analyzed here do exactly that. If part of the ideological work of art, understood broadly, is to validate or make a case for reality as something that can be known and apprehended, and this in turn helps us to understand who we are in the world, the guiding question behind this volume is how contemporary American literature is responding to the perceived shattering of American reality in the age of Trump, when the imagined community—in Benedict Anderson's terms—of 'America' is once again being challenged in such stark terms. Can American literature accurately speak to the newfound realities of the United States post-Trump? Can an engagement with literature as critique help us to engage with the contradictory social, political, and cultural crises and anxieties of the present era and, rather than simple diagnoses, offer the articulation of alternatives? This is wherein the utopian potential of literature lies. If the election of Trump brought about a fractured sense of reality, literature would do good in examining what was that 'reality' that has been so upset in the first place, before it can begin to imagine its futures. In this, the volume seeks to contribute to the broader effort started by New Americanism in the 1990s to problematize and de-center ideas of 'America' and 'American-ness,[23] by examining how contemporary literature may contribute to "question preconceived ideas of an ingrained national identity" (Halliwell and Morley 2008, 9), the naturalization of 'American reality' as the natural state of things, and to expose and problematize its fictive qualities in the context of the twenty-first century. Following Dimock and Buell, we ask: "Is 'American' an adjective that can stand on its own, uninflected, unentangled, and unconstrained?" (2007, 2), as many politicians, critics and pundits seem to suggest? We even need to problematize the use of 'American' in the title of this work.

The analyses that follow look at a number of literary works published by U.S.-based authors in the immediacy of the 2016 election and subsequent years—contemporary works that speak to cultural and social anxieties and

[23] See, for example, Pease (1997), Giles (2002), Kaplan (2002), Radway (2002), Rowe (2002), Dimock and Buell (2007), among many others.

tensions that, as has been extensively argued, did not appear overnight after the 2016 election, but had been years in the making. In this sense, our understanding of what constitutes American literature in the era of Trumpism gives room to works that were already in the making before Trump burst (for real) into the political scene but that, as expected, engage with a certain "structure of feeling" that is already in the air. As such, the authors in this volume examine works of literary fiction published from 2016 to 2020, by writers such as Colson Whitehead, Claudia Rankine, Ben Winters, Jennifer Egan, Steve Erickson, Ottessa Moshfegh, Ben Lerner, and Gary Shteyngart, among others.[24] It should also be noted that despite the very public role that American poets and poetry have had during Trump's tenure, the focus of this volume is on narrative forms of fiction—albeit other forms are also examined as part of the discussion, such as Claudia Rankine's play *The White Card* (Mullis), Ottessa Moshfegh's "Letter to the President" (Groenland), Bob Dylan's "Murder Most Foul" (Kennedy), and examples of Twitterature in reaction to Jeanine Cummins's novel *American Dirt* (Marini). But, given the role that poets like Claudia Rankine, Evie Shockley, Terrance Hayes and others played during Trump's tenure, also considering Joy Harjo's appointment as Poet Laureate in 2019, and even bearing in mind the viral attention received by Youth Poet Laureate Amanda Gorman's performance during Biden's inaugural, it seems evident that contemporary American poetry deserves a volume of its own, which is no doubt being written if it hasn't already by expert scholars in the field.

The essays in this collection are organized in three sections that respond to some of the most contentious and sometimes fruitful debates that have taken place in the cultural sphere during the Trump years, namely, how to continue to engage with each other as a community at a time of seemingly irreconcilable allegiances[25] and a political environment that feeds on

[24] In contrast, Dominik Steinhilber's chapter looks back at David Foster Wallace's *The Pale King*, posthumously published in 2011, as a way of reevaluating the possible efficacy of New Sincerity for an era of Trumpism.

[25] In a first draft of this chapter, I used the phrase 'tribal allegiances;' I have also used the term 'tribal' in the title of a chapter in Karen McNally's volume *American Television During a Television Presidency* (2022). However, I want to point out that, after listening to Judith Butler's reasoning (during the 2021 Holberg Debate) on why she avoids using the term—which seems to imply a derogative view of tribal forms of societal organization, as if a Western outlook should or could be the arbiter of what constitutes 'civilization'—I too am careful to avoid this term that has become so much in vogue during the Trump years.

polarization and disinformation, in a language that distorts the accounts of history for ideological gain while the present continues to stubbornly prove otherwise, and how to resist and subvert a politics of dehumanization, denigration, and exclusion. The first section ("Getting across in a Trumpian World") problematizes a number of issues related to the role of literature and critique—understood both as reading and writing practices—in the context of a divisive sociopolitical landscape. **Dominik Steinhilber** points to the insights that can be gained from the recent past in order to deal with the current era of right-wing extremism, spectacle, and post-truth. Drawing from David Foster Wallace's ideas on New Sincerity and Wittgenstein's arguments on the use of language, Steinhilber suggests that Trump's ironization of political discourse cannot be met with further ironization of his private person, which would simply condone a semi-solipsistic logic and the erosion of the ethical demands inherent to public office. Instead, Steinhilber provides an alternative, unironic model of critique that is not only more suited to these times but that can effectively bring back moral responsibility into the conversation. Next, **Tim Groenland**'s analysis of recent works by Ottesa Moshfegh illustrates how negative affects can be mobilized in productive ways against the political currents of the contemporary United States. Focusing on what Groenland notes is one of the foundational affects in Moshfegh's fiction—disgust—the analysis encompasses a range of works, from Moshfegh's "Letter to the President" (2018)—in which the author exercised a rare intervention in national politics—through *My Year of Rest and Relaxation* (2018) and up to the recently published *Death in her Hands* (2020). In this trajectory, Groenland argues for the relational possibilities of Moshfegh's "intimate disgust" as particularly suited to the affective environment of a presidency that has been described as "practicing a politics of disgust." The section concludes with a chapter by **Angela Mullis**, who examines the creative and critical work of poet and race theorist Claudia Rankine, with particular focus on her play *The White Card* (2019). This text not only continues to advocate for the dialogue that Rankine started in the first volume of her trilogy, *Don't Let Me Be Lonely* (2004), followed by *Citizen: An American Lyric* (2014) and concluded most recently with *Just Us: An American Conversation* (2020), but actually stages that conversation in theatrical form. Through her analysis of Rankine's play, Mullis illustrates what is at stake in the conversation about race and racism and how it can actually be had in 'Trump's America' by shifting the focus from race to whiteness and thus deconstructing its assumed 'invisibility,'

bringing into sharper focus its effects on class, privilege, and power, and the presentness of history.

Section Two ("Alternative Histories of 'America'") offers analyses of a number of literary works that showcase the relevance and possibilities of genre fiction as adequate means to engage with the altered realities of the Trump era, while at the same time offering productive ways of thinking about a past that persists in the present. The section draws attention to the capacity of historical fiction, alternate history and genre fiction more broadly to destabilize historical accounts and to scrutinize the 'known and the familiar,' especially as regards the horrific legacy of slavery and white supremacy in the United States. The section opens with a chapter by **Martha Jane Nadell**, who examines whether the turn to genre fiction in recent years does in fact strengthen the political potential of literature as critique, beyond the limits imposed by American literary realism. Focusing on the novel *Manhattan Beach* (2017) by Jennifer Egan—a historical fiction that crosses genres into the crime novel and the adventure novel and that, as Nadell suggests, functions both as a post-9/11 novel as a Trump novel—the chapter examines how the mixing of genres, rather than a mere aesthetic choice, actually functions as an acute commentary on the nature of the present. The next chapter by **Liam Kennedy** is also concerned with a novel that is difficult to define in generic terms, Steve Erickson's *Shadowbahn* (2016), set in the near future (present) of 2021. In Erickson's novel, the Twin Towers have reappeared in South Dakota and emanate music—the classics of American popular culture—which, as Kennedy suggests, functions "as a shadow narrative" that revisits violent national traumas, not just 9/11 but especially those involving racial difference. Kennedy notes that this alternative, "invisible republic" is evocative of Norman Mailer's diagnosis of the "two rivers" in American history, an underground current that constitutes "the dream life of the nation" (Mailer 2009 [1960]), a theme also identified by Greil Marcus in his observations on American popular music. Through the trope of the double narrative and bringing into the analysis Bob Dylan's "Murder Most Foul" (2020), Kennedy illustrates how Erickson's novel expresses an ambivalence about the redemptive power of American popular music and the challenges of imagining an alternative American reality in the era of Trump, even if "a desire for meaning […] hovers at the edges" of the novel. The next two chapters in turn underscore how the power of alternate history lies not in its reimagining of the past but in its ability to question accepted and comforting narratives, and focus on novels that, to quote Anna Kornbluh,

bring to bear how "the work to survive against the work of the nation […] is not historical fiction in the past but searingly ongoing reality in the present" (2017, 406). **Sonia Weiner** looks at Colson Whitehead's *The Underground Railroad* (2016) as a two-way railroad (literal and metaphorical) that serves to dismantle the myths surrounding the historical railroad and to reclaim it as a site for African American agency, while also playing with genre, space, and time in productive ways. Drawing from the work of Michel Rolph Trouillot on the authenticity of the representation of the past, which, he argues, is not a matter of 'fidelity' but of the nature of the encounter in the present, Weiner focuses in particular on the sections dealing with the "Museum of Natural Wonders" in the novel to examine how Whitehead's narrative challenges accepted historical myths and at the same time establishes links with their currency in the present. **Karen Hellekson**'s chapter similarly engages with the vivid traces of the past in the present in her analysis of Ben H. Winter's *Underground Airlines* (2016), an alternate history-science fictional mashup in which slavery has not only not been abolished but is enshrined in the U.S. Constitution. Drawing from the notion of history as entropic, that is, as a force that tends to disorder and chaos rather than toward progress, Hellekson reads Winters's universe as an extension of the Trumpian dehumanization of the other, where abject bodies can be dehumanized in the service of the smooth running of the nation, even if chaos persists.

The third and final section ("Humor as Contestation") returns to some of the themes analyzed in the previous two and redeploys them into the examination of humor as an adequate means to interrogate and contest the divisive rhetoric and at times surreal realities of Trumpism. **Teresa Botelho** looks at how many satirical responses to the Trump administration have assumed a potentially corrective and normative rhetoric, which would assume and seek to reinstate a (prior) consensus of values—the idea of liberal 'America' referred to above—while many other satirical works have engaged in more subversive strategies in order to eschew and disrupt the assumptions of any such consensus and deconstruct stereotypes. In order to do so, Botelho's analysis focuses on Gary Shteyngart's *Lake Success* (2018) and Mark Dotten's *Trump Sky Alpha* (2019), and probes into their potential to "say something more" about 'Trump's America.' In turn, **Anna Marta Marini** explores how humor can be effectively used to subvert cultural stereotypes and reclaim agency. The appropriation of the immigrant experience, and even of the Latinx identity, by American writer Jeannine Cummins and her novel *American Dirt* (2018) generated in

response a productive and hilarious outpour of Twitterature—#WritingMyLatinoNovel—that addressed, and at the same time made fun of, the many stereotypes about the Latinx community that are commonplace in the United States, of which Cummins's novel was just an expression. As Marini notes, this creative outburst also opened a necessary debate about the publishing and hiring practices of the American publishing industry which, as I have noted earlier in reference to Nguyen, has an editorial staff that is 85% white and a fiction list that is 95% white (Nguyen 2020). In the next chapter, **Maria Mothes** also deals with works written in response to the xenophobic rhetoric and policies of the Trump administration, in particular the so-called Muslim ban that was one of his earliest acts of government when he took office in January 2017. By exploring two selected pieces from the anthologies *Don't Panic, I'm Islamic* (2017) and *Banthology. Stories from Unwanted Nations* (2017), Mothes probes into the use of humor, genre, and form, especially the short story, as acts of resistance by a community that seeks not only to tell of their own experiences through kaleidoscopic narratives, but to work against a closing of the mind by conveying nuanced portrayals of the Muslim (American) community. The volume concludes with **Robert Anthony Siegel**'s chapter serving as a sort of coda, as it addresses questions that in many ways can be said to hover over the whole volume. Siegel begins by asking whether literature can or should elicit affects like empathy—that some commentators have called 'an American obsession'—especially in a political climate that appeals to 'feelings' more than reason—indeed, when a 'politics of grievance' seems to drive the rise of populist appeals across the world—and whether we should look for a more intellectual and less emotional model of engaging with the reader. By delving into these questions—that, as the history of literature and criticism shows, can never be conclusively answered—Siegel invites a reflection on the affective possibilities of literature, indeed on the role—aesthetic, political, affective—that literature can or may play in especially fraught times.

As one of the first sustained explorations of literature in the era of Trumpism, this collection of essays seeks to contribute a snapshot of the various and productive ways in which writers are responding to the (new) American realit(ies), in many cases challenging the institution of 'alternative realities' brought about by the ascendancy of Trumpism and its project of distortion, while at the same time questioning nostalgic, biased, and distorted accounts of history and of the present, and offering, in turn, different accounts of the multiple realities of the United States. As Liam

Kennedy notes, if 'America' as a set of shared values and beliefs is losing its symbolic efficacy, we are prompted, first, to consider the possibility of its dissolution and, second, to imagine alternatives to it (Kennedy 2020). The works examined in this collection of essays are not only able to imagine "what could not happen [but] very much happened on November 8th, 2016" (Hemon 2019) but seek to formulate cogent responses and alternatives for the world to come.

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PART I

Getting Across in a Trumpian World

CHAPTER 2

"The office could be any office": Toward a New Sincerity in the Age of Trumpism

Dominik Steinhilber

Abstract While postmodernism and deconstruction proved valuable in dismantling the hypocrisies of Nixonian doublespeak, irony, satire, and parody seem to have lost their effect as tools of dissent in a post-truth age. American mainstream culture, and particularly its political Right, have appropriated (foreshortened) poststructuralist modes of Critique, traditionally the resort of the Left. This has led to a derealization and aestheticization of political and cultural discourses and subsequently the generalized skepticism of the 'Fake-News' discourse that find their latest and most clear-cut example in the alternative-facts ideology of Trumpism, in which digitization and the burgeoning notion of a neoliberal marketplace of ideas have further eroded the connection between signifier and signified. Where reality becomes equivalent to reality TV, terms like truth or untruth no longer appear to hold. This chapter looks back to American literature of the New Sincerity, in particular David Foster Wallace's *The Pale King*, and the possibility of a return to moral responsibility. Breaking

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with the poststructuralist 'Death of the Author,' *The Pale King* reestablishes an author-reader-text relationship by viewing (literary) communication as a Wittgensteinian public language game. By thus redefining reading as a reciprocal interaction between author and reader, literature and language recovers its ethically meaningful potential, an analysis that can also be applied to the language game of contemporary American politics.

This chapter is a failure. The Presidency of Donald J. Trump has produced more outrage, more breaches of presidential duty, decency, even basic adherence to truthfulness and consistency than can be kept up with. So much has happened that the examples I give and analyze here can only ever be cursory. In hindsight, some of them will seem completely irrelevant, overshadowed by even more outrageous and worrying incidents. This essay is doomed to be a historical document. Although what I describe here seems to 'check out' for now, only time will tell if the interpretations I am drawing based on David Foster Wallace's analysis of contemporary culture are true. At the time of writing, before the 2020 presidential elections, in a way I hope they are not and that all this will have passed.

This essay attempts to understand the Trumpist new or Alt-right and their post-truths through the aesthetics of the New Sincerity in American literature, for which David Foster Wallace's writing is exemplary. While postmodernism and deconstruction proved valuable in dismantling the hypocrisies of Nixonian doublespeak (the 'old,' non-Alt-right), Wallace argued that irony, satire, and parody seemed to have lost their effect as tools of dissent in a post-truth age. American mainstream culture, and particularly its political Right, it is assumed, should be read as having appropriated (foreshortened) poststructuralist modes of Critique, traditionally the resort of the Left. This has led to a derealization and aestheticization of political and cultural discourses, a generalized skepticism that finds its latest and most clear-cut example in the alternative-facts ideology of Trumpism. Shockingly, Trump surpassed and made obsolete all satire. One is bound to admit that, while dangerous, Trump is also very funny, like something straight out of a Pynchon novel.

In this context, David Foster Wallace's analysis of American culture in the 1990s could provide a useful tool to understand the present phenomenon. For Wallace, neoliberalism and digitization had naturalized poststructuralist ideas into contemporary American discourse. Operating from

such a climate of generalized irony, Wallace's posthumous and unfinished work *The Pale King* develops the possibility of a return to moral responsibility. Breaking with the poststructuralist 'Death of the Author,' *The Pale King* reestablishes an author-reader-text relationship by viewing (literary) communication as a Wittgensteinian public language game. By thus redefining reading, and by extension all communication, as a reciprocal interaction between author and reader, literature, and language, it recovers the ethically meaningful potential that had been lost in poststructuralism.

Wallace's New Sincerity's tentative solution to the generalized skepticism of the post-truth-era of his time can provide an alternative model of (post-)Critique more suited to approaching the challenges of our time. As the (presumably) last section of Wallace's unfinished novel opens, "The office could be any office": I will argue that Trump's ironization of political discourse must not be met with further ironization of his private person. Instead, following Wallace, political dissent must insist on upholding the rules of the language game of politics, demanding of the likes of Trump 'decency' rather than 'spectacle;' that is, to fulfill the communally agreed upon role of their office.

Nixon and the Useful Tools of Postmodernism

Irony has proven a valuable tool in dissembling, critiquing and thereby countering conservative hypocrisy in the West. It is the dominant mode of a literature of the 1960s and 1970s conventionally called postmodernist. In addition, this ironic stance could also be considered the baseline mode of deconstruction, contemporary feminist criticism, identity politics, Critique, Theory, etc.: the hodgepodge of post-WWII progressive academic political discourse. Postmodernist literature met Nixonian doublespeak with metafictional practices that put all authority into question. When Robert Coover's *The Public Burning* (1977), for instance, lets a fictionalized Richard Nixon be infused with the "essence of Presidency" by being anally raped by Uncle Sam, presidential claims to supreme authority are ridiculed and deconstructed. Postmodernism's deconstruction of conventional literary structure always meant an attack on any 'natural' order, not only in the overtly political books like Pynchon's or Coover' s but in all metafictional writing. In questioning the 'official story' of the traditional social order, postmodernism and the ethnic, feminist, and queer literature it can be seen to have paved the way for, have an inherently democratizing, anti-authoritarian impetus: While the Pynchons

and Coovers of the 1960s and the 1970 transformed literature and meaning into a perpetually unfinished and renegotiable, plural activity, writers like Toni Morrison used this loss of grand narratives to give voice to the marginalized and (likewise) talk back to dominant culture's (i.e. the Right's) all too monolithic 'lies' about the state of things.

Untruth or Post-truth: The Unavailability of a Trump-Watergate

Today, it has become evident that these strategies have been rendered more or less useless and that literature seems to have abandoned them. Critical discourse, this essay argues, should probably follow suit and reconsider too its applicability in the present. Although Nixon and Trump appear to share many similarities (they both are Republican presidents, proven liars and racists, have obstructed justice, have had an impeachment process against them, etc.), I would argue that the popular establishment of similarities between the two is deeply misleading and dangerous. If one considers how ineffectual all action based on this comparison has been, it bespeaks the very issues Critique, so very useful in laying open the hypocrisies of, for example, the Nixon administration, faces in the age of Trumpism. Instead, we can learn much more about the current situation, and how to improve our approach to it, by examining how different these two presidencies and their creative relationship to truth actually are.

Deconstruction, irony, Critique, postmodernism, however we want to call it, is an act of unearthing and revealing underlying discourses or ideologies. Our age of Trumpism, however, is one that seemingly has dispensed with the need for hiding, an age of unabashed visibility, weaponized surfacity and spectacle. While Nixon's (almost) impeachment hinged on showing that the president spoke untruth in office, truth or untruth do not seem to play a role in the case of Trump. Although Democrats could succinctly prove that the 45th president of the United States lied and could (factually) impeach him (for the first time in 2019), in the public eye (and that of Trump and his supporters) the impeachment effort failed. Neither *The Washington Post*'s Fact Checker, which clinically tracked false or misleading claims Trump made during his presidency, nor the warnings Twitter implemented on Trump's tweets as containing false or misleading information seem to have changed anything about Trump's presidency, neither his style nor the chances of his removal.

The issue with Trump, it seems, is not one of truth or untruth. Indeed, Trump is equally problematic (and impeachable) when he is actually speaking the truth as when he is lying or contradicting himself. For instance, in November 2019 Trump insisted in a press conference that US military presence in Syria was "only for the oil" (Borger 2019). With this position, he was in complete contradiction with the United States' official policy, which holds that the remaining troops are there on a humanitarian mission to fight the terror regime of ISIS. Any reasonably informed, politically educated person, and in particular any person on the left side of the political spectrum, would privately agree with Trump. Believing in the United States' exceptionalist mission to bring democracy to the world has long been derided by critical commentators as naïve, as a humanitarian fig leaf (or bush) to cover up the 'true' economic rationale that underlies US wars in the Middle East.[1] Although cover-ups also exist in the Trump administration, their deployment follows a completely different pattern than it did for Nixon or the Bushes.

In a politics of spectacle where political violence lies open, we no longer have to disentangle Nixonian doublespeak and read between the lines. Neither what Felski calls the "hermeneutics of suspicion" (Felski 2011) in Critique nor postmodernist parody and satire in literature and the arts seem to be effective anymore against those who do not even need to hide their deeds. Although very effective against the untruths of a Richard Nixon, they seem almost completely useless when criticizing Trumpist post-truths. In the same vein, it is telling that the most successful satire formats on American television, for example, *The Late Show with Stephen Colbert*, *The Daily Show with Trevor Noah* or *Last Week Tonight with John Oliver*, have since increasingly come to resemble news shows both in presentation and function (Baym 2005). One could speculate that (a) reality has become so strange and tilted toward the ironic that further ironization, these programs note, can no longer serve its traditional function; or (b) society has become so entertainment-hungry and addicted to the spectacle that the likes of Trump provide that 'boring' news had to be replaced

[1] For comparison, only nine years earlier, the German President Horst Köhler had to resign in 2010 after insinuating that "in an emergency, military deployment, too, is necessary if we are to protect our interests such as ensuring free trade routes or preventing regional instabilities which are also certain to negatively impact our ability to safeguard trade, jobs and income" (Ricke 2010).

by comedy formats to fulfill the function of information and commentary. My guess is that probably both.

In any case, lies might be a necessary part of politics. Paradoxically, we still seem to prefer an Obama who publicly denounces torture yet secretly keeps places like Guantanamo open (meaning that, in the real world, nothing has really changed), over a Trump who admits that, in his view, waterboarding is not cruel enough. As I will show, this judgment is not simply due to partisanship and has less to do with saying the correct or incorrect thing and much more with who says it, where, when, to whom. This is not anymore about truth or untruth. In twenty-first-century political discourse, truth is no longer a term that even makes sense. One could say that 'truth' has ceased to be a 'player' or 'move' in the 'game' of politics today. In an age of post-truth, appeals to truth do not accomplish anything anymore.

David Foster Wallace and Image Culture

Although writing decades before Trump's presidency, the American author David Foster Wallace offers a diagnosis of American culture that might help us come to terms with the phenomenon of Trumpism and post-truth. Throughout his writing, Wallace diagnoses contemporary culture as having absorbed and naturalized a generalized stance of irony into its dominant discourse. The effect is that meaningful speech about basic values and truth becomes next to impossible. According to Wallace, television, which constitutes the main window from which to view reality for an American populace that spends "over six hours a day" (Wallace 1993, 151) watching television, has appropriated postmodernism's mode of irony. The oppressive *status quo* that the original 1960s–1970s postmodernism rebelled against by revealing its deep contradictions and hypocrisies through irony has thereby—since the mainstream has learned to integrate this very irony—on the one hand, made itself immune to criticism and, on the other hand, alienates the individual from its human surroundings. According to Wallace, this makes it impossible to meaningfully communicate and empathize with others, and the individual therefore becomes only ever more prone to a form of consumption meant to alleviate the stress of this existential loneliness. Irony, in Wallace's writing, alienates Americans from one another, makes it increasingly hard to enter a dialogue and maroons them in self-conscious post-truths.

Moreover, the generalized skepticism that late capitalism thus promotes produces an embodied image culture. American culture has internalized the postmodernist equation of representation and reality and thus wholly relies on the cynical, depthless spectacle. Deconstruction and irony therefore become useless against a culture that is itself endlessly deconstructive. Their tools, once accepted and conventionalized in a foreshortened fashion I shall refer to as 'pomo,' become poses of social life that do little to construct new meaning. If rebellion becomes the norm, to rebel is to conform; and to conform, obviously, also means to conform. Wallace's *The Pale King*, for instance, tells of a college student who excels in "Classes where everything was fuzzy and abstract and open to interpretation and then those interpretations are open to still more interpretations" (Wallace 2011, 157).[2] This student takes the generalized abstracting and surfacity he is taught by society's institutions to an extreme. He counts the words in a given text instead of, Wallace stresses the distinction, reading and having the words have an effect on him, "as if reading was the same as just counting the words" (*TPK*, 162). Ironic abstraction and aestheticization institutionalized, the individual loses grasp of a, however complex and decentered, interiority and meaning. Internalized irony therefore turns Critique into a pose that may question, in a postmodernist fashion, the 'official story' yet offers nothing for its replacement: "The whole thing was just going through the motions; it didn't mean anything—even the whole point of the classes themselves was that nothing meant anything" (*TPK*, 157).

Between New Sincerity and the New/Alt-right

From the vantage point of a culture schooled to compulsively question 'the official story'—in and of itself a laudable position—the phenomenon of Fake News is transformed from a mere reduplication of Nazi-Lügenpresse jargon to a new, postmodernly nostalgic discourse. Normalized into an existential attitude, a foreshortened poststructuralist recognition that every text has its underlying agenda(s) tips over into the abstract interchangeability of all information; all news, in their quality of being the product of a network of ideologies, turn into Fake News. The

[2] Henceforth, all parenthetical references to Wallace's *The Pale King* (2012) are abbreviated as *TPK*.

hyper-self-conscious individual can therefore freely pick their story based on aesthetic surface alone rather than on the lost criterion of 'truth.'

At the same time, this generalized abstraction creates a desire for concreteness that it itself forbids. Notably, Wallace's "New Sincerity" (Kelly 2010, 131) and the discourse of the contemporary far-right appear to have a lot in common. Both operate from an insurmountably postmodernist position yet, at the same time, seek to offer concrete coordinates of value from within it.[3] While Wallace's writing, as will be shown, seeks to achieve a form of 'real,' moral communication by giving presence to author and reader without reducing them to untenable biographical fact, instead appealing to the individual's role in society, Trumpist populism, not only despite but importantly *in* its contradictoriness, similarly offers clear coordinates within the abstract and fuzzy. Trump's rhetoric *does* bring people together, even if their definition of who 'the people' are is a problematic, very small group. After all, racism and ethno-nationalism provide very clear directions on how to interpret an increasingly complicated world. In fact, Wallace himself seems aware of the closeness of his project to the fascistoid. Notably, it is always those characters and institutions that most resemble Wallace's own project that are also associated with fascist tendencies in his texts, as can for example be seen in Wallace's admittance that the therapeutic "permanent values" of "discipline and fidelity to some larger unit" that his character Gerhardt Schtitt teaches also "have a whiff of proto-fascist potential about them" (Wallace 1996, 84).

What distinguishes both Trump's new Right and Wallace's New Sincerity from their pre-postmodern counterparts is the coupling of a consciousness that truth is constructed with the goal of nevertheless establishing real coordinates. Hence, eerily prophetic, Wallace's 1996 *Infinite Jest*, set in a near future that should roughly correspond to the 'now,' imagines an outsider, ex-Las Vegas crooner president who during his inauguration "swears he'll find us some cohesion-renewing Other" (Wallace 1996, 384). Capitalizing "Other," *Infinite Jest*'s President Gentle bespeaks how the mainstream has absorbed postmodernist discourse; the necessity to 'hide' a 'true' agenda has disappeared and been replaced by a radical

[3] Hence, the political Right's (illiterate) rejection of 'postmodernism' is little surprising despite its foundation, as is argued here, in this very perspective. New Sincerity and contemporary Alt-right discourse alike construct a 'pomo-strawman' against which to define themselves, a pomo-postmodernism that upon closer inspection has little to do with historical postmodernism.

openness which, as both Wallace's writing and our own experience of post-truth show, is deeply problematic.

From Jefferson to Reagan and Trump: America's Private Language

Following and extrapolating from Wallace's diagnosis of contemporary America, our current social and political climate can be described by a naturalization of the postmodernist equation of representation and reality. This image culture informs an aestheticization of political discourse for which Trumpism is exemplary. The spectacle forms the central touchstone of today's right-wing discourse and that of society as a whole.

Aestheticization, Irony, and Privacy

Hence, if reality becomes equivalent to its representation (as in reality television), clearly a reality TV star like Trump must be deemed to have a privileged access to 'reality,' making him the perfect leader and ontological arbiter. Just like Wallace's word-counters and empty ironists who "have, as it were, denotation but not connotation" (Wallace 1996, 693), Trumpist politics seem to solely operate from a quasi-meta-discursive stance, within which all talk of truth or untruth appears meaningless and unintelligible, as will be shown, irrelevant to this use of language. Inhabiting a semi-solipsist position in which (his) language creates reality, Trump's alternative facts become (post-)truths without necessitating any evidence: By claiming to Make America Great Again, Trump, for his followers, makes it real.

As Allard den Dulk shows, Wallace conceptualizes this general ironization which can only ever concern itself with the image as what Wittgenstein would later call "private language use" (den Dulk 2015, 146). The philosophy of ordinary language in Wittgenstein's later *Philosophical Investigations* (1953), which argues predominantly against the view of language and reality proposed in his own earlier positivist *Tractatus* (1921), rejects the possibility of what he calls a "private language." Instead, it views meaning in language as a product of communal agreement, conventions and rules. The private language of the *Tractatus*, on the other hand, treats words as "logical picture[s]" (Wittgenstein 1921, 4.03) of objective facts. Thus language, or the "totality of proposition" (Wittgenstein 1921,

4.001), stands in a mimetic word–object relation to the world as the "totality of facts, not of things" (Wittgenstein 1921, 1.1), the two sharing the same logical pattern and thus running parallel to one another. The meaning of a word is hence the irreducible core definition the speaker attaches to a fact in the world (and, importantly, not the thing itself; the Private Language User [PLU] only has access to language through which they construct the world). Such a language is private since its user seemingly derives all meaning from themselves, a private mental image derived from one's own experience, as if pointing at, naming and thus defining something. The community is wholly irrelevant to this process, the Other (and critically also the Self) becoming another object the PLU defines and sets itself off against.

To Wallace, deconstructive general irony is but a variation on this Tractarian perspective rejected by the later Wittgenstein (den Dulk, 2015, 143–47). Thus, an existentially ironic stance (as opposed to the use of verbal irony) also treats language as running parallel to what it refers to. However, while for the atomist PLU there is an indivisible core-meaning to a word in which word and world converge, the ironist stance views this gap to never fully close. Irony is thus only ever able to speak of language. The fact from which the *Tractatus* would derive a proposition's truth-value turns into a plurality of alternative facts, without reference to the world, from which post-truths are derived. Nevertheless, both treat (the illusion of) an essential core-meaning as fundamental to language. The later Wittgenstein disagrees, regarding any such link as irrelevant to the functioning of language: Meaning is a product of speakers acting in accordance with the rules and conventions of their community. In contrast, Trump is known and celebrated for his almost compulsive breaches of decorum and of the demands of his official role.

The many otherwise divergent issues surrounding Trumpist post-truths and alternative facts, for instance, the cult of personality around Trump, the pathological importance of him being a successful businessman, him not needing to base his propositions on evidence, his continued and celebrated breaches of protocol and common decency, and his apparent immunity to self-contradiction, share a pattern similar to Wallace's depiction of private language use. Trump acts like one of Wallace's substance abusers in *Infinite Jest*—private language ironists addicted to pharmacological and, by objective correlation, metaphysical substances—who refuses to accept that he is an addict unless provided with a substantial definition of the term 'alcoholic.' Although this character admits

> Am I having pancreas problems? Yes. Do I have trouble recalling certain intervals in the Kemp and Limbaugh administrations? No contest. Is there a spot of domestic turbulence surrounding my intake? Why yes there is. […] I have no problem forthrightly admitting things I can grasp… (Wallace 1996, 177)

he refuses to view himself as an alcoholic on the grounds that "How can you ask me to attribute to myself a given term if you refuse to define the term's meaning?" (Wallace 1996, 177). This misunderstanding illustrates Wittgenstein's concept of use-based meaning in language. While the private search for an all-connecting, 'true' definition leads into an infinite regress of skepticism, later Wittgenstein views things as connected by a series of overlapping similarities. The only way to 'define' a term is to give examples for its actual usage in language, when, how, and by whom it is applied. These usages are not connected to another by one defining characteristic but derive their meaning from being sanctioned by a community as rule-abiding usages of the word. Similarly, Trump could deny having offered a quid pro quo to the Ukraine despite having clearly engaged in behavior we would call a 'quid pro quo.' But, as the Republican defense argued, there was no quid-pro-quo agreement offered because nobody uttered the words 'quid pro quo.' Seemingly, it is the use of specific words, signifiers, and not behavior, how we use these words to mean things, what is relevant in contemporary political discourse.

In the same vein, Trump's ironic private language use allows him to internally contradict himself. Herein he can be seen as similar to yet another of *Infinite Jest*'s irony addicts who, waiting for his drug dealer, winds up stuck between doorbell and ringing telephone. As the *Tractatus* notes, "Each item [in the world] can be the case or not the case while everything else remains the same" (Wittgenstein 1921, 1.21), and both propositions (the dealer is at the door/on the telephone) are possible to be "the case or not the case" without affecting the truth-value of the other. Similarly, in 2020 and using an ironist private language, Trump could simultaneously call for the counting of votes in Arizona and to stop the count in places like Michigan without losing consistency or credibility among his followers.

In other words, ironization has the effect of an erosion of the distinction between the public and 'official' and the private. If everything is reduced to representation, and the individual is a network of discursive roles, the political and the private cannot be kept apart. Radical privacy as

effected by a pomo-ization of the dominant discourse creates a semi-solipsist language in which the individual totalizes the community of Others into its own linguistic creation. It thereby ceases to have any responsibility to adhere to this community's rules of truthful and meaningful, understandable, discourse. What is probably one of the most central leftist mantras of the 1960s counterculture and of feminist politics, that "the personal is political," has therefore been turned into a core element of the Right's aesthetic of personality cult and ad hominem attack. In line with Wallace's analysis, the progressive, postmodernist tools of the 1960s have traveled into the dominant discourse and been absorbed and perfected in Alt-right politics. Tellingly, Trump is the first US president to use his *private* Twitter account as his chief channel of official, public communication.

Learning from Wallace's The Pale King

While Wallace's 1996 *Infinite Jest* describes a (then) near-future of image-obsessed aestheticization and post-truthisms in parts shockingly reminiscent of our present, his third novel *The Pale King* traces the cultural and economic changes that gave rise to this future/present back to the Reaganite mid-1980s. Set (largely) in the Peoria branch of the Internal Revenue Service, the novel's (ostensible) dramatic conflict stages an "enormous internal struggle and soul-searching" (Wallace, *TPK*, 72) about the implementation of a (fictional) 1969 "Spackman Memo" (*TPK*, 111) within the 1980s IRS, resulting in "what's come to be known among tax professionals as the New IRS" (*TPK*, 72). The novel employs this transformation of the old "Service" of "traditional or 'conservative' officials who saw tax and its administration as an arena of social justice and civic virtue" (*TPK*, 84–85) into the abstracted corporate logic of "a for-profit business" (*TPK*, 85) as an analogy for certain shifts in American (postmodern) literature and overall culture.[4] In its exploration of the effects of Reaganite neoliberal abstraction of value, state-deregulation and privatization of public resources on human connection, truth and

[4] Like Trump, whose electoral campaign ran on the promise that as a successful businessman he would lead the United States like a business, *The Pale King*'s 'Service' is to turn from a reciprocal interaction serving and composed of the people into a corporation. As Godden and Szalay remark, *The Pale King* can be read as a "study in the neoliberal transformation of American governance" (Godden and Szalay 2014, 1274).

democracy, *The Pale King* depicts, in a Wittgensteinian gesture, the segueing of the United States into a private language. Thus, Wallace's novel traces this issue of generalized cultural irony and irresponsibility, which has also become apparent in Trumpist rhetoric, down to the challenges of a widespread neoliberalization of society, the rise of corporations and "the financialization of daily life" (Martin 2002, 3), as well as a burgeoning digitization during the 1980s and the 1990s.

Truth-Values: The Pale King, *Trump and the Neoliberal Marketplace of Ideas*

Wallace, "an old-fashioned moralist in postmodern disguise all along" (Mishra 2006), as Pankaj Mishra writes, uses the IRS, which he suggestively refers to as the "Service," to reflect on the shift in American discourse from a public and social to a (postmodernist) private language. Applying Wittgenstein to the social sphere, Wallace argues for a therapeutic (re)introduction of public language games through the cultivation of a reciprocally responsible, rule-based communication as a remedy to the post-truths that a neoliberal pomo-ification has introduced into American culture. Thus, while the old Service in *The Pale King* understands itself as a civic, that is, social, enterprise, the New IRS, operated like a for-profit business, turns this erstwhile reciprocity into a one-sided venture. The communal service (composed) of and for (the) citizens becomes a consumerist service in which the individual, as customer, is privatized and renounces all responsibility to the greater whole. State and individual acting like private enterprises, the individual divorces itself from the state it is part of. As summarized in one of Wallace's notes to the novel, this tension between public communal reciprocity and (neo)liberal private individualism gives way to the "big Q" of the novel, which is "whether [the] IRS is to be essentially a corporate entity or a *moral* one" (Wallace *TPK*, 545; emphasis in the original). In the new IRS's Tractarian "corporate philosophy" (*TPK*, 545) the derived value is thus, as the adjective implies, the objectively quantifiable capital it can generate from an Other; philosophically speaking, meaning or truth here being the reference to an object body, that is, private ostensive definition. The old IRS, on the other hand, is conceived as a moral project, a social language in which the value/meaning that is generated is, though it needs representation/money, not

empirically verifiable but a matter of communal agreement, that is, what Wittgenstein calls a public language game.[5]

Hence, the 'economico-linguistic' reading *The Pale King* employs on American democracy and capitalism reflects on the multiple meanings, usages, of 'value,' for example, (postitivist) truth-value, economic or monetary value, and moral value. Within this framework, a proposition's truth-value can be understood as its use-value: A proposition is true if it refers to a fact in the world (imagine a dictionary or, to stay within the metaphor, a catalogue, on the one side of the table the word, on the other side the thing you 'buy' with it). In postmodernism, or as Fredric Jameson has it, the logic of late capitalism, this use-value is increasingly replaced by a primacy of the exchange-value (Jameson 1991, 17). While postmodern irony retains, as already noted, the parallel structure of word and world, it holds that the gap is never bridged: The exchange is never put to use but words are only ever traded in for other words in constant deferral. The pomo-neoliberal (post-)truth-value thus acts like the exchange-value, abstracted and without referent in the real world, as the ironist economist deals in a plurality of alternative facts.

Notably, however, as the history of real neoliberal economy of the early 2000s has shown, the further away the values that are traded with stray from having a referent in the real world, the more likely a depression

[5] Perhaps a short example is necessary here to illustrate this shift from moral to corporate, that is, the role of the object body in Wittgenstein's public language games as opposed to private ostensive definitions: If you were to see me right now, a pen between my teeth, scratching my head, losing hair, sitting in my office, and I told you "I am thinking really hard about a good example because this will be very important further on with regard to how Wallace reads neoliberalist corporations through Wittgenstein's philosophy," you would probably believe that what I am saying is true, that I am thinking hard. However, if you were asked "What does 'thinking really hard' mean?" you would most likely not respond "It means if you lose a lot of hair," or, "sitting in office 412 at the University of Mannheim," etc. What my *body* is doing (and this includes 'firing electrons through my synapses') does not *mean* what *I* am doing. Nevertheless, if that person were then to ask you "How do you know that Dominik was thinking?" you would probably respond with something like "because I saw him scratch his head, chew on his pen, etc. *and he told me he is thinking really hard*." Whereas you therefore need the behavior of my body (and this includes my vocal cords vibrating to emit speech sounds) to know what I am doing, what you (and I) mean is not the body, nor is it something hidden, privately, in my 'mind'. This is what Wittgenstein means when he says meaning in "language […] is founded on convention," for there is no inherent substance of think-ness in the recesses of chewing on one's pen, nor is there a complete list that defines this activity; and these conventions are always communal. Meaning can only occur if there is some community whose rules of usage I can be in compliance with.

becomes. Wallace seems to insinuate that the same goes for the language economy and thus for the psyche. Generalized irony produces the depressed and empty characters who have "come to regard truth as *constructed* instead of *reported*" (Wallace 2006, 1048; emphasis in the original) that populate Wallace's writings. To counteract this, Wallace's *The Pale King* appears to propose the revaluation of moral value in the (re) introduction of a newly (or, actually, very conservatively) understood use-value: meaning as a form of usage in accordance with the rules and conventions of an intersubjective community.

This also becomes apparent during a conversation on civic virtue, responsibility, and corporate capitalism in §19 of *The Pale King*. In this section (the entire novel is subdivided into legal paragraphs), one of Wallace's characters foretells the coming of an American president whose "surface rhetoric" (*TPK*, 150) allows him to "do to the electorate what corporations are learning to do, so Government […] becomes the image against which this candidate defines himself" (*TPK*, 149) and, paradoxically, "to *continue* to define himself as an Outsider and Renegade when he's actually *in* the White House" (*TPK*, 150; emphasis in the original). It is probably not necessary to fully outline the similarities between Wallace's next president and Trump, a business-magnate whose electoral campaign was based in his alleged outsider status and his conscious breach of decorum and "decency" (*TPK*, 149), and whose 'rebellion' against the (Deep) State[6] would continue into his Presidency, that is, his rise to actually embody the very government he rebels against.

Through his characters, Wallace hypothesizes that the origin of this "rule of image" (*TPK*, 151) lies in a loss of personally perceived "duty to the others" (*TPK*, 133) as a result of the 1960s counterculture and the logic of corporations in neoliberalism. Thus, although "the sixties […] did a lot for raising people's consciousness in a whole lot of areas, such as race and feminism" (*TPK*, 134), the questioning of authority, institutionalized into a fashion, produced a "selfish individualism" (*TPK*, 134) in which the individual's "highest actual duty was to *themselves*" (*TPK*, 134; emphasis in the original). The relinquishment of communal responsibility therefore "opened the door to […] [the] end of the democratic experiment" (*TPK*, 134). A "liberal individualism" and "consumer capitalism" (*TPK*, 137) constructs Government as "some threatening Other" (*TPK*, 137). Although the people are the subject and thus the authority in a democracy,

[6] Note the hermeneutics of suspicion at play in the very metaphor of a *Deep* State.

neoliberal citizenship lets the individual renounce its responsibility to the whole. From a Wittgensteinian perspective, this means a shift of American democracy from a public language game to an individualistic, private definition that can only conceive of the Other—the community—as an object that the self-defines itself against. *The Pale King* likens this development in "the way we think of ourselves as citizens" (*TPK*, 138) to the transition from production—a group effort—to consumer-capitalism—a "solo venture" (*TPK*, 148). Following this shift, "we as individual citizens have adopted a corporate attitude" (*TPK*, 139). "Corporations," Wallace's old citizen remarks, "aren't citizens or neighbors or parents. They can't vote or serve in combat. They don't learn the Pledge of Allegiance. They don't have souls. They're revenue machines" (*TPK*, 139). Like corporations, ultimately nothing more than "machines for producing profit" (*TPK*, 138) to whom it would be "ridiculous to ascribe civic obligations or moral responsibilities" (*TPK*, 138) but that, however, legally act as if they were persons, for Wallace the neoliberal subject conceives of itself as an automaton, individually reduced to objective fact. PLU and corporation alike do not interact socially. Logical positivism and deconstruction turn the individual into such a machine, incapable of social interaction with others.

The novel contrasts this private mode of citizenship with the notion of "civic virtue" (*TPK*, 135), a responsibility to the Other in the understanding of the self as both product and a constitutive part of a community. As Wallace's conservative citizen puts it, virtuous, publicly responsible citizenship is based in the understanding "that the huge Everybody Else that determined policy and taste and the common good was in fact made up of a whole lot of individuals just like them, that they were in fact *part* of Everything" (*TPK*, 141; emphasis in the original). Hence, Wallace's ethical Wittgensteinian argument calls for intersubjective empathy, the assumption that meaning is not private but publicly communicable; that it, in fact, only occurs meaningfully in a public language game.

As already noted, meaning according to the later Wittgenstein is not a matter of corporeality. It is not reference to any worldly referent that gives a proposition meaning but the communal agreement with the ever-shifting rules and conventions of a community that does so. Hence, when a deconstructionist interlocutor interrupts the section's discourse on civic virtue and mutual responsibility in a social, democratic language with references to biographical fact, these can be seen to be wholly irrelevant to its meaning. As can thus be seen, the value of the "sense of civics" (*TPK*, 135) that to Wallace inheres in "the American experiment" (*TPK*, 135) is not

diminished by one of its founding fathers, Jefferson, "supposedly boinking his own slaves and having whole litters of mulatto children" (*TPK*, 135). Nor does the fact that the original electorate was "An educated landowning *white male* electorate" (*TPK*, 135; emphasis in the original) change anything about the basic understandableness of these people's propositions. The conventionalized usage of what 'electorate' means is subject to change and constant renegotiation. Meaning, as already noted, is not a product of the historical body. Metaphysical entities like truth and morals are not, as the PLU would have it, subjective and relative nonsense, but real as any other proposition in a public language.

As Wittgenstein remarks, himself too employing the metaphor of money and language:

> You say: the point isn't the word, but its meaning, and you think of the meaning as a thing of the same kind as the word, though also different from the word. Here the word, there the meaning. The money, and the cow that you can buy with it. (But contrast: money, and its use.) (Wittgenstein 1953, 120)

Just as the money that buys the cow is not the cow but can be used to acquire one, reference to a referent (e.g. Jefferson's problematic biography) is irrelevant to the meaning, and value, of a proposition like democracy. Due to their privacy unable to conceive of and join such a community in which they can 'vote' as part of a greater whole, *The Pale King*'s corporate citizens "vote with their wallets" (*TPK*, 149) and thus replace the object referent, the money, with its meaning.

The metaphor of a 'marketplace of ideas' where truth reliably asserts and proves itself in free-market-like competition may be one of the most successful and most quintessentially 'American' rationales for freedom of speech of the last decades. Although the exact formulation only goes back to a 1965(!) concurrence by Justice William Brennan (Brazeal 2012, 1), the idea itself can be traced in US history, as Gregory Brazeal shows, as far back as President Thomas Jefferson, who defended free speech in his First Inaugural Address by saying that

> If there be any among us who would wish to dissolve this Union or to change its republican form, let them stand undisturbed as monuments of the safety with which error of opinion may be tolerated where reason is left free to combat it. (qtd. in Brazeal 2012, 5)

As a continuous negotiation on the world between equal citizens, this conservative ideal of truth through democratic discourse can be seen to also underlie Wallace's notion of civic virtue and responsibility in the public language of governance. However, as Edward Nik-Khah shows, "Having been shaped by the neoliberal project over the course of the past six decades, the 'marketplace of ideas' no longer resembles its earlier (common-sense) understanding" (Nik-Khah 2017, 32). Under neoliberalism, the marketplace of ideas "has taken on an increasingly economic construction" (Nik-Khah 2017, 32), closely linking economic doctrine and intellectual life and describing, as well as shaping, one through metaphors of the other. This removes neoliberal 'truth' from our conventional, commonsense understanding of it. Information becomes a quantifiable measure whose value derives from its profitability. In neoliberalism, the 'truth' that generates the most income is the most valuable. It is the winner of the competition in the marketplace of ideas and hence the truth that asserts itself.

Trumpist post-truth rhetoric can be read, then, as an expression of a late capitalist neoliberalization of political discourse itself, where Trump's statements act according to the logic of a neoliberal marketplace of ideas. Mirroring the perpetual removal of exchange value and use value in neoliberalism, the value of Trump's political messages is not measured against their truth-value or their compliance with the (unwritten) rules of political life (which, in this language game, amounts to the same thing; fiction, for example, is a whole other language game that does not have to follow these rules yet does not constitute an act of lying either), but entirely against how many buy into his messages. Acting as pure signifier, reference to reality is completely irrelevant in Trump's semi-solipsist language. As seller of truths, Trump is not bound to argue in good faith. Any claim to authenticity, wholly derided in the simulacra of postmodernity, Trump's corporate speech operates exclusively in the realm of image.[7] Truth as an exchange value in neoliberalism takes the shape of something that can be quantified, its value something that can be economically measured, rather

[7] Tellingly, Trump establishes a personality cult around himself in which his business ventures, always containing the 'Trump' moniker, become synonymous with his own name, forming a corporate identity. The dependence of a supposed Trumpist private language on the (object body) image as reality would also explain the pathological anxieties over supposed inadequacies of his body that could for example be seen in his, incomprehensible, outrage at being said to have small hands. Only a PLU who is existentially concerned with his image could care enough.

than something qualified through investigation and discourse among peers. It is hence unsurprising that Twitter should have become Trump's chief channel of communication. The digital medium of tweets shows this neoliberalization remarkably well: tweets are 'true' and 'good' if they get likes and retweets. Qualified commentary, on the other hand, is hidden behind the algorithmic logic of the platform.

Digitization and the Alt-right

Indeed, concurrent with this neoliberalization of the political discourse is the phenomenon of digitization. As sociologist Armin Nassehi argues, digitization bespeaks a doubling of the world and thus constitutes, like writing or the printing press, another technological step toward making the rift between signifier and signified more apparent (Nassehi 2019, 108). Nassehi thus identifies the digital society as another moment of social self-consciousness like the rise of nation-states in the nineteenth century or the pluralization and liberalization of society during the twentieth century (Nassehi 2019, 45–48). Just like postmodernity destabilized and decentered meaning, digitization's translation of reality into ever more abstract, digital patterns further highlights the mediatedness of all perception. Even more than writing—the main concern of Derrida's *Of Grammatology*—the digital doubles the world by standing for something without actually being that thing. Once accepted as part of everyday life, a datum which, interestingly, roughly coincides with the global rise of the Alt-right in the mid-2010s (Facebook, for example, held its initial public offering on Friday, May 18, 2012), digitization out-poststructuralized an already decentered and self-conscious conception of meaning, truth and selfhood. By even further removing the signifier from the signified, or, more correctly, by making that remove even more apparent and eventually normal, digitization increasingly naturalizes postmodernist perspectives.

It is thus notable that not only does the rise of an Alt-right coincide with the increasing omnipresence of the digital in our everyday life, but that this Alt-right and its new post-truth discourse thrive and originate in particular on the Internet (Daniels 2018). Not only did Trump's communication happen mainly via Twitter, to the point that officials first heard of the president's decisions via this medium, but the Internet is a breeding ground for right-wing memes, Alt-right webzines and filter bubbles (both on the Left and the Right). There is a clear relationship between digitization, post-truth and the rise of the Alt-right.

The Pale King, too, outlines the dangers that a digitally doubled world poses to 'truth' and value in civic discourse. In *The Pale King*, the digital produces confusions about truthfulness, the 'true self' and its role in society. Abstraction, an ironic doubling, cannot provide grounds for meaningful communication. In the novel, a young 'David Wallace,' the author seemingly inserting himself into his writing, finds himself mistaken for another, "high-value" (*TPK*, 415) IRS-employee "David Wallace" due to a computer error. The computer, its language relying solely on a positivist logic of image, thus turns the two characters into, "so far as the Service's computer system was concerned, the same person" (*TPK*, 415). The (digitized) image fails to represent who the 'true' David Wallace is, or, more properly, digitized abstraction cannot account for 'truth' and 'value' in varying social contexts. It is not any sense of objective representation, the abstract image or body, but the role one plays within a reciprocal system that describes who is 'really' meant by 'David Wallace.'

Establishing Moral Responsibility and Truth After the Death of the Author

The world abstracted into exchange value and (digital) signifiers cannot establish grounds for truthfulness. Hence, Wallace fails to give proof for the "real person, David Wallace" (*TPK*, 68) as a presence in the text and the claim that "This book is really true" (*TPK*, 69) when he provides the reader with the most private information imaginable in economic America, his social security number "975-04-2012" (*TPK*, 68), explaining that only IRS employees have an SS number starting with a nine, or when he claims the book's copyright disclaimer stating the fictitiousness of the novel to be "a lie" (*TPK*, 71) only necessary for "legal protection" (*TPK*, 69). Wallace's social security number is wholly fictional. IRS employees do not receive a new SS number. The reference to the book's copyright disclaimer also only defers the judgment of truthfulness to yet another text. Neither can serve as grounds for self-justification. As Godden and Szalay note, David Wallace, and his insistence on being equated to "the real author, the living human being holding the pencil" (*TPK*, 68), represents the neoliberal "corporate citizen" (Godden and Szalay 2014, 1277). This 'David Wallace' is but another metafictional ghost in the novel's machinery, unable to provide any criteria of truth.

However, if we want to judge the truthfulness and moral value of a proposition, the proposition must be applied to *somebody*. Only actions in

the world can be said to be moral or immoral, true or untrue, and these actions imply an agent. While Wallace's authorial self-insertion might appear as reminiscent of postmodernist works, writing about writing in *The Pale King* serves an obverse function. Distinct from conventional metafiction, it centrifugally points outside of the text toward the work of the embodied selves of author and reader rather than centripetally commenting on the constructedness of the text and its author. The novel thereby establishes a mode that allows for meaningfully speaking of 'truth' without falling into the aporias of historical reference.

In its attempt to recover truth from pomo-post-truth, *The Pale King* shows the untenable reference to historical reality to be irrelevant. Instead, the novel points toward the *roles* of reader and author. In its attempt to recover moral responsibility from the postmodernist dissolution of authority, the novel thus highlights the physical yet not referentially object-bound work of reader and author. The untenability of 'David Wallace"s presence as "the actual human David Wallace" (*TPK*, 73) in the text thus actively raises Barthes's poststructuralist question "Who is speaking thus?" (Barthes 1977, 142) by revealing the simple answer "Author here" (*TPK*, 68) as a neoliberal illusion. However, whereas Foucault would reply "What matter who's speaking" (Foucault 1977, 138), *The Pale King* places great importance on the, albeit problematized, presence of a dialogic, authorial Other in the production of meaning.

In other words, for Wallace the author and the reader *matter*; they are speaking through matter but are not (of) matter. Rather than from the objective evidence that 'David Wallace' points toward as 'proof,' insight into the presence of the author/Other and the nature of the author–reader relationship can be gained from the information he omits. Statements about one's position in the world do not derive their truth from a private justification that metafictionally points at more linguistic material, but through the recognition of the Other in an experience of embodiment. Thus, while 'David Wallace' offers an extravagant amount of seemingly extratextual data to justify himself as the "real author" (*TPK*, 68), he notes that "the publishing company has declined to be identified by name in this Author's Foreword, despite the fact that anyone who looks at the book's spine or title page will know immediately who the company is" (*TPK*, 70). Similarly, while remarking on "the rather unfortunate and misleading front cover" (*TPK*, 69), no description of the book's cover is provided to explain what is unfortunate and misleading about it. What these omissions have in common is their reference to a physical reality of the

book that is, unlike other references such as the copyright disclaimer, subject to change. Omitted from the novel are references to an individual, object physicality rather than the generalized, conventional materiality of the book. Books may change publisher through countries and time and new editions may get new covers yet those references to matter are relatively stable. Books always have *a* cover and *a* publisher. The reader is made to recognize the book's and her, and thereby the authorial Other's, materiality through the physical work of paging through the novel to the copyright disclaimer or even closing the book to look at its spine and cover. The novel thereby points out a materiality that, despite each reader's inability to experience another's bodily experience, remains communicable and thus stable ground for judgments of truthfulness.

Another thing a reader looking at the book's front cover will discover is that, contrary to the professions of the "real person, David Wallace, age forty" (*TPK*, 68–69), the name of the author reads "David Foster Wallace Author of *Infinite Jest*." This distinction highlights the irrelevance of a name having a fixed referent in the real world. Playing on the publicity of 'David Foster Wallace' having become a household name after the publication of the bestseller *Infinite Jest*, Wallace's *The Pale King* constructs 'David Foster Wallace' as the author according to conventional usage distinct from the *scriptor* David Wallace. It is hence in his official role as the author that 'David Foster Wallace,' though the name does not have a referent in the world but is a *nom de plume* containing Wallace's mother's maiden name to avoid confusion with another author (Max 2012, 66), is imbued with moral responsibility from which truthfulness can be judged. By attaching truthfulness to a role rather than a historical referent, Wallace can provide a model of truth that does not, naively, ignore poststructuralist theses yet also does not fall into the relativism of post-truth rhetoric.

"The Office Could Be Any Office": Trump in the (Oval) Office

The (presumably) last chapter of the novel thus opens with the line "The office could be any office" (*TPK*, 539). Notably, while 'office' here on the one hand certainly refers to a bureau in Wallace's tax revenue novel, the meaning of office as "[a] position or post to which certain duties are attached, esp. one of a more or less public character; a position of trust, authority, or service under constituted authority" (*OED*, 'office') opens

up a reading of the reciprocal relationship of author and reader. Since author and reader dialogically coproduce the work's meaning, "The office [i.e. position of authority] could be any office [i.e. responsibility]" (*TPK*, 539) regardless of whether author or reader are meant or who they are physically. Thus, the chapter's unidentifiable voice referring to "a disposable piece of paper attached to the headrest" (*TPK*, 539), the blank page at the end of every book on which no narration occurs—giving the thinking head rest—the materiality of book, reader and writer outside the text are again thematized. *The Pale King*, drawing attention to the fact that author and reader "do have a body" (*TPK*, 539), offers an alternative to an irresponsible neoliberal privacy, promoting a view of (literary) communication as a service for the Other in which the Self can occur meaningfully.

If the office could be any office, this also includes the office of the president. If there is anything we can learn from Wallace's tax accountants, it is that we should hold the likes of Trump accountable for their behavior. Hence, while Wallace would call for empathy and communication in the face of a globally rising new Right, this does not mean that we should attempt to *understand* neo-fascists. On the contrary, the only way to face the post-truth rhetoric of the new and Alt-right is through a cultivation of *not*-understanding. The Right's post-truths must be treated as what they are: unintelligible.

As banal as it may sound, what Wallace's Wittgensteinian reading of contemporary culture suggests is a return to what he calls 'decency.' The intolerable breaches of protocol the likes of Trump have perfected over the last years must not be tolerated. Instead, the checks and balances of democratic politics, our rules of communal language use, must return to fulfilling their official role and sanction such behavior as inadmissible within the language game of politics. Decency here therefore means a recollection of what 'moves' in (political) language games are officially allowed. Foul behavior, behavior that does not adhere to the official role we assign to presidents, representatives, the press, but also the voters, must be sanctioned with a pronounced non-understanding, a refusal to understand the not-understandable until the unwritten rules of public discourse are met, not in the (abstract) letter but in their common sense. This non-understanding is not to be confused with indifference or isolation.

Even though Trump's first impeachment did not lead to his removal, nor did his second, the only meaningful way to react to Trump and the GOP is to demand that both sides adhere to their official roles: Rule

breaches cannot be met with more breaches but must lead to sanctions. Whether or not such sanctions have an actual effect in the world is altogether irrelevant. As has been shown repeatedly, this new far-right is not (exclusively) a disenfranchised, rural and poor movement that would require empathy and understanding on our behalf. To understand those who argue in bad faith means to expand the rules of the game to accommodate them. Only if both sides of a conversation adhere to the agreed-upon rules can meaningful dialogue occur. To play into the other side's breaches only escalates the problem. Today, unity can only be achieved by not-understanding, by disagreement. The stakes in this game are higher than ever. Each one of us matters. We cannot further evade our responsibilities.

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CHAPTER 3

"I'd get so constipated if I were you": Ottessa Moshfegh's Intimate Disgust

Tim Groenland

Abstract In July 2018, the website *Popula* published a short piece by Ottessa Moshfegh entitled "Letter to the President." This document, written in the author's distinctive register—darkly humorous, confessional, and balanced uneasily between irony and sincerity—addresses a series of questions and speculations towards Donald Trump, leading towards an unexpected and provocative intimacy hinging on shared bodily experiences of disgust.

Moshfegh's letter represents an uncharacteristically direct intervention in national politics, and should encourage us to consider the political valence of the disgusting intimacy dramatized in her fiction. The writer consistently depicts characters, narrators, and readers bound together by the spectacle of bodily disturbance and discharge; this affective charge is legible, in her recent fiction, as a response to the post-2016 political climate. Drawing on theories of affect, this essay suggests that Moshfegh's

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fiction might be particularly suited to the affective environment of a presidency arguably defined by its recourse to a politics of disgust. Focusing on the varied forms of repulsion dramatized in 2018's *My Year of Rest and Relaxation*, I argue that the novel demonstrates a newfound reflexivity in its treatment of disgust, exploring the question of whether it is possible to mobilise disgust's aversive energy for positive ends.

In July 2018, arts and culture website *Popula* published a short piece by Ottessa Moshfegh entitled "Letter to the President." This document, written in the author's distinctive register—darkly humorous, confessional, and balanced uneasily between irony and sincerity—addresses Donald Trump (albeit not by name; the letter hails "Dear Mister President"), with a series of confessional anecdotes, questions, and accompanying speculations (Moshfegh 2018b, "Letter").[1]

The letter begins in a personal register, with an anecdote about a childhood vision of eternity (a "black hole") that illuminated the absurdity of existence and affected the author to the degree that she still suspects herself to be "completely insane." This experience is used to build an affinity between author and president ("you seem to know, too, that reality is flexible, that you can bend it with your mind and words, at least sometimes") that develops through a shared sense of exceptionality and megalomaniac recklessness ("I feel lucky to be who I am: I do what I want, and the universe seems to be conspiring to get me to keep doing it").

The confessional format of the piece soon generates an implicit critique of Trump's rhetoric and the policies of his administration: Moshfegh (who is of Iranian extraction) admits to feeling glad, for example, that she is also half "white European," particularly when traveling in the South. In perhaps a less predictable vein, however, the author then begins to propose an unexpected and provocative intimacy hinging on shared bodily experiences of disgust:

> It must be hard to live such a public life. Do you see a shrink? Are you on any psych meds? Do you have any friends? You must feel like the walls are watching you. I'd get so constipated if I were you. I can't shit with anyone else in the house. I need total solitude. I'll tell you a secret: I use laxative

[1] Unless otherwise indicated, all quotations in this first section correspond to Moshfegh's "Letter to the President."

> suppositories on days I can't shit. Or else I'll get backed up. And that's just toxic. That will make anybody crazy. Am I right?

There follow several paragraphs that, at times, veer toward open mockery ("Do you think your wife really loves you?") and that make the author's opposition to Trump's political project more explicit (there is a reference, for example, to "the derailment of civilization for profit"). However, the bulk of the piece returns resolutely to the realm of the personal:

> I travel a lot these days, and when I'm alone in hotel rooms, I watch television in bed. I watch you on the news sometimes. I think about you. I think of your skin and your hair, the careful way you style it. […] Once I held a pillow in my arms and thought of you. I kissed the pillow. I petted it, soothingly, like I'd like to pet your strange yellow hair. […] You're obviously a very strong person, but I see your vulnerability, I do. I know you must feel unloved. It must be heartbreaking, everyone always criticizing you.

The ending of the piece elaborates on (what we can only assume is) this conceit of personal attraction, describing a bargain that the author has supposedly struck with her fiancé:

> Maybe someday you could come over. My fiancé wouldn't mind. We have a deal, an arrangement of sorts. He can sleep with Jennifer Lawrence, and I can sleep with you, no harm, no foul. We made this deal because the prospects seem so unlikely. But I figure it's worth a try. So? What do you think? Consider it and get back to me.
>
> Until then, I would like to be your friend. We all need friends. Good ones, who don't punish us for being ourselves.
>
> Respectfully yours,
>
> Ottessa

The ending here is deadpan, and—we can take it—presented with tongue very much in cheek. But it's notable that Moshfegh avoids closing with any overt political statements, insisting instead on an interpersonal scale and a commonality of needs; notable, too, that it makes a transgressive proposition that might be expected to surprise and perhaps disgust the reader. The proposition advanced might remind a reader of J.G. Ballard's 1968 story "Why I Want to Fuck Ronald Reagan" (Ballard 2001, 165–70), but the pseudo-scientific tone of that experimental fiction is very different from the mode of casual first-person intimacy constructed here by Moshfegh.

Moshfegh's letter, which represents an uncharacteristically direct commentary upon national politics, should encourage us to consider the political valence of the disgusting intimacy dramatized in her work. Throughout her fiction we consistently see characters, narrators, and readers bound together in uncomfortably close ways by the spectacle of bodily disturbance and discharge. Disgust, indeed, could fairly be described as one of the foundational affects of Moshfegh's fiction. In this essay, I read the centrality of disgust in Moshfegh's work alongside contemporaneous political developments, focusing particularly on *My Year of Rest and Relaxation* (2018c), the novel whose compositional chronology parallels the ascendancy of Donald Trump to the heights of US politics. I argue that the novel shows a particular self-awareness in its deployment of disgust as relational affect, exploring whether or not its contaminative quality might be the site of generative political effects.

"Just as I'd Always Hoped It Would Be": Disgust in Moshfegh's Fiction

To begin with, 'disgust' is a word Moshfegh explicitly invokes around and within her fiction itself. One of her earliest published stories, indeed, originally bore the title of "Disgust" when it appeared in the *Paris Review* in 2012 (it was changed to "Mr Wu" for her 2017 story collection *Homesick for Another World*). The story, set in China, follows a middle-aged man pursuing an obsession with a woman who works at his local video-game arcade; he is also in the habit of visiting sex workers, a practice that leads him to the insight that he is "disgusting." As the story progresses and Mr. Wu attempts to court the woman through underhand means (sending anonymous texts that alternate between insults and praise), he begins to project his self-loathing onto the woman, becoming disheartened as he imagines that she might want to engage in "disgusting" erotic acts with him. He visits a brothel and performs a series of novel (to him) acts on a young woman, an experience he finds both shocking and freeing in its disregard for sexual convention. From here, he goes on to reveal himself to the woman from the arcade, whose rejection (as Taylor notes) is "swift and liberating;" the story ends with the protagonist "rais[ing] his arms in victory," his cynicism and self-disgust having been confirmed as well as externalized (Taylor 2020, 228–29; Moshfegh 2018a, 35).

The word 'disgust' itself appears multiple times in Moshfegh's works of fiction, and the curious reader in possession of searchable ebooks will find multiple iterations of words such as "sick," "vomit," "puke," and "shit."[2] Moshfegh's fiction is notable for its extended focus on the body—its processes, its breakdowns, its frequently dysfunctional relationship with food and stimulants. The protagonist of her first novel, *McGlue* (2017b), is an alcoholic whose addiction is portrayed in vivid detail, as his body degenerates through different phases of confinement and punishment. In the opening page, we find him vomiting and "belch[ing] bile," and the final chapter sees him attempting to pry open a crack in his skull (Moshfegh, *McGlue*, loc. 10; 184); in between comes a catalogue of revulsion and bodily abuse exemplified by the narrator's sense of having "dirt deep inside me" (*McGlue*, loc. 173).

The titular character of *Eileen* (2016) could also be said to be defined by her various states of revulsion: her use of laxatives to manage her bowel movements, her "disgust" at her own menstruation, and the nauseated excitement she feels at viewing the grisly photos of a crime scene ("Getting sick like that had excited me") (Moshfegh, *Eileen*, 44; 100; 216). Again, these manifestations of disgust can be read as a function of character: as Lauren Oyler puts it, "the eponymous narrator's fear of erasure manifests through a self-loathing fixation on her own body" (Oyler 2020). Moshfegh's protagonists tend to be locked in at least one uncomfortably intimate relationship with another character in which disgust plays a key role, as in *McGlue*. While McGlue's self-disgust appears to be linked to his often unbearably close relationship with his friend and lover Johnson, Eileen's self-loathing can be read in the context of her abusive and dependent alcoholic father (in an early scene, Eileen sits on the toilet worrying "that the smell would carry downstairs to the kitchen, or that my father would come knocking while I sat there on the toilet") (*Eileen*, 44).

[2] For example, in *McGlue*, "disgust" appears twice, "sick" 21 times, "vomit" or "puke" 6 times, and "shit" 20 times; in *Eileen*, "disgust" appears 19 times, "sick" 27 times, and "laxative" 7 times; in *Homesick*, "disgust" appears 10 times, "vomit" or "puke" 5 times, "shit" 14 times; in *My Year*, "disgust" appears 10 times, "shit" 20 times, "vomit" 11 times, "puke" 8 times, "sick" 11 times; In *Death in Her Hands*, "disgust" appears 3 times, "sick" 14 times, "vomit" once, and "shit" and "excrement" appearing once each, suggesting a general decrease in the vocabulary of disgust in the latest novel. Justin Taylor observes drily that "Moshfegh's preferred bodily fluid is vomit, with feces and blood tied for second place, and the by-product of orgasm (male or female) a distant third" (Taylor 2020, 231).

Oyler describes this aspect of Moshfegh's work as "body horror," noting how the author "lac[es] her fiction with grossness and ugliness […] cursing her misfit characters with repugnant features, antisocial behavior, and a fascination with the nastier bodily functions" (Oyler 2020); similarly, Taylor notes that "Moshfegh's primary epistemological frameworks are revulsion and emesis" (Taylor 2020, 229). Meanwhile, in a 2017 review of Moshfegh's collection of stories *Homesick for Another World*, Brooks Sterritt emphasizes (under the provocative title "Ottessa Moshfegh Is Disgusting") the importance of disgust and revulsion to these stories, presenting their "engagement with the body, ingestion, elimination, intercourse, aging, darkness, and decay" as a deliberate counterbalance to the bodiless banality of much contemporary fiction. He observes that the book contains the word "sick" in its title, that many of the characters suffer from skin disorders, and that there is a repeated and provocative link between sex and revulsion in the characters' encounters (one memorable example being the narrator's observation, in "The Locked Room," that Takashi's mouth "tasted like excrement when we kissed each other"—this is followed by "Takashi was my first real boyfriend" (Sterritt 2017; Moshfegh, *Homesick*, 264).

Theorists of disgust have, since at least Freud onward, tended to note the contradictory charge that it carries: Sara Ahmed's observation that disgust is "deeply ambivalent, involving desire for, or an attraction towards, the very objects that are felt to be repellent" (Ahmed 2014, 84) is applicable to many of the interactions in these narratives.[3] Disgust, in Moshfegh's fiction, seems to be an inescapable and sometimes even desirable state through and toward which her characters move. The narrator of "A Dark and Winding Road," for example, escaping to his family's remote cabin from his pregnant wife to enjoy "one last weekend" to himself before the baby is born, soon discovers a rubber dildo nestled amongst the blankets. Characteristically for a Moshfegh protagonist, his "first instinct, of course, was to pick it up and smell it" (*Homesick*, 78). Soon comes a knock on the door, and the arrival of a woman expecting an assignation with the narrator's wayward brother. The narrator fraudulently presents himself as another of his brother's lovers, and the tension of the scene

[3] See also William Ian Miller's claim that disgust "attracts as well as it repels. The disgusting has an allure; it exerts a fascination which manifests itself in the difficulty of averting our eyes at a gory accident, of not checking out the quantity and quality of our excretions; or in the attraction of horror films, and indeed of sex itself" (Miller 1998, 22).

resolves itself in a sexual encounter whose transgressive nature is indicated in the story's final lines by the woman's picking the dildo up off the windowsill: "I let her do whatever she wanted to do to me that day in the cabin. It wasn't painful, nor was it terrifying, but it was disgusting—just as I'd always hoped it to be" (*Homesick*, 88).

Moshfegh's interviews suggest that the author is alive to the ways in which this combination of repulsion and desire might structure readerly responses to her own writing. In 2015, answering the question of how she understood her writing's appeal to readers, she suggested that "My writing lets people scrape up against their own depravity, but at the same time it's very refined—the depth of it hides behind its sophistication. It's like seeing Kate Moss take a shit. People love that kind of stuff" (qtd. in Bullwinkel 2015). Moshfegh has also used the specific word 'disgust' to describe her own compositional process. In an *LA Times* interview from November 2015, Moshfegh signaled that the formal structure of *Eileen*, her second novel, had evolved as a deliberate strategy to evoke disgust in the intended reader:

> Living with Eileen for so many pages fully ensconced me—and I hoped the reader too—in the hell of her situation. I really stretched the exposition until a point of disgust. I felt as Eileen did, that she was biding her time, counting the days of her life and all their morbid mundane contributions to her own hell and the hell of others around her. I wanted her woes and obsessions and compulsions to be repetitive and annoying enough so that […] the reader is about to give up on any grand dramatic action. (Frere-Jones 2015)

Disgust, here, seems to indicate the intended affect enveloping the reader: In addition to the bodily disgust evoked by the novel's content, Moshfegh wants her reader to be trapped in a narrative dynamic that is enervating enough to provoke disgust with the book itself.

Moshfegh's most notable commentary on this aspect of her process comes in a brief essay provocatively titled "How to Shit," published in October 2015. Again discussing *Eileen*, a novel she has claimed was deliberately calibrated to approach the mainstream and address the problem of her empty bank account, she writes:

> And so you could say that I participated in the paradigm I'm so critical of. I drank the Kool-Aid. I ate the shit. But my aim was to shit out new shit. And so in writing, I think a lot about how to shit. What kind of stink do I want

> to make in the world? My new shit becomes the shit I eat. I learn by digesting my own delusions. It's often very disgusting. The process requires as much self-awareness and honesty as I'm capable of having. It requires the courage to be hostile and contradictory. […] I am interested in my own hypocrisy. It provides the turbulence for me to change. (Moshfegh 2015)

Digestion, here, becomes a metaphor for productive conflict, meaningful creation through recursive internal struggle. The language here, indeed ("courage"), posits this as an ethics of disgust, a personal commitment to self-knowledge that can only be achieved through unpalatable means.

"Don't say It, It's Disgusting, Let's Not Talk": Disgust in the Trump Era

Moshfegh's fiction, her interviews, and the letter to Trump all invoke disgust, often in particularly intimate and interpersonal terms. *My Year of Rest and Relaxation* (2018c) not only continues this pattern, but was written in the context of the Trump presidency—with the result that her key narrative affect, as we shall see, coincides with one frequently used by the president.

Disgust has been identified by numerous observers as an important Trumpian affect. Michael Richardson puts it succinctly, claiming that "The affirmation, amplification and circulation of disgust is one of the primary affective drivers of Trump's political success" (Richardson 2017, 1–2). Trump has used the word at different times to refer to Hillary Clinton taking a bathroom break during a debate ("I know where she went, it's disgusting, I don't want to talk about it. No, it's too disgusting. Don't say it, it's disgusting, let's not talk"), a female lawyer taking a break during a trial to pump breast milk, and Marco Rubio's sweating (Hurst 2015). This propensity was evident during his 2015–2016 campaign activities, during which one commentator noted that "on a daily basis, Trump seems to experience more disgust, or at least to say he does, than most people do" (McAdams 2016). Disgust remained a clear affective feature of his administration, as is clear from accounts like the one given in Michael Wolff's *Fire and Fury* (2018). The word 'disgust' appears several times in Wolff's book, with reference to several different subjects that can largely be divided into two categories: Trump's feelings of revulsion, on the one hand (at, e.g., the décor of the White House and Reince Priebus's passive demeanor) and, on the other hand, the reaction of associates (like

General Kelly and the lawyers of the Trump circle) to the escalating chaos and rancor of his tenure (Wolff 2018, 118; 260; 285–6).

Wolff's description of the internet-based media dynamic so key to Trump's success, in fact, neatly captures the ambiguous charge of disgust deliberately provoked by many of the president's actions: "the *Breitbart* formula was to so appall the liberals that the base was doubly satisfied, generating clicks in a ricochet of disgust and delight. You defined yourself by your enemy's reaction" (Wolff 2018, 71). This dynamic continued into the final months and weeks of his presidency, with the January 6th insurgency in the Capitol being described by some observers as "Trump's disgusting coda" (Lowry 2021) and taken by others as evidence of the fact that he is "disgusted by his supporters" (Lopez 2021). The latter fact was perhaps in evidence at an earlier stage, given that Trump had reportedly remarked months earlier that one benefit of the Covid-19 pandemic was the fact that "[Now] I don't have to shake hands with these disgusting people" (Cohen 2020). Throughout Trump's tenure, disgust was circulated freely, being experienced almost as an omnipresent feature of his time in office: the president himself appeared constantly to both provoke and experience it (even toward his own allies and supporters), and his supporters and opponents alike had little chance of escaping its contaminating force.

The consensus among scholars of disgust is that conservatives are more prone to be moved by the affect. Martha Nussbaum has analyzed the historical importance of a "politics of disgust" in facilitating oppression, with examples of "disgust-based subordination" ranging from misogynistic law-making, to caste hierarchy in India, to Nazi anti-Semitism (Nussbaum 2010). A 2018 cognitive neuroscience study—conducted, indeed, among US voters in the 2016 election—suggests that sensitivity to body odor can reliably predict authoritarian attitudes (Liuzza et al. 2018). Trump's speeches could, indeed, be read as textbook illustrations of the way in which, as William Ian Miller writes in his 1998 study *The Anatomy of Disgust*, disgust works "to hierarchize our political order" (Miller 1998, 8). Richardson notes the enthusiasm with which the president physically performs disgust, acting out for his audience a "fantasy of purity, of ejection and cleansing" (Richardson 2017, 751); as he observes, the purifying imagery of the infamous "Drain the swamp" chant promises to remove the disgusting corruption at the heart of government (Richardson 2017, 748).

Richardson also observes that "while [Trump's] rhetoric about other races and religions steers clear of the word, his imagery evokes the rejection or ejection characteristic of disgust: deporting illegal immigrants, a wall on the Mexican border, a ban on Muslim travel" (Richardson 2017, 747). Ahmed writes that disgust invokes a border that must be policed, transferring the disgust onto "border objects" in a circular and self-reinforcing process: "Border objects are hence disgusting, while disgust engenders border objects" (Ahmed 2014, 87). This metaphorical 'border'—the sharply unpleasant distinction between self and other that is identified and/or created in the moment of disgust's expression—represents the clearest link between Trump's expressions of disgust and the specific policies pursued by his administration.

"Everything Is Political": Affect and the Novel

Moshfegh's novels are notable for their sustained portrayal of states of isolation, delusion, and narcissism. This fact would seem to present the most obvious obstacle to a political reading of her fiction—at least insofar as such a reading might depend on a text's explicit engagement with political structures and societal relations. The plot of *My Year of Rest and Relaxation* (2018c), which revolves around the decision of its privileged Manhattanite narrator to ingest an escalatingly powerful set of pharmaceutical sleeping aids in an attempt to go into temporary hibernation, continues the patterns of confinement and portrayal of hermetic spaces found in her previous work. The novel's chronology, too—it takes place throughout 2000 and 2001, building toward the events of September 11 and ending in its immediate aftermath—places it at a deliberate remove from the contemporary. The centrality of this key date in US history to the story certainly allows for political readings—critics noted the obvious metaphorical suggestion of a culture sleepwalking toward disaster, and its implicit critique of the vapidity and "gleaming absurdities of pre-9/11 New York City"—but also insists on a certain distance from its own time (Tolentino 2018).

One motivation for this distance might be a desire on the part of the author to resist the danger that the overwhelming noise of contemporary political events might overwhelm the novel's own reality. In this regard, Moshfegh's novel can be interestingly read alongside Matthew Olzmann's "The Blanket Room," a microfiction published in 2017 that dramatizes a

desire to cocoon one's way to oblivion and eventual renewal. The story appeared in *Scoundrel Time*, an online publication explicitly framed as a response to contemporary political developments and opposed to the aims of "despots and demagogues," and which invites fiction and poetry submissions that respond to the urgency of the present moment (Whyman 2017). In "The Blanket Room," the narrator describes the titular room at the mall where citizens can go to be wrapped up tightly in blankets—so tightly, indeed, that they knowingly risk loss of consciousness or death—and thus withdraw from the toxicity of contemporary life. The story's presentation of retreat as response to the Trump presidency is signaled clearly in the following lines:

> My friends say that I'm becoming distant, that I rely on this too much. Nonsense! [. . .] The thing is, everyone occasionally needs a quick pick-me-up [...]. Let's say you get passed over for that promotion, you've been having trouble sleeping, or the Steelers lose. What time is it? Time for The Blanket Room™! Then everything is okay again. Or maybe the problem is deeper and more malevolent. Police goosestep down the street. The Republic decides to build a wall so patricians can stand on top and watch everything burn. These are the times when it's best to be swaddled in darkness and held by strong arms as a soothing voice says, "Hush now; it'll all work out." (Olzmann 2017)

At 600 words, Olzmann's story is deliberately slight, presenting a brief and obviously metaphorical scenario that gestures toward the liberal urge for withdrawal and restoration under the Trump presidency. While the affective design of the piece is similar to Moshfegh's novel, the latter writer may have felt that any novel-length response to contemporary politics would need to unfold in a subtler way, through a parallel time scheme. The highly specific chronology of Moshfegh's novel, which signals its immediate pre-9/11 setting in various ways, might be seen as deliberate resistance to this kind of reading. Indeed, several critics echoed Dwight Garner's observation that Moshfegh's novel still, despite its clear chronological distance, "feels current" (Garner 2018). We might be tempted to accuse such critics of recency bias, or of the frequent desire among reviewers to read fiction through the lens of its 'relevance' to contemporary events. However, as we have seen (and as affect theorists have long argued), feelings can also be political.

The author's interviews, too, indicate a conscious bending of the personal in the direction of the political. In a 2017 interview, given during the writing of *My Year of Rest and Relaxation*, Moshfegh said:

> Unless I'm going to move to the woods, I'm going to be living and responding to my environment. And what's happening politically, culturally, and socially in my environment is always going to show up. So certainly I'm going to be writing about it, in terms of what it's teaching me or not teaching me. And the book that I'm writing now is a very political book. Some people will probably dismiss it as a female narrative. Politics have become institutionalized in a way; when we say "political," we mean conversations about Trump and the economy, for example. But everything is political. Including world events and the things that we read about in the *New York Times* bullshit. So the older I get and the more I'm awake to what's actually happening, the more it's going to be driving me in my work. (Moshfegh 2017a, "The Future")

Moshfegh gestures here toward the traditional gendered divides in the reception of fiction, with a long history of 'female narratives' tending to be read for their local and 'domestic' content rather than their wider political implications; she also implicitly makes a claim for the political stakes of the personal and interpersonal scale at which her third novel functions.

"'Is He Worth The Stink?'": Disgust, Contamination, and Artistic Value in *My Year of Rest and Relaxation*

Sianne Ngai describes ugly feelings as "explicitly agonistic emotions" organized by "trajectories of repulsion" (Ngai 2007, 11), a description that would certainly encompass Moshfegh's third novel: The disgust in *My Year* is arguably both more ambient and more intrinsic to the plot, as repulsion is written into the novel's code at a structural level. Jia Tolentino suggests as much in her review of the novel, which notes that in contrast to the explicitly squalid environments in which the protagonists of her first two novels find themselves in, Moshfegh here "builds a façade of beauty and privilege around her characters, forcing the reader to locate repulsion somewhere deeper: in effort, in daily living, in a world that swings between tragic and banal" (Tolentino 2018). The entire plot of the book dramatizes a process of turning away from an intolerable reality: Hibernation is

a negative, reactive state, and the novel thus allows us to inhabit its social world in a continually misanthropic and oppositional way. While the novel includes instances of body horror, then, we might also consider it as an example of the kind of literary work posited by Ngai, "whose global or organizing affect is disgust" (Ngai 2007, 30).

The disgust here, however, also appears to be diffused more thoroughly throughout the interactions with the primary characters, each of whom could be said to display versions of the privilege, narcissism, and dishonesty that echo through the Trump era. The primary relationship in the novel is the complex friendship between the narrator and her friend Reva, whose dedication to self-improvement makes her a comic foil to the narrator's project as well as the most frequent object of her caustic, satirical running commentary. Along with Reva's obsession with image, the narrator also finds herself alternately attracted to and repulsed by her comically self-obsessed banker ex-boyfriend Trevor, her extravagantly irresponsible psychiatrist Dr. Tuttle, and the artist Ping Xi, whose fraudulent creations and megalomaniacal shock tactics might be said to represent a dark mirror image of Moshfegh and her own provocative fictions. She describes Xi as "a pubescent-looking twenty-three-year-old from Diamond Bar, California" who titles his abstract ejaculatory paintings "as though each had some deep, dark political meaning […] it was all nonsense, but people loved him for it" (Moshfegh, *My Year*, 37). The narrator leaves us in little doubt that Xi, whose art includes paintings made by masturbating onto large canvases and installations featuring taxidermied purebred dogs, is an almost Trumpian con artist whose attention-seeking antics contain little in the way of artistic value.

Xi's approach, however, undeniably evokes the author's own. The adjectives employed by critics to describe the latter's exhibition (in which lasers shoot through the darkness from the dead dogs' eyes) are not unlike those found in reviews of Moshfegh's own fiction—"brutal," "cruelly funny"—and his art is explicitly figured in terms of sensory outrage: one critic wonders, "Here is a spoiled brat taking the piss out of the establishment. […] But is he worth the stink?" (*My Year*, 45). Shortly after the opening of the exhibition, the narrator is fired for her increasing narcolepsy and neglect of her duties. She locks up and leaves the gallery, pausing to face the exhibition, and finds herself experiencing a childhood memory of her mother's cruelty. Stung by the memory, and by the "disgust that I'd wasted so much time on unnecessary labor when I could have been sleeping and feeling nothing," she goes back inside, defecates on the floor, and

"stuff[s] the shitty Kleenex into the mouth of that bitchy poodle" (*My Year*, 49; 51). Having externalized her disgust in a way that matches Ping Xi's own methods, the narrator is finally ready to embark on her project of "rest and relaxation" (*My Year*, 51).

It is this quality of reflexivity in the novel's treatment of disgust, in fact, which represents the most significant development from Moshfegh's previous work. Ping Xi largely disappears from the novel's central section, but he remains an enigmatic presence through the narrator's efforts to hibernate: He shows up in a photograph taken on an unremembered night out, prompting the narrator to wonder, "how had I found him? Or had he found me?" (*My Year*, 185). Xi's reappearance in the final chapters is crucial, as he gradually becomes the narrator's key ally in her plan to prevent herself from leaving the apartment during the final months of her experiment. The narrator receives flowers from Xi along with "the corniest quotation I'd ever read: 'every act of creation is an act of destruction. —Pablo Picasso'" (*My Year*, 225). She bins the flowers, whose smell is "like the stink of a dead cat in the gutter," and reflects on the useful reminder represented by their arrival: "However much Ping Xi disgusted me—I didn't respect him or his art, I didn't want to know him, I didn't want him to know me—he had flattered me, and reminded me that my stupidity and vanity were still well intact. A good lesson" (*My Year*, 224; 225). While her opinion of the artist is as low as ever, his importance to her grows dramatically from that point onward, as she conscripts him to become her "jailkeeper" in her final desperate effort to withdraw entirely from human contact.[4]

Her description of Xi's understanding of their shared situation closely echoes the language Moshfegh uses to describe herself and Trump's shared sense of exceptionality, quoted at the outset of this essay:

[4] Moshfegh has suggested that Ping Xi's importance to the novel—as well as the novel's treatment of art and commodification more generally—has been underappreciated by critics. In response to a question about the critical reception of *My Year*, Moshfegh highlights "the absence of certain things": "I thought so much about the art world and about art in general and had so much fun writing the satire of early twenty-first century New York art galleries and coming up with all the crazy art that was in this gallery. Also, the project the protagonist takes on with Ping Xi, this artist, was like such a hard element for me. It took me so many wrong turns to figure out that that's what would have to happen. So for me, it's a really big deal, but I think for other people, it maybe wasn't such a major theme for them in their reading" (Juzwiak 2018).

> like an artist, he clearly believed that the situation we were in together—he the warden of my hibernation with full permission to use me in my blackout state as his "model"—was *a projection of his own genius, as though the universe were orchestrated in such a way as to lead him towards projects that he'd unconsciously predicted for himself years earlier*. […] He wasn't interested in understanding himself or evolving. He just wanted to shock people. And he wanted people to love and despise him for it. (*My Year*, 262–263; my italics)

We might detect a clear critique, here, of the limits of disgust as an artistic technique and of its capacity to be assimilated as a tool of commodified entertainment, as well as an implicit and uncomfortable parallel with the work of the artist and of the demagogue.

We might also consider the implicit contrast between Ping Xi's techniques and Moshfegh's own approach in light of Rachel Greenwald Smith's investigation of the different varieties of affect identifiable in the contemporary, post-neoliberal novel: broadly, between "two different types of literary feeling, one that can be more easily felt, described, and therefore traded and valued, and another that is less immediately palpable and codifiable" (Greenwald Smith 2015, 18). Smith values novels that resist identification and the kind of "strategic emotional alliances" that bolster the construction of the entrepreneurial self: in these texts, "the capacity for affective connection with others might be impersonal, contingent, and distributed throughout social systems and environments in ways that fall outside willing entrepreneurial investment" (Greenwald Smith 2015, 56). It is, perhaps, an open question as to whether Moshfegh's fiction resists or courts identification in relation to Greenwald Smith's schema: While some readers might find the narrative personae in her various fictions cold and unwelcoming, others are attracted by precisely the charismatic narcissism and misanthropy of these narrators and the palpable affects generated by the texts. Greenwald Smith expends little focus on disgust as affect, dismissing it summarily as one of the categorizable "minor affects," the "palpable but messy feelings" (Greenwald Smith 2015, 18), that have been notably taxonomized in the work of Sianne Ngai. However, the complexity and ambiguity of disgust as affect (an ambiguity agreed upon, as detailed earlier, by a range of theorists) should give us pause in our judgment on whether it can be reliably "traded and valued" in all circumstances.

In any case, it seems clear that *My Year* pursues a thematic interest in questions of affect and artistic possibility in ways that may not be so

distant from Greenwald Smith's own. It is notable that Smith's book opens with an account of the way in which the FDA's 1997 deregulation of Direct to Consumer (DTC) advertising by pharmaceutical companies allowed prescription drugs to be advertised in broadcast and print media; this development shifted the emphasis in the model of prescription drug use away from medical diagnosis and care toward one of "commodity and consumption" (Greenwald Smith 2015, 8). The plot of Moshfegh's novel, set three years after this regulatory event, is enabled by precisely this consumption-model of drug use, and indeed serves as an extreme parody of that model. *My Year*'s narrator comes to Dr. Tuttle prepared to make up a convincing story to justify prescription, only for the doctor to emerge as a "pharmaceutical shaman" (Moshfegh, *My Year*, 25) who boasts of her ability to handle insurance companies and plies her patient with samples of new medications. The pharmaceutical fog in which the narrator exists for almost the entirety of the novel has important implications for the novel's presentation of character as well as its affective environment. The constant drug use renders the narrator's individual emotion less relevant or believable: characters can and do alter and/or create their moods through chemical intervention, and Moshfegh sometimes plays against the tendency to seek 'well-rounded' characters (we're reminded on more than one occasion that her friend Reva talks like a character in a TV show, her dialogue and emotional expression canned and predicable).

Instead, the novel immerses us in an affect—alternately cynical, cold, and disgusted—that implicates the emotional world of characters and reader and forces a repeated return to a sense of disgust that is inescapably relational. Ping Xi's deployment of disgust as provocation is intended in advance for commodification: The narrator imagines him as essentially "reptilian" (*My Year*, 282), and his interest in the narrator's project of renewal is repeatedly figured as essentially entrepreneurial, as indicated by his eagerness to have her sign a contract before they begin.[5] The narrator, on the other hand, is pursuing a less transactional—if more dangerous and demented—project, and her desire for Xi's complicity in her endeavor suggests that something in his approach remains essential to the narrator's attempt to escape from her enclosure. (As the narrator of Olzmann's story observes, "cocoons can be complicated. Some are so seamless that the insect must slash its way out" [Olzmann 2017].) The narrator does not

[5] It is notable that Dr. Tuttle, too, in her first appearance, quickly makes this transactional gesture: "I'll have some agreements for you to sign, some contracts" (Moshfegh 2018c, 19).

reject Xi's shock tactics, and her project represents not so much a disavowal of disgust as an affective driver of change so much as an attempt to mobilize its intimate charge to force a metamorphosis. As Olzmann's narrator puts it: "It's possible we won't make it out of this. It's also possible that the membrane will peel apart and a set of wings will emerge" (Olzmann 2017).

The novel might, on this reading, be seen as an extended exploration of the question of whether it is possible to mobilize the aversive energy of disgust for positive ends. Disgust can sometimes, it suggests, represent an opportunity for the hypocritical boundaries of normality to temporarily dissolve. At the end of Chap. 4, for example, we find perhaps the tenderest scene of friendship in the novel. The women arrive back at the narrator's apartment after Reva's mother's funeral, a long and exhausting day characterized by Reva's raw emotion and the narrator's characteristically relentless contempt for her friend. They arrive in the door to find a porn film still playing on the TV screen, a legacy of the narrator's last pharmaceutical blackout. The movie continues playing as the women proceed to drink and guzzle pills respectively. Over several pages, we experience a narrative cascade of body parts, fluids, and sex acts—the narrator leaves the room to pee, Reva to puke, all while orgiastic scenes play out loudly on screen (and the narrator meditates on Trevor's ejaculations and the phenomenon of "pussy-eating" in film)—inside of which an unexpectedly intimate moment of friendship develops. After several pages, the narrator distantly notes herself experiencing the most empathetic moment in the novel:

> "I love you, Reva," I heard myself say from so far away. "I'm really sorry about your mom."
> Then I was gone. (*My Year*, 177)

The most directly sympathetic moment of communication in the novel, then, seems only to be possible in an environment of mutual disgust. Disgust, according to Douglas Dowland, is "transitive, an affect that moves readily from its source to its surroundings, leaving nothing—and no one—clean in its wake" (Dowland 2016, 68). This capacity for contamination is, I would suggest, a source of generative possibility in Moshfegh's fiction as well as potential escape from the borders of the self. Instead of the closed loop of exclusive disgust invoked by Trump's speeches, in which an in-group is invited to instantly demonize the other,

or the facile shock tactics of Ping Xi's laser-eyed dog corpses, Moshfegh's characters find themselves experiencing a kind of collective, slowly ramifying experience of disgust whose length renders the reader equally contaminated and complicit.

Early in the novel, we find what may be an unexpectedly direct expression of this possibility:

> I had taken some Risperdal. I was feeling woozy.
> "Have you ever heard the expression 'eat shit or die'?" I asked.
> Reva unscrewed the tequila and poured more into her can. "It's 'eat shit *and* die,'" she said.
> We didn't talk for a while. My mind drifted back to Trevor… (*My Year*, 77; emphasis in the original)

This apparent non sequitur, coming in the midst of a fractured and seemingly insignificant conversation, hides an ethical injunction that recalls Moshfegh's digestive metaphor of composition. As an expression of Moshfegh's narrative ethics, you could do worse than the terse statement of digestive ethics found in "eat shit or die." The only escape from death, for her characters—or the death-in-life represented by the hypocritical embrace of conformity and bland civility—is through disgust, a redemptive and leveling process of degradation that strips away conventional pieties.

Miller writes that "to feel disgust is human and humanizing," and this surely represents its most liberating possibility (Miller 1998, 11–12). Ultimately, these narratives seem to make the challenging—and quite deliberately disgusting—suggestion that the route to meaningful connection in the degraded and commodified environment of contemporary capitalism might require us to metaphorically 'eat shit.'

Coda: *Death in Her Hands*

Moshfegh's fourth novel, published in the summer of 2020, was greeted by many critics as something of a swerve from the trajectory suggested by her previous work. The novel's plot, a murder mystery in which the status of the crime—has a murder actually taken place?—and the narrator—is Vesta Gull, the lonely widow who pursues an eccentric course of investigation, at all reliable?—are both increasingly put into question. The book

has an eerier and less embodied tone than most of her other work, with the narrator's "baroque inner life"—and, as a consequence, metafictive questions over "the nature and meaning of art"—taking more obvious primacy over the novel's plot than is the case in previous novels (Power 2020).

Oyler describes *Death in Her Hands* as a "much subtler, more mature book" (Oyler 2020) than *My Year*, a description that, while understandable, does not line up with the description of the novel's genesis given in a *New York Times* profile of the author appearing at the time of the novel's publication. In this account, Moshfegh wrote the novel in the spring of 2015, immediately after completing the writing of her story collection. Upon completing the manuscript, she "immediately abandoned it in a drawer, only to rediscover it four years and three books later" (Christensen 2020). If we are to trust this compositional history, then *Death* was written in the year before Trump assumed the Republican nomination and subsequently the presidency. The book's status, then—or at least its place in the chronological analysis of the author's work that I've presented in this essay—is uncertain.

Nevertheless—and notwithstanding the warnings by the book's narrator, who expresses her regret at marrying an academic with the complaint that "they always need to analyze and prove a point about something" (Moshfegh, *Death*, 194)—we may make some observations about the presence of disgust in the novel. In the first instance, the narrator here struggles with feelings of alienation and self-loathing reminiscent of those found in Moshfegh's other novels. Early in the novel, we begin to suspect that the imagined life of Magda, the (supposed) murder victim, may be a projection of Vesta's own interior life. In Vesta's imagining, Magda's life is conditioned by her subservient position as an immigrant laborer, a position that can only be ameliorated through mischievous and disgusting strategies of resistance:

> If Magda was as tough and funny as I was imagining, if she was as interesting, she saved a little from that bucket and used it to give that wicked Shirley some pee in her special nonfat milk. Or she dipped Shirley's toothbrush in the pee. A flake of excrement nestled between the bristles. Ha ha! I nearly laughed, picturing the kind of silly revenge she might think up…. (*Death*, 108)

Elsewhere, Magda's pride manifests itself in (again, imagined) cruelty to the "senile old man" she might care for: "Everybody must take care of you, because you are so dumb like dumb dog, shitting on itself. Pah!" (*Death*, 124).

As this quote suggests, the novel—like *My Year*—contains notable associations between dogs and excrement, highlighting the centrality of "animality" (as Nussbaum notes) as a primary object of disgust. This becomes graphically clear in Chap. 6, when Vesta is searching for her dog Charlie and recalls a day when he was just a "young pup" on a day out in the park. Charlie eats "another dog's watery feces," causing him to react in confusion: "almost immediately, he started gagging, thick drool flinging from his mouth as he shook with disgust. […] He gagged and gagged. But he was so happy" (*Death*, 220). There follow several paragraphs describing the implications of the dog's actions, as the feces-covered Charlie and his similarly contaminated owner ("of course it got all over my hands and the legs of my trousers") return home to attempt a clean-up. When the garden hose turns out to be broken, and cleaning Charlie in the sink turns out to be impractical, Vesta decides the only option is for she and the dog to wash together: "So I removed my clothes, too, and we showered together for what must have been an hour" (*Death*, 221).

This escalating minor drama of contamination comes shortly after a surreal episode in which the narrator wanders into a neighbor's party and faints. Vesta awakes to a room of suspicious interlocutors, one of whom asks her a question that might reasonably cause a reader in 2020, the year of the novel's publication, to pause: "'I'm sure she's fine,' the man said. 'Do you know your name?' he asked me derisively. 'You know who's president?'"[6]

As the novel progresses, Vesta's feelings of resentment become increasingly focused upon her memories of her manipulative husband Walter, whose betrayals and abusive behavior come to the fore in its final chapters. Recalling her discovery of a notebook that detailed his lechery, Vesta takes an important step toward freeing herself: she throws away the notebook and "let all of Walter's thoughts seep into the urine and feces that must

[6] There are few enough chronological markers in the novel: the primary one is a reference to the web service *Ask Jeeves*, indicating that its action is set prior to 2006 when 'Jeeves' was removed from the search engine's name (Moshfegh 2020, 69). The 2020 profile mentioned above makes no mention of the extent to which Moshfegh revised the manuscript for publication (her editor suggests that his own work on the text was minimal, due to the author's tendency to turn in work that is "fully cooked" [Christensen 2020]).

still exist somewhere in the bowels of this messy Earth" (*Death*, 237). While disgust is by definition experienced as intimate, it again presents itself here specifically within the context of a close and fraught relationship—in this case, her late husband and her dog. The novel's climax finds Walter and Charlie's identities seeming to symbolically merge, as her attitude toward her late husband has hardened into unambiguous hatred (she recalls her sense of feeling "suffocated" during sex with him) and the dog (which has been presumed lost) returns with an attitude of implacable hostility. In the novel's closing action, Charlie attacks, and she instinctively defends herself with a knife discovered moments before. In this moment, Vesta appears to have moved symbolically through disgust and contamination to find an ability for self-preservation: She realizes that it will be impossible to touch the enraged Charlie, and that she will have to watch from a distance as he expires. "Sometimes this happens to animals," she observes to herself: "They turn mad on you" (*Death*, 258).

It is notable here that Charlie literally eats shit and, much later, in the novel's closing moment, dies—perhaps so that Vesta can live. The narrator's escape from the torment of the ambiguous (and possibly self-constructed) murder mystery and her unhappy memories appear to be predicated on a kind of digestive ethics that sit closely alongside those explored in *My Year*. While the characters in *Death in Her Hands* do not consistently evince the levels of self-loathing and habits of self-medication as those in most of Moshfegh's other fictions, there are clear continuities in the centrality of disgust to the key relationships in the novel.

It remains to be seen whether *Death* represents a new departure in Moshfegh's treatment of disgust, or a diversion more properly belonging to an earlier stage of her career. Her next novel will be published during what appears (at the time of writing) to be the post-Trump era and may provide more indications as to how these turbulent years in US history have been digested by contemporary novelists.

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CHAPTER 4

Writing the Resistance: Claudia Rankine's Exploration of Whiteness in *The White Card*

Angela Mullis

Because being American is more than a pride we inherit—
It's the past we step into, and how we repair it. […]
So let us leave behind a country better than the one we were left.
With every breath from our bronze-pounded chests,
We will raise this wounded world into a wondrous one. […]
We will rebuild, reconcile, and recover,
In every known nook of our nation,
In every corner called our country,
Our people, diverse and dutiful.
We'll emerge, battered but beautiful.
When day comes, we step out of the shade,
Aflame and unafraid.
The new dawn balloons as we free it,
For there is always light,
If only we're brave enough to see it,
If only we're brave enough to be it.
—*Amanda Gorman*, The Hill We Climb

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Abstract Claudia Rankine has emerged over the past several years as a leading voice in critical race theory, and her important work on whiteness presents new ways to interrogate race, privilege, and constructed understandings of space and, importantly, citizenship. Underscoring the words of James Baldwin that "history is not the past. It is the present," Rankine forcefully calls attention to our current political climate and the presentness of our history—America having elected "a presidential candidate with white-nationalist sympathies." As Rankine makes clear, racial hatred and white dominance and the many forms they take are nothing new to America. This chapter explores Rankine's dissection of whiteness in her 2019 play, *The White Card*; by using the subtleties of conversation, the setting of a dinner party, and discussions of art itself, Rankine's characters confront difficult topics about race and privilege, as their bigotries and humanity come more fully into display through the lens of dialogue. From praise, anger, sympathy, rage, exactness, deep-seated emotions arise in these discussions of race and its relationship to power, as part of the larger conversation that Rankine has extended—including her trilogy *Don't Let Me Be Lonely* (2004), *Citizen* (2014), and *Just Us* (2020)—with the aim of layering our understanding of whiteness and become closer to confronting the *what* is the problem Trump's America is facing.

As Joe Biden was sworn in as the 46th President of the United States on January 20, 2021, just days following a massive riot at the nation's capital, a young black poet came to the podium and delivered a message of active healing. National Youth Poet Laureate Amanda Gorman reminded a nation that being American is both how we "step into" the past and how we "repair it" (Gorman 2021, 18). After four years of Donald Trump's presidency and the increasing awareness of systemic racism in the United States across the globe, her voice was a welcomed, resounding cry that called out the violent and stark reality Americans have been experiencing, and she offered a different way of seeing, a space for bravery, "rebuilding," and "recovering." Another eminent poet, Claudia Rankine, is leading this charge forward by consistently working to spotlight systemic racism, counter hate speech, and offer ways to consider the racial imaginary anew.

Claudia Rankine has emerged over the past decade as a leading voice in American literature, and her important work on the racial imaginary and whiteness presents alternative ways to interrogate race, privilege, and

constructed understandings of space, and ultimately, citizenship. Her work presents us with ways to repair America—ways to see ourselves and our participation in a larger imagined, beloved community. Rankine has an incredible body of work, most notably her American trilogy, which includes *Don't Let Me Be Lonely: An American Lyric* (2004), the award-winning *Citizen: An American Lyric* (2014), and her most recent work *Just Us: An American Conversation* (2020). She has also written numerous plays, including *The White Card* (2019), followed by *Help*, which premiered in March 2020 at The Shed in New York City. She has authored additional works of poetry and done numerous video collaborations with her husband John Lucas, and she is the editor of important critical works, specifically the coeditor of *The Racial Imaginary: Writers on Race in the Life of the Mind* (2016). This collection stems from a project that Rankine began in March 2011, when she "composed an open letter about race and the creative imagination that she placed on a website and invited others to respond to however they wished" (Loffreda and Rankine 2016, 13). In the introduction to this collection, Rankine and coeditor Beth Loffreda define the racial imaginary as

> something we all recognize quite easily: the way our culture has imagined over and over again the narrative opportunities, the feelings and attributes and situations, the subjects and metaphors and forms and voices, available both to characters of different races and their authors. The racial imaginary changes over time, in part because artists get into tensions with it, challenge it, alter its availabilities. […] Pretending it is not there […] will not hurry it out of existence. (Loffreda and Rankine 2016, 22)

Through her work, Rankine pushes readers into a cross-racial conversation and new ways of racial imaginings. She manipulates the page and the theatrical stage, including multimedia works, to present new ways of seeing through language, space, and genre. Evidencing the power of her work and her unprecedented use of language, Rankine has received numerous awards, including the National Book Critics Circle Award, the *Los Angeles Times* Book Prize, and the Forward Prize. She is a MacArthur Fellow and has received fellowships from the Lannan Foundation, the National Endowment for the Arts, as well as the Guggenheim Foundation.

Just Us: An American Conversation is the latest work in Rankine's growing canon and, notably as the final book in her trilogy, she transitions from the subtitle "An American Lyric" of the previous two texts to "An

American Conversation." Published during the Trump administration, her work in part reacts to and responds to this administration's cruel disregard of racial inequalities and the movements that have erupted with an increased force in response. *Just Us* very much focuses on the personal—whereas former works have also looked at the personal, they have done so through a different lens, one of history—and the day's headlines of police brutality or citizen violence against bodies of color. However, *Just Us* takes up her latest theme, that is, investigating how cross-racial conversations (dialogue) can lead to new ways of seeing, hearing, and reimagining how we witness race, and particularly whiteness. In the section "big little lies," Rankine shares a profoundly personal observation about the difference between herself and her white friend:

> Unless something structural shifts in ways that remain unimaginable, the life my friend has is not a life I can achieve. Ever. Her kind of security, because it's not merely monetary, is atmospheric and therefore is not transferable. It's what reigns invisible behind the term "white." It doesn't inoculate her from illness, loss, or forfeiture of wealth, but it ensures a level of citizenry, safety, mobility, and belonging I can never have. (Rankine 2020, 189)[1]

Through this deeply personal essay, Rankine calls attention to what "reigns invisible" in whiteness—a security and mobility that Rankine witnesses and finds unimaginable for herself unless "something structural shifts" (*JU*, 189).

On August 11, 2017, in the early days of the Trump administration, America saw white nationalism on full display: the "Unite the Right" rally erupted in Charlottesville, Virginia, with members brandishing tiki torches and (re)creating modern day imagery of K.K.K. rallies and lynch mobs as they marched to protest the removal of a Confederate statue. This eruption of the past into the present was both shocking and not surprising—and the psychological toll it took on the nation was and remains felt from coast to coast. In the wake of this rally, Claudia Rankine published an article, "Was Charlottesville the Exception or the Rule?" in *The New York Times Magazine*, where she underscores the words of James Baldwin that "history is not the past. It is the present" (Rankine 2017). Rankine forcefully calls attention to our current political climate and the presentness of

[1] Henceforth, all parenthetical references to *Just Us: An American Conversation* (2020) are abbreviated as *JU*.

our history—America having elected "a presidential candidate with white-nationalist sympathies"—the same president who "appeared reluctant to denounce a former grand wizard of the K.K.K." (Rankine 2017). As she explains, "It's true that our president's refusal to become 'presidential,' as the pundits are fond of saying, is amplifying *what is*, but what is—whatever the tweets, whatever his state of mind, whatever his ultimate agenda—remains *what was*" (Rankine 2017; emphasis in the original). Further, she writes, "Americans continue to request that our president indulge our national sentimentality and with a show of good manners denounce white supremacy. He tried, but his words were hollow. Those who voted him in office did not vote for 'healing talk'" (Rankine 2017). In short, Rankine makes explicit that the "Republican presidential campaign ran on racial hate," and that, if there was any doubt, "this election 'outed' America's affiliation with white supremacy" (Rankine 2017).

In an earlier interview with Steven Thrasher of *The Guardian*, Rankine had shared that

> she understands why people don't want to focus on whiteness. "I think we've seen whiteness centralized forever, so they're no longer interested in making it the subject, putting it in the subject position. But I think that it's been centralized in order to continue its dominance, and it's never been the object of inquiry to understand its paranoia, its violence, its rage." (Thrasher 2016)

It is in this sense that her work offers a place for whiteness to be an "object of inquiry" and thus move whiteness studies in new directions. Rankine underscores throughout her various essays, interviews, and works that racial hatred, white dominance, and the many forms they take are nothing new to America. Whiteness studies is also not new. In *Just Us*, Rankine provides a list of major scholars in the field to consult, "the cornerstones of which include Toni Morrison's *Playing in the Dark: Whiteness and the Literary Imagination*, David Roediger's *The Wages of Whiteness*, Matthew Frye Jacobson's *Whiteness of a Different Color: European Immigrants and the Alchemy of Race*, Richard Dyer's *White*, and more recently Nell Irvin Painter's *The History of White People*" (*JU*, 17). She also references Cheryl I. Harris's seminal article "Whiteness as Property" (1993), which provides essential ways for thinking about the construction of race and how whiteness itself became a form of property. Specifically, Harris examines "the emergence of whiteness as property and trace[s] the

evolution of whiteness from color to race to status as property as a progression historically rooted in white supremacy and economic hegemony over Black and Native American peoples" (Harris 1993, 1714). Echoing back to language from the *Dred Scott v. Sandford* case, Harris discusses the linkage between African Americans and Native Americans in a nation that has historically hyper-valued whiteness:

> Slavery linked the privilege of whites to the subordination of Blacks through a legal regime that attempted the conversion of Blacks into objects of property. […] Possession—the act necessary to lay the basis for rights in property—was defined to include only the cultural practices of whites. This definition laid the foundation for the idea that whiteness—that which whites alone possess—is valuable and is property. (Harris 1993, 1721)

Further, Harris addresses the legacy of whiteness and the hereditary privilege bound in it. She explains how whiteness as a concept was desperately protected because so much depended upon it; whiteness and citizenship were bound tightly together and the value further increased because it was "denied to others" (Harris 1993, 1744). As she explains, "Indeed, just as whiteness as property embraced the right to exclude, whiteness as a theoretical construct evolved for the very purpose of racial exclusion. Thus, the concept of whiteness is built on both exclusion and racial subjugation" (Harris 1993, 1737). The exclusivity and continued protection of whiteness remains a reality in twenty-first-century America today. Rankine wrestles with it as she works to turn the subject of her inquiry into what has created these systems of inequality—building upon Toni Morrison's call to investigate whiteness and the racial imagination.

Toni Morrison's acclaimed *Playing in the Dark: Whiteness and the Literary Imagination* clearly informs the work of Claudia Rankine's The Racial Imaginary Institute—where the very practice of the project seems to be an extension of Morrison's early injunction. Morrison explains that her "remarks should not be interpreted as simply an effort to move the gaze of African-American studies to a different site" (Morrison 1992, 8). As Morrison writes,

> I do not want to alter one hierarchy in order to institute another. It is true that I do not want to encourage those totalizing approaches to African-American scholarship which have no drive other than the exchange of dominations—dominant Eurocentric scholarship *replaced* by dominant

> Afro-centric scholarship. More interesting is what makes intellectual domination possible; how knowledge is transformed from invasion and conquest to revelation and choice; what ignites and informs the literary imagination, and what forces help establish the parameters of criticism. (Morrison 1992, 8; emphasis in the original)

She emphasizes that her "project is an effort to avert the critical gaze from the racial object to the racial subject; from the described and imagined to the describers and imaginers; from the serving to the served" (Morrison 1992, 90). Sara Ahmed provides another key voice in understanding whiteness. "A Phenomenology of Whiteness" begins with Ahmed posing the following questions: "If whiteness gains currency by being unnoticed, then what does it mean to notice whiteness? What does making the invisible marks of privilege more visible actually do?" (Ahmed 2007, 149).

These are the same questions Rankine's work explores. But, notably, Rankine's exploration is just that; she has an unwillingness to leave us with answers—for her, answers would close the conversation. So, instead, her work engages in cross-racial conversations in real life as documented in *Just Us* or via her created characters in *The White Card*. The understanding comes through listening—listening to the characters, their voices, hearing what they are really saying—as much as it does through speaking. And importantly, the *seeing* that emerges from shared conversations provides a space to hold the pain and unresolved histories. Taken as a whole, Rankine's art models the conversations she wants us to explore. Her work itself is in dialogue with history, contemporary intellectual and political movements, art works and exhibitions, and the list goes on. In other words, her art is in conversation with other forms of art—a macro example of what she encourages at the micro level, too.

While Rankine's work as a poet has received much attention, her work with alternative genres, namely, drama, has received less focus even as it has allowed her to imagine dialogue—akin to the conversations she has witnessed, or been a part of—and then share these exchanges in a different form. Her play *The White Card* was first performed in 2018, and later published in 2019. By naming her play *The White Card*, Rankine already subverts our ways of thinking about race. The title makes reference to a derogatory phrase we are familiar with, as someone 'playing the race card' or the 'diversity card.' What if the 'race card' is the 'white card'? Whiteness thereby becomes the space of exploration.

Using the subtleties of conversation, the setting of a dinner party, and discussions of art itself, Rankine's characters confront difficult topics about race and privilege, and we witness their bigotries even as we see their humanity more fully through the lens Rankine provides. From praise, anger, sympathy, rage, exactness—we feel deep-seated emotions arise in these discussions of race and its relationship to power. Through Rankine's play, as part of a larger conversation she has extended, we layer our understanding of whiteness and become closer to confronting a key problem of 'Trump's America'—an embedded problem of which he is merely a symptom, even if a chief agitator too.

The White Card arose from Rankine's desire to answer a question she has received over and over again—one that is repetitively asked of other Black writers and activists too from "well-meaning white people": "What can I do for you? How can I help you?" (Rankine 2019, vii).[2] For Rankine, the larger answer to this question is complex, multi-layered, peppered with various theories and histories to more fully explain her critical response, yet she also answers these questions very simply and personally by saying to a white man who asked this question of her: "I think the question you should be asking is what *you* could do for *you*" (*TWC*, viii; emphasis in the original). The man then replies to her: "If that is how you answer questions, then no one will ask you anything" (*TWC*, viii). From this exchange, *The White Card* came to life. As Rankine says, her

> terminal thought, the originating impulse of *The White Card* came out of this man's question and his response to my response. In his imagination, Where did I go wrong? Was I initially intended to express gratitude for his interest? Were his feelings and the feelings of the audience in general my first priority? (*TWC*, viii)

She further explains that "it occurred to me after this incident that an audience member might read all the relevant books on racism, see all the documentaries and films, and know the 'correct' phrases to mention, but in the moment of dialogue or confrontation retreat into a space of defensiveness, anger, silence, which is to say he might retreat into the comfort or control, which begins by putting me back in my imagined place" (*TWC*, viii–ix). She posits, "perhaps any discussion of racism does not begin from

[2] Henceforth, all parenthetical references to *The White Card* (2019) are abbreviated as *TWC*.

a position of equality for those involved. Maybe the expectation is for the performance of something I as a black woman cannot see even as I object to its presence. Perhaps the only way to explore this known and yet invisible dynamic is to get into a room and act it out" (*TWC*, ix).

The artist allows us into her creative process, as she shares the importance of theater as an experimental place, one of "encounter," where she can create a dinner party for strangers, and then "test an imagined conversation regarding race and racism" (*TWC*, ix). Rankine explains that "the home of a white family seemed the benevolent, natural, if not exactly neutral, site" (*TWC*, ix). While the strangers come together over one artist's work to discuss an exchange, ultimately "what keeps them there is the complexity of our human desire to be understood" (*TWC*, ix).

The two-scene play has five characters: Charlotte Cummings, a black female artist who graduated from Yale's MFA program who, now in her forties, is a celebrated award-winning artist known for her photography. Eric Schmidt is a white male art dealer who is also in his early forties and is the founder of "one of the most prestigious art galleries in New York" (*TWC*, 3). He is "a connoisseur of modern conceptual art and a strong advocate of young progressive artists. He has been instrumental in shaping the Spencer Art Collection for the past decade" and serves on their board (*TWC*, 3). The other three characters are members of the Spencer family: Charles Spencer is the patriarch, a white male entrepreneur, who is in his early sixties and "a lover of contemporary art who made his money in real estate. He is also a well-respected philanthropist who is interested in ideas around diversity" (*TWC*, 3). His wife, Virginia Spencer, is a white female in her mid to late fifties, who was previously an "art consultant for corporate clients" (*TWC*, 3). Their marriage spans thirty years and they have two sons. One of these sons, Alex Spencer, also joins the dinner party. He is twenty years old, a white male "junior at Columbia University, and an activist. Deeply involved in current American politics, he is passionate as he sees the injustices in America. He sees his parents as part of the problem" (*TWC*, 3).

Following these characterizations, the print text of *The White Card* incorporates four different works of art, paintings, and images related to race, black bodies, and also violence against them: Robert Rauschenberg's *White Painting*, Robert Longo's *Untitled (Ferguson Police, August 13, 2014)*, Glenn Ligon's *Hands*, and Jean-Michel Basquiat's *The Death of Michael Stewart*. As with other texts by Rankine, the images offer their own tale—they in themselves hold weight, history—and yet, when placed

inside her text, offer a conversation between art and artist—layering her creation with theirs. They too become in conversation, having a complex dialogue that her play's dinner party interrogates.

On Whiteness

The White Card is set in New York City's Tribeca in March 2017 and insists on a clear referentiality to time and place. The notes state that "the new [Trump] administration has been in office for three months," and the space is meticulously described:

> The living/dining room is a tastefully elegant and spare NYC loft. In the room is contemporary work by artists representing the victimization of African Americans and Rauschenberg's *White Painting*. They are well lit and prominent in the space. The art pieces are projected on canvasses around the white room. Everything in the room is white except for the art. (*TWC*, 15)

Here the intertextuality of her own work in conversation with other theorists and historians comes to the forefront, as well as the continuity of themes within her work, as Rankine explores the many forms of whiteness, not just human bodies, but also the perception of whiteness as a color and how it is used to define a space, how it affects our seeing and interpretations of art, and how this construction has occurred around racial lines. *Citizen* enters into this conversation, where her use of white space pervades the text—spotlighting the black font and images throughout the text—at times black font fading from grey to white, as blackness fades to invisibility on the stark white page. Zora Neale Hurston's words are brought into *Citizen* too via Glenn Ligon's painting *Untitled (I Do Not Always Feel Colored)*. Ligon borrows Hurston's words that begin in standard font, only to become more smudged and blackened further down the page, with the left page repetitiously stating, "I DO NOT ALWAYS FEEL COLORED" and the right responding, "I FEEL MOST COLORED WHEN I AM THROWN AGAINST A SHARP WHITE BACKGROUND" (Rankine 2014, 53). This thread continues in *The White Card*, where her sole black character, Charlotte, enters the white space of the play, and is 'thrown against' it and transformed by it—the character's art (and by extension Rankine's art) morphs into something new that has the potential to bring about cross-racial understanding.

Rankine continues to reflect on the color white in *Just Us*, when reflecting on the history of the use of the 'white cube' and whiteness in art installations as the color of choice against which to view art. The text is constructed with the narrative of the work on one page and notes about the text on the verso page. One can open the book to any section and find an entry point. Likewise, the notes and quotations on the verso pages offer a narrative interwoven with the recto pages—in other words 'a conversation' between texts. In the section "sound and fury" (evoking William Faulkner), Rankine writes: "White portraits on white walls signal ownership of all, even as white walls white in" (Rankine, *JU*, 179). The verso page provides the following notes, with Rankine quoting Abigail Cain's "How the White Cube Came to Dominate the Art World":

> But it wasn't until the Third Reich took hold of the country during the 1930s that white became *the* standardized color for German gallery walls. "In England and France white only becomes the dominant wall colour in museums after the Second World War, so one is almost tempted to speak of the white cube as a Nazi invention," [Charlotte] Klonk said. "At the same time, the Nazis also mobilized the traditional connotation of white as a colour of purity, but this played no role when the flexible white exhibition container became the default mode for displaying art in the museum." (*JU*, 178)

Associating whiteness as a "standardized color" for gallery walls because it connotes "purity" offers up yet another way of visibly showing white ownership of property and space. Digging deeper into this trope, Rankine quotes from Elena Filipovic's work, "The Global White Cube": "Particular to the white cube is that it operates under the pretense that its seeming invisibility allows the artwork best to speak; it seems blank, innocent, unspecific, insignificant. Ultimately, what makes a white cube a white cube is that, in our experience of it, ideology and form meet, and all without our noticing it" (*JU*, 178). It is this pretense of *invisibility* that Rankine so thoroughly explores—where "ideology and form meet" yet *unnoticed*.

On Blackness

Paradoxically, and translating this into culture, while white is neutral and the default position, the white imagination often does not see the black body, but rather associates it with invisibility. Even Ralph Ellison's canonical novel *Invisible Man* (1952) explores the invisibility of black bodies in a white dominated world. But Toni Morrison is quick to point out, "invisible to whom?" (in Greenfield-Sanders 2020). This question spoken with only three words holds assumptions about the reader, the audience, and questions of visibility. Rankine transposes the very idea of invisibility—arguing whiteness itself is fraught with "seeming invisibility"—echoing Ahmed's argument that "Whiteness is only invisible for those who inhabit it, or those who get so used to its inhabitance that they learned not to see it even when they are not it" (Ahmed 2007, 157). In other words, whiteness *is* highly visible for those who are not white—and taking up this position, of seeing from another's perspective via art or cross-racial conversations can expose the *unseen* reality and how it perpetuates white privilege, and by extension, structural racism.

Rankine's contextualization provides an understanding of the 'white cube' in the art world, even as she creates her own white cube in *The White Card*, the setting of which is an entirely white space against which to see all of the work by black artists that Charles Spencer has collected—work he *owns*. The opening image by Rauschenberg is an image of white-whiteness on display against a grainy walled background. An inversion of the white walls just discussed. Instead of the white walls being the holder of the art—so the art can be subject—here whiteness itself becomes the subject—the thing to be interrogated in Rankine's play. Her own created world inside the play, as well as the literal world we experience as readers and viewers, is calling on us to reimagine ways of seeing whiteness—perhaps rather simple, but profound in its simplicity. She is urging us to actually *see* whiteness—what it represents, what it means, and make its history and privilege *visible*. The question then becomes, how is *The White Card* displaying black art—her art—against whiteness or in a cross-racial conversation with it? How is this art a representation of the world? Or a world the artist would like to create or imagine?

The opening scene of *The White Card* begins with introductions and exchanges of pleasantries, yet as the night progresses, it becomes clear that so many performances are at work—so many playing a part. Early on in the first scene, Eric (the art dealer) tells Charles that Charlotte is not just

looking for someone to purchase her art—but that she must also know the character of the one who will come to hold her collection. She will not merely sell it to the highest bidder. Eric tells Charles, "Some artists can't separate themselves from their work. I think she's one of those. She doesn't have children; the work is everything to her—so she won't sell it to just anybody. She needs the collector to be invested in the spirit of the work. She needs money, yeah, but it can be tricky with her" (Rankine, *TWC*, 18). And Charles wants her work so badly; he is trying to put his best self forward. He does seem well-intentioned. As a liberal white man, part of the upper-class in New York City, he cares about racism and acts of injustice against African Americans but, meanwhile, he has some business dealings that he would rather not speak of—namely, prison projects that he has dealt with via his real estate investments, and more deeply personal matters, like the imprisonment of his own son. In addition, his wife Virginia has given their black housekeeper the evening off, so the optics of the evening do not spotlight the family having a black servant. And their son, Alex, arrives full of pent-up frustration with his parents, with little regard for what his parents' intentions are for the night. In a quest to learn who this family is and what they are about, Charlotte has her hands full, as she tries repeatedly throughout the evening to interject her ideas—have a voice. Even though she is the one they are all attempting to woo, time and again she is treated as the 'outsider.'

The conversation of the early part of the evening is about black artists, writers, theorists—oscillating between talks of Ta-Nehisi Coates's work to the athleticism of Serena Williams, then they move into discussions of the Obama administration, political movements, including Black Lives Matter, and Alex's participation in protests against Trump (which Charles keeps mistakenly referring to as rallies). Alex sees his role as educating his parents on white privilege, and part of that is through his activism.

On Naming

When the night turns to a discussion of Charlotte's latest work, she says: "I'm staging the aftermath of the Charleston crime shootings. I'm thinking more about how art can provoke connection and recognition by reenacting moments of violence that are lost to history entirely" (*TWC*, 35). Her work is about staging particular moments of injustice, small moments like a girl being pushed down on a platform as a white man 'not seeing her' rushes past and knocks her off her feet. Charlotte's latest work will

focus on the Charleston crime scene—images of which have not been made public. Naming here cannot go unnoticed—these place names scream loudly and are physical places of racial violence. 'Charles' as the lead male, white character of the play is at the root of the place name 'Charleston,' the site of the shooting at the Emanuel African Methodist Episcopal Church in 2015. The name is also rooted in colonialism as it was originally named 'Charles Towne' after the British monarch, Charles II (Encyclopædia Britannica, "Charleston" 2020). Charles is married to 'Virginia,' yet another place marker of a state with a legacy of colonization, a bedrock of the nation, and a historical place of white violence against black bodies. 'Virginia' also presents a moment of intertextuality—crossing with *Just Us* and the section entitled "notes on the state of whiteness" that follows with pictorial images of "Notes on the State of Virginia" from 1781. 'Charlotte,' too, is of import, calling to mind 'Charlottesville, Virginia,' the site of the "Unite the Right" rally in 2018, and also Queen Charlotte of England, whose race has been debated among historians as to whether or not she was the first queen with black ancestry (Brown 2017). Framing the conversation about her work, Charlotte tells them that "I like to think of myself as a bit of an archaeologist. I've always been interested in what gets lost … who gets left out of the picture" (*TWC*, 27). Virginia inquires what she means by "Lost?," and Charlotte responds, "Made invisible. The writer Teju Cole says, 'We need to think with our eyes'" (*TWC*, 27). Charlotte's art is attempting to make visible that which is "left out of the picture" (*TWC*, 27), yet even through her best efforts, it remains invisible to the Spencers. Her realization of this will later lead her art in a new direction to make the invisible seen.

Charles's blind spot is that he cannot see himself as part of the system of institutionalized racism—and his blindness is key to the play's message. He shares with the group that "I don't support this idea that all white people are a part of what's wrong in this country. Some of us are working very hard to make all our lives better. You can go as far back as President Johnson's role in the Civil Rights Act. There's Obama's presidency. We need to look at the way the system works" (*TWC*, 46–47). His son Alex is quick to point out that his father is part of the problem: "See, Dad, you're forgetting some of the facts. The reason you can support Charlotte's work comes in part from the private prisons you construct" (*TWC*, 47). Charles defends himself, pointing out he builds schools and hospitals too, but his prison contracts are clearly something he would have preferred remain hidden. Charlotte asks, "How can you reconcile yourself to a system that

has targeted minorities for profit? How do you make peace with that?" (*TWC*, 47).

Charles can *support* Charlotte and purchase her work because his wealth is built upon an incarceration system; his foundation is literally and metaphorically rotten. This conversational thread continues as Charles shares that "boardroom decisions are always colorblind. We don't get distracted. If this administration's base is solidly white men spewing racist rhetoric, it's not us" (*TWC*, 49); however, earlier in the evening he shares with Eric that he would love to get Charlotte on his Foundation's board—she would be both a welcomed voice and solve their "diversity problem" (*TWC*, 49), as if the mere presence of a black person meant she would be listened to. Charles sees himself as well-meaning and part of the fight for justice, especially for African-Americans, yet the very company that he leads is part of the structural and systemic problems that are at the root of America's problem. Charles's blind spot means he does not see his role in the perpetuation of white privilege. In an attempt to show his part in the larger system, Charlotte asks, "So in the boardroom, whites promoting and supporting themselves economically isn't racism and building private prisons is helping whom?" (*TWC*, 49).

Virginia, on the other hand, has her own blind spot. She has such pride in her son Alex and his activism—that she praises and overshares Alex's efforts ad nauseam with the dinner party. She says, "I think emphasizing our differences gets, well, in the way. When Alex joined Black Lives Matter some of the members objected because he was white. Alex went thinking and hoping he could be part of a helpful solution. Isn't that right, sweetheart?" (*TWC*, 38). When Alex replies that he can "understand why they were suspicious," Virginia cannot let it go (*TWC*, 39). She interjects, "A student leader got up and said lots of you think you're here helping the cause, but what you're doing is just going to make you feel better and help you sleep at night. Alex said someone even said, they need allies not masters. He was judged for just showing up. What's wrong with helping and feeling good about that?" (*TWC*, 39). Charlotte says it "Sounds … like someone was expressing anxiety about white benevolence. I doubt it was about Alex specifically" (*TWC*, 39). But Virginia does not pause or take a moment to consider Charlotte's response before diving in again—she has made the whole account about her son personal, the rejection of his 'help' and kindness. Trying to salvage the conversation in some way, Eric steps in and says, "It does seem wrongheaded. How do they expect to get allies if they alienate the very people who have come to help?" Charles suggests

that "Perhaps anyone who would be alienated by such comments is not a very useful ally" (*TWC*, 40), and he then looks at Charlotte—clearly trying to capture a moment with her—to prove his 'understanding' of the complexities and hoping for her approval. Charlotte responds that "the black students were likely responding to a long history of white savior rhetoric" (*TWC*, 40)—and the conversation continues to circle around—in and out and back again, making no progress, but just folding continually in upon itself.

Virginia then shares that she sent a picture of Alex being arrested on their family Christmas card, which Alex quickly tells Charlotte was "wrong on so many levels" (*TWC*, 42), but Virginia defends her position and says she is very proud of her son's work and wants to share what he is doing. This only infuriates Alex more, who is quick to respond that his work "isn't about individual action. It's about working in solidarity against white supremacy" (*TWC*, 42). He "realizes the ways in which [his] whiteness protects [him] and that whiteness is tied to the beliefs of white supremacy" (*TWC*, 42). Trying to explain again (and be seen again), Charlotte shares that "I don't think white people identify themselves as white Americans. They think their perspective is objective. They don't realize they're always invested in the advancement of white people. … Whiteness is propped up at every turn. It's its own legacy program" (*TWC*, 42–43). Throughout these exchanges, Rankine is providing us with ways to critique so many common responses on the topic of race—these characters are not alien to us, we know them, we are them, and their messages are not new. We have dinner with them and engage in some of these conversations ourselves.

Scene One reaches its climax when Charles walks Charlotte through his collection of art, namely, pieces that call attention to the violence inflicted on black bodies. Once again trying to develop a kinship with Charlotte, he tells her "if I collect your dead, they'll never be buried. You can be certain of that" (*TWC*, 55). In surprise, she retorts, "my dead? Tell me, how is that about my work?," and Charles replies: "this entire evening, my dear, is about your work" (*TWC*, 55). To help her understand, he moves to unveil his most recent acquisition—a sculpture he is particularly proud of sharing with his son because of his son's work with Black Lives Matter. As Charles removes the sheet covering the artwork, he proudly displays the piece called *An Anatomy of a Death*. Horrified, Alex asks, "Is that an autopsy report?" (*TWC*, 55). And Virginia replies excitedly, "It's Michael Brown's autopsy report!" (*TWC*, 56). Alex is so perplexed, the very idea

of them trying to 'own Michael Brown' is completely disconcerting to him—but they do not understand him and his position. He feels *unseen*. Meanwhile, Charlotte says to herself "Michael Brown?," as a question. To try to clear matters up, Charles explains it is not really Michael Brown, but "a photograph of a diagram. That diagram documents the violence inflicted on a black man" (*TWC*, 56). Turning to Charlotte he says, "Isn't this the purpose of art—your art—to make the invisible visible?" (*TWC*, 56). Charlotte is flabbergasted—questioning why they would purchase this work, if it makes them feel sick and shows such unnecessary violence. Charlotte responds to Charles, saying: "Michael Brown's body was on the street for hours. Isn't everything that happened to him visible? This (gestures toward the piece) is not revealing anything we haven't seen" (*TWC*, 56). Charles tries to explain that the work is a statement on the Ferguson police department and systemic harassment and racism that had been happening in that community for years. Charles sees the piece as a portrait of the police officer responsible. Charlotte finds the discussions futile, realizing they are getting nowhere with this "kind of American sentimentality" (*TWC*, 57). She says to them, "Feeling bad by looking at black lines enclosing a white space doesn't come close to experiencing the dread of knowing you could be killed for simply being black. … Any police report of my death would erase me as much as this autopsy report erases Michael Brown" (*TWC*, 58). Charles tries explaining to Charlotte that he wants her work to join his collection because "the other pieces [he] collects aestheticize black experience" (*TWC*, 59). Here, Charlotte recognizes even her art is being misinterpreted. She is not making the invisible seen. She says, "If you think what I'm doing is no different than this then I fail" (*TWC*, 59). The dialogue once more becomes a swirl of voices and family arguments as Charlotte is completely ignored.

Throughout the evening the dialogue between various white characters has said more about themselves and their relationship to each other and to their race, their whiteness, than about Charlotte. Their critiques and dialogue revolve around her, but she is a token thing to instigate their patterns—someone they circle around as one might an object—a body of art. As the scene ends, she lies down and fills in the black taped body, perhaps attempting to humanize or bring humanity to this taped-off space that only allows one to see death, rather than the life lived and taken. Yet even then, it takes time for the other characters to realize where she has gone. She is "then erased, as she quite literally becomes the Michael Brown autopsy report" (Larks and Santana 2019). Charlotte, like the art they

collect, is interchangeable—she is something for Charles to collect, and for Alex, someone to save. None of them *sees* her, even as the night is supposedly created for her, to impress her and to win her over. A point that is driven home even more explicitly when we discover in the next scene that Charles fails to recognize Charlotte at a museum the following year. Her metaphoric death here at the end of Scene One, gives rise to a different voice, and a new artistry in Scene Two.

While Charles is a collector of art, "black death" as Charlotte refers to it, she collects cameras—the technology used to create art and objectify the subject. When Charles arrives at her studio at the beginning of the second scene, her collection is one of the first things he notices. He nods to one camera that she tells him was "from Berlin, 1936" (*TWC*, 74). Rankine takes us through another art history lesson—whereas earlier the white cube was the focus, here she shows how even an object, a camera, can lead to another story—another history—that itself is layered with racism, the continued legacy of white supremacy, and the struggle for freedom. Charles says to her, "You know Ernst Leitz, who manufactured the Leica, helped get Jews out of Nazi Germany?" Aware of this history, Charlotte replies, "Yes, the Leica Freedom Train" (*TWC*, 74). Charles further explains, "Postwar, the Allies blew up photos of the emancipated Jews and the dead-bodies in the camps and forced the Germans to look at them to combat anti-Semitism" (*TWC*, 74). The artist once more offers up an alternative way of seeing. Charlotte asks Charles, "Did it ever occur to you it could have the opposite effect? All those bodies could have fed their anti-Semitism" (*TWC*, 74). Charles thinks art (particularly the art he collects) can help stop racism, but Charlotte is not convinced. In fact, because of her meeting with the Spencers, she wonders if it *is* having the opposite effect. Like the various images of black bodies that Americans see almost daily through social media and news outlets, the subject has time and again been the black body—the lynched black body, the black body incarcerated, the murdered black body, the black body bullet-riddled or billy-clubbed by the police. Images of black men in headlocks, knees on their necks. Countless images. But what of the image of the person inflicting the violence on these bodies? Where are the images that make us *see* the cause of this violence and work to eradicate it? Charlotte's new work (like Rankine's work) forces Charles (and us) to look at whiteness renewed.

Scene Two takes place one year later, and we learn Charlotte never sold her work to Charles when he visits her studio. They begin discussing the

dinner party and Charlotte tells Charles she could not stop thinking about his analysis of her work. She says,

> I kept wondering about your desire to collect black death … I had this image of my work being held as in the hold of a ship. All that art just packed in like the dead and dying bodies themselves. … I don't mean to suggest you shouldn't celebrate the work of black artists. It's the emphasis on black death that I needed to question for myself. What does it mean to portray black suffering as art? (*TWC*, 74)

She then tells Charles, "Just looking at the Charleston crime scene, I realized what I wasn't seeing. … You" (*TWC*, 74). The overt metaphor alludes to the Atlantic Slave Trade and the many slave ships that brought black bodies to the Americas against their will—her art like these black bodies that would become enslaved—reduced to a commodity in Charles's hands, focused on those bodies instead of on those who own them. For Charlotte, her art had to move away from black death and suffering, so her work took a detour. She tells Charles, "blackness can't be reduced to suffering, if that means you lose the context and the history of how we got here" (*TWC*, 82). When she ran into Charles at the Lynette Yiadom-Boakye opening at the New Museum, he failed to recognize her and it caused her to begin seeing differently. She says, "I felt like the artwork you collected. I was like an object you could be interested in or not depending on the day" (*TWC*, 84). She explains she had been "making objects of people to give to" him, but now *he* has become the subject. She followed him and Virginia to various events—captured them with her camera—and her latest work on white skin, called *Exhibit C*, came to life. She further explains to Charles, "all your attention to black suffering allows you not to look at your own whiteness. … All your attention to your whiteness didn't allow you to see the approaching white nationalists now in the White House. … This administration didn't beam down into our democracy. It's an amplification of what's always been there" (*TWC*, 79). While Rankine's play was written prior to the riot at the Capitol, it is clear-eyed (and thus prescient) about what America keeps burying and refusing to look at. Charlotte tells Charles, "your imagination, like mine, like everyone's, is a racial imagination, except you don't really think of yourself as having a race and being shaped by the beliefs of that race" (*TWC*, 78). Her encounters with the Spencers allowed her to realize that her artistic approach was not being received with the intended message and needed to be

reimagined. In her realization, she had to show Charles what he was not seeing—himself—a subject Rankine takes up further in *Just Us.*

Charles's first reaction is anger because he feels that "Charlotte is lumping him and all white men together. […] What Charlotte does is explain, by way of example, that making Charles Spencer the subject of a piece of art work (*Exhibit C*) reduces him in the way that the subjects of artwork in his collection were reduced" (Larks and Santana 2019). As their strained dialogue continues, Charles begins to grasp her perspective—he begins to *see* differently. He sees his skin as if for the first time. He looks at his body, his skin, and says, "It's just skin and yet I know its power too," and Charlotte adds, "Dehumanizing power" (*TWC*, 88). This moment in conversation—Charles recognizes the power implicit in his flesh and Charlotte adding to the dialogue labels it too. Charles, seemingly in a world of his own, begins to examine his skin, asking "How many cells is it? How porous is it? … Where is it the darkest?" (*TWC*, 88). He then starts to remove his shirt and exclaims, "All my skin is holding me together. Good lord, all this skin shields me. It protects me from … from being you. It's like the badge of the police" (*TWC*, 88). Here begins a powerful visual exchange—he willingly offers himself as the subject for Charlotte to photograph. He "turns his back to her" and says, "you can shoot me now"—a power-charged phrase evoking so much history through its double meaning (*TWC*, 88). The play then draws to a close.

The ending is puzzling and ripe for multiple interpretations. Charles does begin to understand the dynamics of the racial imaginary, but in *allowing* Charlotte to shoot him, by giving her permission, he still is inside his worldview, where as a white man of privilege he gets to make these decisions. Yet, his whiteness is indeed made visible to him. Charlotte's exhibition, *Exhibit C*, was created via her own agency and without Charles's permission. She was merely free to create, yet the focus was on his race, his inescapable whiteness. They are inextricably bound to one another in the American racial juggernaut. The note that closes the play reads: "Charlotte ties her smock around her waist and, taking off her shoes, steps onto a crate, binding her hands with her scarf. She stares at Charles's back. Charles turns around. His horror and confusion are apparent. There is the click and flash of a camera" (*TWC*, 89). The play ends without a conventional, tightly knit conclusion, but rather in a space where a deeper, different conversation might evolve.

Like her other works, this ending is a both/and, leaving us with more questions than it has answered. Rankine has entered our imagination via

her art and now how do *we* imagine what comes next? Where does the conversation go from here interpersonally and nationally? Even as Charles sees his flesh and recognizes his whiteness, this is not an ending suggesting all has changed, but instead a moment of recognition that necessitates continued active work. The play itself ends in a space of ongoing conversation. Readers and viewers are left needing to talk about what we have witnessed, to sort how to extend Rankine's inquiries. Throughout the play we have stepped into different perspectives, learned so much about historical and contemporary movements, black art, politics and perspective, as well as the trappings of so much contemporary focus on 'empathy' and 'white fragility.' We have seen ourselves, our families, our friends, and colleagues in these various characters. The stage notes ask that the audience be seated around the stage, as if around a dinner table themselves, so they can see other audience members while the play is unfolding—witness the reaction of others to the different scenes and conversations. Here, too, is yet another level of connection and dialogue happening between artist, stage, characters, and audience—forcing the audience to close read this public performance, even as their private selves become part of the stage. The space between fiction and real is blurred—the audience becomes members of this dinner conversation too. In *Just Us*, Rankine beautifully writes of a future that is yet to be imagined:

> Our lives could enact a love of close readings of who we each are, the love of a newly formed, newly conceived 'one' made up of obscure but sensed and unnamed publics in a yet unimagined future. What I know is that an inchoate desire for a future other than the one that seems to be forming our days brings me to a seat around any table to lean forward, to hear, to respond, to await response from any other. (*JU*, 335)

This is her call to action for herself and for *us*—to have an "American Conversation."

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PART II

Alternative Histories of ‘America’

CHAPTER 5

Alternative Facts, Alternative Genres: Jennifer Egan's *Manhattan Beach*

Martha Jane Nadell

One of the reasons why I think it was possible to write the book is that a lot of what Trump represents and unleashed was there anyway, if you were looking properly, and would not have been destroyed by his defeat. Once you take the cork out of the bottle, things fly out.
—Salman Rushdie (in Brockes 2017)

The contemporary compels us to think, above all, about the politics of how we think about the present.
—Theodore Martin (2017, 5)

Never part with a fact unless you've no choice.
—Jennifer Egan (2017, 6)

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Abstract This chapter argues that contemporary writers of literary fiction have turned to genre in the decades-long lead-up to the Trump presidency and throughout it, offering diagnoses and remedy for contemporary political, cultural, and social concerns and crises. It focuses on Jennifer Egan's 2017 hybrid historical fiction / gangster novel / adventure tale *Manhattan Beach* which, on the surface, looks backwards to a moment of national fluidity but, as historical novels always do, firmly engages with the present of its writing and publication. Egan's novel, long-in-the-making and completed before Trump's presidency, functions as much as a post-9/11 novel as a 'Trump novel,' diagnosing the political, social, and cultural factors that enabled the rise of Trump to the national political scene. However, in working through and with genre fiction, it does not only engage in acute social, cultural, and political critique, but also reckons with the possibility that fiction may investigate the production of knowledge itself.

In a number of interviews, conducted on the occasion of the publication of his 2017 novel—one of the first 'Trump novels'—Salman Rushdie reflected on the presidency of Donald Trump: "It's an awful thing to say: that this thing that is very bad for America is very good for the novel" (Rushdie 2017). Trump, Rushdie clearly thought, would inspire great novels, for his election and presidency had all the necessary ingredients—division and conflict, political intrigue, social and political unrest, and outsize personalities. Rushdie was not alone in imagining the potential of the novels that would emerge from the watershed moment in 2016, cast by many as one of the darkest in US history, a sense that would provide, he argued, the necessary narrative—the "light-into-darkness trajectory" (Rushdie 2017).

Some disagreed with him. A literary agent, publishing in *Literary Hub* a survey of the many pitches he received during Trump's presidency, observed that "their imaginative scope narrowed, the subtext became text, and the stories started tying far more literally to the news cycle where they used to rely on implication" (Hane 2018). Writers seemed especially invested in post-apocalyptic accounts of the nation, suffering as they, and everyone else, were from "an inability to look away" from the ever-present news cycle, the proliferation of reporting not only about Trump's policies and controversies but also about Trump's tweets, comments, and actions (Hane 2018). Trump was, in other words, too present, too easy, too mercurial, and too surface a target.

Rushdie's own Trump novel, *The Golden House*, which Random House described as the author's "triumphant and exciting return to realism," was not a critical success as, we can imagine, Rushdie would have hoped.[1] Reviews of the novel were decidedly mixed; many recognized that its flaws stemmed from the challenges of publishing a 'Trump novel' so early on in his presidency. Others saw the challenge in writing about a public figure who was already a cultural cliché well before his presidency.[2] Alex Shephard, writing in *The New Republic*, offered an explanation of the challenges of writing Trump in the present: "Capturing this wildly absurd moment has proved difficult for novelists. The jokes are too obvious, having been made thousands of times already on Twitter and *The Daily Show*. The general thrust of these novels is the same: The president is a boor, his supporters are dumb, and together they might just kill us all" (Shephard 2020). Shephard, however, did point to one novel that, in his view, was an exception to the spate of ponderous 'Trump novels,' Carl Hiassen's satirical thriller *Squeeze Me*.

In 2018, Hiassen, a well-known and popular writer of genre fiction—specifically of satirical thrillers set in Florida—published *Squeeze Me*, a novel that is firmly and recognizably part of his oeuvre. Janet Maslin, writing in *The New York Times*, argued that "In its themes and its wild imagination, 'Squeeze Me' offers some familiar pleasures, akin to a Greatest Hits collection. Anyone who's read him will know what a prime recommendation that is" (Maslin 2020). Readers, in other words, knew exactly what to expect and were not disappointed. Another review, in *The Washington Post*, identified Hiassen's characteristic style—vulgarly humorous crime fiction set in the world of corrupt Florida real estate developers and local government—as particularly apt for the moment of a Trump presidency: "But by the evidence of the scabrous and unrelentingly hilarious 'Squeeze Me,' the Trump era is truly Carl Hiassen's moment" (Lipez 2020). Shephard also reminds us that Hiassen's signature style—that is, his novel's participation in a particular genre—was able to act successfully as a form of social and political critique: "In "dial[ing] up the absurdity to speculative extremes," the novel captures the Trump presidency and reminds its readers of the genuine social concerns that, as he writes, "lurk"

[1] See the publisher's description at http://www.randomhousebooks.com/books/558138/.

[2] These mixed views were expressed in mainstream outlets such as *Slate*, *The New York Times Review of Books*, *The Washington Post*, and *The New York Times*, among others.

not so far beneath the surface (Shephard 2020). Hiassen's novel, wrote Shephard, is "grounded in genuine outrage over the corruption that increasingly defines American political and cultural life," and exhibits a healthy fear of Trump's "ability to alter reality" (Shephard 2020).

These reviews tell us quite a bit about the relationship between contemporary novels and the Trump presidency, suggesting the potential work of representation and critique that genre fiction has been able to do in the Trump era, in contrast to more traditional forms of narrative. It is Hiassen's genre fiction rather than Rushdie's realism, it turns out, which has been able to capture the persona of the president/reality television star/real estate developer—so outsize in his words and actions that he is a caricature—as well as the violence and violations performed by him personally and those created by his administration's policies and actions. In positioning Hiassen's comic crime fiction, as opposed to Rushdie's realism, as a successful and acute critique of the Trump era, these reviews remind us of the deep potential of the genre novel to engage in social critique, even as, or better yet, because it works within and through the parameters of science fiction, crime novels, historical fiction, and other generic forms.

It is no accident, I argue in this chapter, that contemporary writers of literary fiction have turned to genre in the decades-long lead-up to the Trump presidency and throughout it, recognizing in genre fiction the ability to offer diagnoses and remedy for contemporary political, cultural, and social concerns and crises, in contradistinction to the prevalent variations of "program fiction," as Mark McGurl calls the fiction emerging from the recent proliferation of MFA programs (McGurl 2011).[3] However, not all genres and not all fiction engage in the project of diagnosis and remedy in the same way; as Tim Lanzendörfer reminds us in *The Poetics of Genre in the Contemporary Novel* (2017), it behooves the critic to explore precisely how particular genres function. Accordingly, I focus on a novel that engages with three genres in innovative ways, Jennifer Egan's 2017 historical fiction cum crime novel cum adventure tale *Manhattan Beach*, a narrative that looks backward but, as historical novels always do, firmly engages with the present of its writing and publication. Egan's novel, long-in-the-making and completed before Trump's presidency, functions as much as a post-9/11 novel as a 'Trump novel,' diagnosing the political, social, and cultural factors that enabled the rise of Trump to the national

[3] See Dorson (2017).

political scene. However, in working through and with genre fiction, it does not only engage in the acute social, cultural, and political critique Rushdie hoped would emerge from the "very bad thing," but also reckons with the possibility that fiction may investigate the production of knowledge itself.

The Turn to Genre

The turn to genre fiction in the twenty-first century is by now so well-known as to have become a cliché, as some critics have argued. Case in point: in May 2012, in his piece "Easy Writers," *The New Yorker* critic-at-large Arthur Krystal drew a line between genre fiction and literary fiction. "One was good for you," he wrote, "one simply tasted good" (Krystal 2012a). Krystal traced how thinking about this difference had been a constant throughout the twentieth century and even earlier, identifying those writers and critics alike who pitched genre fiction as a "guilty pleasure," as an escape from not only life but also from certain types of literary works, those that demanded work, sustained attention and thought from their readers (Krystal 2012a). Krystal was concerned about the turn to genre fiction in contemporary fiction, conceiving of it as disruptive to a long-established hierarchy of value: "the canon has been impeached, formerly neglected writers have been saluted, and the presumed superiority of one type of book over another no longer passes unquestioned" (Krystal 2012a). But he soon talked himself out of this worry. Genre fiction, as Krystal consoled himself, would never usurp the place and value of literary fiction. It would always remain inferior, in part because of the expectations of its readers for predictable and comforting prose and, in part, because of the constraints of plot and generic formulae.

A few days later, Lev Grossman, student of comparative literature and author of *The Magicians*—a novel characterized, as Krystal reminds us, as the "postadolescent Harry Potter" (Krystal 2012b)—published a rejoinder in *Time*. Although he agreed with Krystal that the turn to genre fiction among contemporary writers of literary fiction was notable, he soundly rejected many of Krystal's claims as cliched themselves. Genre fiction is not just about escapism, argued Grossman. Instead, it provides readers the opportunity to navigate their problems in new ways: "genre fiction isn't just generic pap. You don't read it to escape your problems, you read it to find a new way to come to terms with them" (Grossman 2012). In addition, Grossman claimed that Krystal's characterization of the poor quality

of writing in genre fiction was true only of "shitty" genre fiction. And, finally, Grossman found Krystal's insistence on the limitations of plot specious, for critics, he insisted, had not yet adequately interrogated the possibilities embedded in plot; scholars lack, he declared, the tools to do so, wedded as they are to "close-reading, for translating thick, worked prose into critical insights, sentence by sentence and quote by quote" (Grossman 2012).

Krystal and Grossman, along with a number of other writers, critics, and scholars are right; there has been a turn to genre fiction among contemporary American writers. But what that turn means, for writers, readers, and the publishing industry, remains up in the air for most of them. In his response to Grossman, Krystal argued that genre fiction is, at its most fundamental, commercial. Grossman, on the other hand, saw the opportunity in genre fiction, not just because of its ability to sell (though I am sure that would not bother him), but in the affordances it possesses, namely, plot, for writers of literary fiction, which has been constrained itself. As Grossman saw it, "Blue-chip literary writers—finding that after years of deprivation under the modernist regime their stores of plot devices are sadly depleted—have been frantically borrowing from genre fiction, which is where plot has been safely stockpiled for all these decades" (Grossman 2012).

Grossman, however, may be right in his assessment that critics have failed to take genre fiction seriously, that they have failed to develop a critical apparatus to interrogate it and to consider the potential work of critique and resistance that it may do. Consider a scholarly introduction to the historical novel that posits it as a commercial staple among genre fictions and also as an extraordinarily rich meditation on questions of reality and truth.[4] Jerome de Groot's useful survey, *The Historical Novel*, traces the development of the genre, as well as of scholarship about it. Focusing on some of the most well-known novels and critics, he reminds us that

> the historical novel […] is similar to other forms of novel-writing in that it shares a concern with realism, development of character, authenticity. Yet fundamentally it entails an engagement on the part of the reader (possibly unconsciously) with a set of tropes, setting and ideas that are particular, alien, and strange. (de Groot 2010, 4)

[4] As de Groot argues, science fiction is also a useful "cognate genre" to historical fiction (de Groot 2010, 4).

This sense, de Groot argues, makes the reader aware of the "artificiality of the writing and the strangeness of engaging with the imaginary work which tries to explain something that is other than one's contemporary knowledge and experience: the past" (de Groot 2010, 4).[5] Rather than define a narrow range of generic conventions, de Groot focuses on its many elements: its metafictional aspects, its engagement with authenticity and reinvention, its revelatory potential, all of which tell us that the genre itself is "complex, dissonant, multiple, and dynamic" rather than "clear-cut and innocuous" (de Groot 2010, 10).

De Groot, however, makes a seemingly firm distinction between literary historical fiction and genre fiction, "novels that are not generally judged literary and therefore are often unconsidered by critics" (de Groot 2010, 51). This set of works, he writes, "often tends to be extremely rigid in its underwriting of dominant cultural ideologies" (de Groot 2010, 51), raising questions about how the form engages with contemporary social, political, and cultural crises, trends, and anxieties. Does it challenge, resist, or complicate? De Groot answers this for what he calls the overlap between "historical novels and male-oriented crime fiction" (de Groot 2010, 85), which he identifies as a sub-genre. In works in this category, "the scholar-historian-detective investigates the intrusion of chaos into a site of order" (de Groot 2010, 86). "Literary fiction," which has taken what he calls "a historical turn," on the other hand, allows us to ask a set of questions about its relationship to the current day:

> …to what extent are historical texts inextricably grounded in the moment and site of their inception and publication? […] Why has middle-ranking literary fiction developed a fascination with history? What does it mean for a sub-genre to become 'mainstream'? Can we consider historical novels to be 'serious literary fiction'? (de Groot 2010, 96–97)

De Groot answers these questions, in part, by asserting that "these bourgeois novels," as he calls them,

> clearly demonstrate the influence of postmodern style and form. They take the tools of postmodern historiographic metafiction and make them main-

[5] De Groot explores the work of Sir Walter Scott and its antecedents, as well as Georg Lukács's seminal *The Historical Novel* (1955), together with more contemporary examples of fiction and scholarship.

> stream and popular […]. They sell well and are increasingly attended to within popular culture [and] contrast with the genre, pulp or 'low' fiction. (de Groot 2010, 100)

Maintaining the hierarchy insisted upon by Krystal, de Groot notes that they are engaged in "questioning the legitimacy of narrative and undermining authority" (de Groot 2010, 108).

Grossman, however, may also be wrong when he claims that scholars don't have the tools necessary to approach genre fiction, or simply outdated. Indeed, in recent years, a number of scholars have explored genre fiction and the turn to genre among writers of literary fiction in ways that undermine hierarchy and problematize generic taxonomies. Some have debated about differences between the recent turn to genre and postmodernism's earlier use of ironic or 'playful' use of genre.[6] Others have argued for continuities, rather than a break, between the work of the 1990s and that of the 2000s, calling the novels of that time "mind-bendingly plural" in their use of "formal experimentation" and "formal conservativism" (Greenwald Smith 2017, 3). They are, Rachel Greenwald Smith argues, informed by a "hybridizing impulse: the desire to bring together the accessibility of popular culture with the aesthetic significance and cultural capital of literary fiction" (Greenwald Smith 2017, 5). Andrew Hoberek puts it in a slightly different way; he offers the term "literary genre fiction" for these works, which pivot toward "the simultaneously nonrealistic and non-experimental work of genre fiction" (Hoberek 2017, 69). Hoberek reminds us that, alongside the two strains of twentieth-century US fiction—its modernist and post-modernist experimentation and its concurrent realism—genre fiction has always been present (Hoberek 2017, 69).

For his part, in his excellent edited collection *The Poetics of Genre in the Contemporary Novel*, Tim Lanzendörfer provides the necessary intervention in scholarship on genre fiction. Lanzendörfer recognizes, like many others, the ubiquity of the turn to genre and the increasing hybridity of contemporary literature, which he describes as "traditional realist form… with formal elements previously confined to the popular genres of science fiction, crime, and fantasy, among others" (Lanzendörfer 2016, 3). But Lanzendörfer takes this further, making a compelling claim that genre is, in fact, so central to the contemporary novel that it "may best be

[6] See Hoberek (2017).

understood not through the prevalent identitarian modes of reading, but rather through a deeper engagement with genre" (Lanzendörfer 2016, 4). This is a bold argument, and it is beyond the scope of this chapter.[7] However, regardless of the merits of Lanzendörfer's claim, it is clear that genre fiction plays a central role in contemporary literature and its attendant scholarship.

Lanzendörfer's introduction to *The Poetics of Genre* provides a methodological framework with which to investigate genre and genre fiction and to unpack the novel's relationship to contemporary culture, politics, and a range of social anxieties. For Lanzendörfer, "we can only understand the turn to genre, both its popular and more general sense, then, in the context of its contemporary moment, as a response to that moment and a reflection on it" (Lanzendörfer 2016, 5). As he writes,

> the novel's contemporary cultural, societal, and political engagements are best understood through a reflection on its specific engagement with genre. If we take the idea of genre as a technology and as a tool for cultural diagnosis seriously, we must also pay attention to the various forms in which an engagement with genre permits us to read contemporary literature differently, indeed perhaps better than other modes of reading. (Lanzendörfer 2016, 4)

Ultimately, Lanzendörfer insists, "if genre mediates between a social situation and a text, then to understand the valence of genre for the contemporary novel *in general* is but a step toward reading the contemporary novel and ultimately its sociopolitical contexts *through* its use of genres, rather than merely offering readings *of* its use of genres" (Lanzendörfer 2016, 5; emphasis in the original). What then, do we make of the moves through genre of recent 'literary genre fiction,' Jennifer Egan's *Manhattan Beach* (2017) specifically, and of the hybridity of this work? How can we

[7] Lanzendörfer's claim warrants, however, further exploration, as it claims genre as the primary means of an alternative organization of the contemporary critical analyses that emerge from identity and intersectional stances, and this has an impact on the organization of teaching. Of course, and as Toni Morrison showed in *Playing in the Dark* in 1992, questions of race and ethnicity are central to US literature and, if Lanzendörfer is right about the cultural diagnosis, then it is likely that the novels emerging in the near future, following the 'summer of reckoning' in 2020 after the murders of George Floyd, Breonna Taylor, and others and the widespread rise of Black Lives Matter protests, will offer fertile ground for examining the relationship between the turn to genre and genre mixing and questions of race, ethnicity, and gender, which, unfortunately, is beyond the scope of this essay.

unpack the relationship between the novel's multiple genres—historical novel, gangster fiction, and adventure tale—and the moment of its publication during the Trump presidency?

Manhattan Beach and the Performance of Genre

Reviews of Jennifer Egan's *Manhattan Beach* were extremely positive, but some raised concerns about what they thought were its flaws, emerging, in large part, of the fact that, as Ruth Franklin wrote in *The Atlantic*, "it's a historical novel—perhaps today's least fashionable form" (Franklin 2017).[8] Following the lauds about her experimentation in her 2010 novel *A Visit from the Goon Squad*, one reviewer commented that her work was overrun with details (Corrigan 2017).[9] Consider Franklin's statement:

> It is disappointing to find this wonderful language sometimes buried in that bugbear of the historical novel: a surfeit of research. We learn that boxed lunches for workers at the Navy Yard cost 40 cents, and we learn what they contain. We hear a bit too much period talk: "Say, this is delicious!," Anna says of her glass of champagne, to which her companion replies, "Isn't it grand?" And we get lines like these about Anna's mother's indifference to the war effort:
>
> It seemed to Anna that their mother spent her days listening to serials, *Guiding Light*, *Against the Storm*, and *Young Doctor Malone*… It was Anna who turned the radio to *The New York Times News Bulletin* at suppertime, eager for news of the U.S. landings in French North Africa.
>
> This feels less like a passage in a novel than an answer to an exam question about what people in Brooklyn listened to on the radio in 1942. (Franklin 2017)

Although the review by Franklin is on target about the novel's remarkable language, it misses the importance of the details that go into the world-building of the novel. In fact, the details, which may send a conscientious or at least a curious reader directly to Google, are part of Egan's

[8] It is striking to note that two years after these reviews, *The New York Times* published an article, entitled "Why Are We Living in the Golden Age of Historical Fiction?", which traced the history and appeal of the form.

[9] Corrigan of *NPR* also notes that "*Manhattan Beach* isn't flawless. Especially at the beginning, Egan strains to convince readers of the authenticity of her story and intrusively references too many brand names and period details: Ivory Flakes for washing, automats, the 40-cent boxed chicken lunches that Anna buys at the Navy Yard" (Corrigan 2017).

epistemological speculations about the nature of history, the problem of fact, and the impossibility of master narratives of the nation.[10] In rebuilding Brooklyn in 1942, as well as other places at other times and, significantly, in multiple genres, *Manhattan Beach* claims, on the one hand, authority and authenticity. We are reading and inhabiting a novel of a particular place and time. However, the novel's shifts in genre, sometimes in the course of a single paragraph, remind us of the subjectivity, partiality, and, hence, heuristic potential of novels. Deploying a propulsive plot, a set of characters, and several settings, all in flux across multiple, fluidly connected genres, the novel diagnoses a set of contemporary cultural anxieties that have emerged since 9/11 and that come to the fore even more in the time of Trumpism—anxieties about the proliferation of (mis- and dis-) information, the limits and dangers of social media in creating and disseminating knowledge, and the undermining of expertise and fact. But it also considers the contemporary novel's form, shape, and potential to engage with, simultaneously, epistemological and ontological questions.[11] Tempting as it is to read elements of the novel allegorically, for a one-to-one relationship between, for instance, plot points and the present day—a mechanism of critique about which scholars of postcritique are suspicious—it is through its travels through genre that the novel posits that fiction itself can engage in the project of interpretation.

Authority and Authenticity

Manhattan Beach revolves, primarily, around Anna Kerrigan, a young woman who becomes the first female diver at the Brooklyn Navy Yard during World War II. It opens, however, at an earlier moment, in the winter of 1934, with an account of the visit of Anna's father Eddie to the Manhattan Beach mansion of Dexter Styles, a gangster and nightclub owner, who is married to the daughter of a powerful and politically connected banker, Arthur Berrigan. Eddie, formerly a well-compensated stockbroker and later a 'bagman' for a syndicate boss on the New York

[10] See Bryan Waterman on the novel in the age of Google: "Riddled through with the Real: *Chronic City* Book Club, Day 1" (www.ahistoryofnewyork.com, 9 August 2011, https://ahistoryofnewyork.com/2011/08/riddled-through-with-the-real-chronic-city-book-club-day-1/).

[11] Note Corrigan's comment in this respect: "Like every good historical novel I've ever read, the storyline of this one is as hokey as hell and completely transporting. *Manhattan Beach* is ambitiously and deliciously plot-driven, and it boldly helps itself to a wide library of earlier New York stories" (Corrigan 2017).

docks, has brought the eleven-year-old Anna to make his case for employment as Dexter's eyes and ears in his many illegal enterprises.[12] Anna, fascinated by the water that will become the central trope of the novel, removes her shoes and socks and plunges them into the freezing water with a fierce determination admired by Dexter, an encounter that sets up the themes and actions of the remainder of the novel. The first section of the novel, then, provides the backstory for its two main parts, describing Eddie's financial difficulties after 1929 and his turn to illegal activities and the impact on his family: his wife, a former Zeigfield Follies dancer and later a stay-at-home mother caring for their disabled daughter Lydia, and Anna, around whom a large portion of the novel circulates.

Manhattan Beach builds its world throughout this first section of the novel, entitled "The Shore," as well as through its paratextual elements. As many a historical novel does, it maps and describes the time and place, through space (streets and neighborhoods, such as Ocean Parkway, Manhattan Beach, as well as stores, nightclubs, and hotels, such as the jeweler Black, Starr & Frost, and the Heigh-Ho Supper Club), things and food (Dexter's daughter's Flossie Flirt doll, coveted by Anna; Eddie's former 1928 Duesenberg Model J, the car he had to sell to the union for which he acts as a bagman; the charlotte russe, a whipcream and sponge cake confection that Anna deems too childish for her), cultural practices and artifacts (Ringolevio, the game young boys played outside of Eddie's apartment; the *Evening Journal*, the Hearst newspaper Eddie carries home), and public figures (Cardinal Hayes, a close friend of the a banker, whose daughter's wedding Eddie attends). The list could go on; there are countless examples of world-building details that serve not only to demarcate place and time but also insist on the historicity of the novel and attest to the research conducted by the author.

Egan also claims authority and authenticity for her world-building efforts through paratextual elements, an "obsession" for historical novels, as de Groot writes.[13] These include a historical map of the Navy Yard, reprinted in front and back covers of the book, as well as her extensive acknowledgment section, in which she thanks scholars, librarians, oral

[12] The novel usefully defines the term bagman: "'Bagman' meant exactly what it sounded like: the sap who ferried a sack containing something (money, of course, but it wasn't his business to know) between men who should not rightly associate" (Egan 2017, 28), suggesting that this is more important than the Googleable references.

[13] As de Groot notes, "Historical novels are obsessed with paratexts: footnotes, additions, acknowledgements, bibliographies, author information, maps" (de Groot 2010, 63).

historians, archivists, and others. All of these serve to remind us of the remarkable amount of research Egan conducted. However, the acknowledgments also tell us that she is an amateur historian and that her novel is not a work of history but a work of historical fiction; she mentions only a few books, as "a bibliography would be tranquilizing," and leaves out the footnotes that would enable her readers to track her references. This opening section, nonetheless, along with the entirety of Egan's acknowledgment section, which concludes the novel, frame the main body of the novel, as *Manhattan Beach* turns first to Anna's efforts to become the first female diver at the Brooklyn Navy Yard in World War II, then to solve Eddie's murder, when she becomes involved with Dexter Styles, and finally to Eddie's experiences working on a cargo ship and, subsequently, becoming shipwrecked.

There are some hints in the opening section, however, that *Manhattan Beach* may perform or move through other genres, exhibiting "intergeneric hybridity and flexibility" (de Groot 2010, 2). Consider the definition of Eddie's work as a bagman for a syndicate boss on New York City's docks:

> 'Bagman' means exactly what it sounded like: the sap who ferried a sack containing something (money, of course, but it wasn't his business to know) between men who should not rightly associate. The ideal bagman was unaffiliated with either side, neutral in dress and deportment, and able to rid these exchanges of the underhanded feeling they naturally had. Eddie Kerrigan was that man. (Egan 2017, 28)

In defining the term 'bagman,' the novel pins its storyline to a particular time but also reminds us that we are looking backward to that earlier time, that we are reading an historical novel; however, in using "sap" as part of that definition, the novel situates itself in the gangster novel, a subcategory of crime fiction. *Manhattan Beach* is acutely aware of these two genres, as well as of the adventure novel, which occupies the ending, an awareness demonstrated by the reading habits of its characters. Anna reads *Ellery Queen* novels and attends a showing of *The Glass Key*, while Eddie, as a child, listened to *The Arabian Nights*, *Treasure Island*, and *20,000 Leagues under the Sea*. Eddie, thus, isn't an "ideal bagman" only because he is ferrying money around; he is an ideal bagman because he is ferrying around the plot of *Manhattan Beach* to different genres. As one of the few "unaffiliated" or "neutral" characters, he is able to traverse through the novel's multiple genres. Other characters do as well, most

notably Anna (though Brianna, Eddie's sister and Anna's aunt, does as well), while Dexter, specifically, is unable to do so, failing in the attempt to move from the gangster novel to the historical novel. In its acute awareness of and movement through genres, *Manhattan Beach* diagnoses, as Lanzendörfer would have it, a number of contemporary social anxieties.

Consider the three genres that the novel performs. In building its world throughout the novel, not just in the opening section, *Manhattan Beach* encourages readers to inhabit the world of the novel, a world different, though related, to their own. Contemporary readers may be familiar with the locales of contemporary New York City, but note the difference between the contemporary and the past. Think, for example, of the Brooklyn Navy Yard of today, home to a variety of industries and small business of the creative economy, and of the 1940s,when it housed the enormous, monumental warships on which Anna works. De Groot is helpful here; as he remarks, the historical novel "enforces on the reader a set of historicised 'difference' (and there is a *frisson* in the excitement which this otherness provokes in the author), and as a mode which has an effect on the normative experience of the everyday and contemporary world" (de Groot 2010, 4). In other words, in depicting a different time and place, the novel engages in the process of defamiliarization of the contemporary.

The novel, however, also sends the reader to *film noir*—its spaces (the waterfront, nightclubs, roadhouses), its denizens (Mr. Q, the head of an organized crime syndicate, the syndicates' lower ranks, unpredictable criminals, rich married men and their mistresses, movie stars), clothing, drinks, music, games, weapons. Indeed, Anna feels, when she discards the coveralls she wears to work daily in the Navy Yard and enters a nightclub, that she is moving into a new story: "Descending the shallow flight of stairs into the nightclub felt clashingly unreal—as if she'd been thrust across an invisible barrier into a moving picture" (Egan 2017, 67). And readers too enter a new space, a new genre—the gangster novel, through these details and through the generic parameters laid out by Tristan Todorov in *The Typology of Detective Fiction* (1966): two stories, that of the crime—Eddie's disappearance in the nine years in between the jump from the first section of the novel ("The Shore") to the second section of the novel ("Shadow World")—and the investigation of the crime—Anna's efforts to figure out what happened to Eddie, after she realizes that Dexter was the man that she had met on Manhattan Beach with Eddie.

Following the resolution of the investigation (or at least what the reader thinks is the resolution of the investigation), the novel takes a sharp turn to a new genre. Although we think Anna has solved the crime, after diving with Dexter in the East River location where Eddie's body was dumped, weighted down with a heavy chain, she finds his pocket watch. Are we at the end of the novel? *Manhattan Beach* disrupts generic conventions by propelling readers beyond what would have been the end of a crime novel to the next genre, the adventure novel, which comprises Eddie's voyage and shipwreck on a cargo boat. With Houdini-like moves, Eddie, the generic bagman, wriggles free of his chains and of the gangster novel and inserts himself into an adventure novel, complete with ships, shipwrecks, and far-flung places. As with the other genres, *Manhattan Beach* establishes the adventure novel with details and structure, following the conventions mentioned by de Groot:

> These novels present a set of possible masculinities with a relatively conservative nationalistic narrative. Their models of heroism are largely straightforward, dutiful, resourceful, violent, and homosocial. They present a process of history in which the central character is repeatedly tested in some way before achieving some form of martial success. The books abound with detail, mainly military, martial and technical. (de Groot 2010, 79)

It is reasonable to argue, then, that *Manhattan Beach* is clear evidence of the turn to genre in literary fiction, but what does this have to do with literature in the age of Trump? I argue that this turn to genre, well-established at this point, coincides with the transition from the presidency of Barack Obama to that of Donald Trump, a transition accompanied by division, partisanship, and, among many other affects, disbelief; by the ever-increasing reliance on and power of social media for political communication and social commentary, by the embrace, in some quarters, of anti-expert, anti-historical, anti-fact stances, by the rise of Islamophobic, anti-LBGTQ+, racist, sexist, and xenophobic sentiment and government policies, as well as resistance to those sentiments and policies; and, finally by the blurring of the lines between entertainment and politics and the attack on democratic institutions.

Egan, however, when asked in an interview if she was relieved that she had completed the novel before Trump's election, commented:

> Oh my God, you said it. Friends who are working on books set in contemporary times are trying to figure out how to account for him; he has a way of sucking all the air out of the room. After the Inauguration, I found it almost impossible to work for a couple of weeks. All the existential problems that can crowd in on writers—questions like: what's the point?—seemed very crushing at that moment. (Egan in Cooke 2017)[14]

To consider *Manhattan Beach* a 'Trump novel,' *à la* Carl Haissen's work is, thus, a little tricky, as the latter is as clearly an allegory as it is crime fiction.[15] Indeed, Egan's use of many of the tropes of crime fiction make this critique even more pointed. In her depiction of Dexter Styles's criminal enterprise and relationship to his powerful banker father-in-law, Egan explicitly connects gangsterism to governance, linking "a shadow government, a shadow country" (Egan 2017, 92) to those at the height of political power. Dexter's father-in-law, Arthur Berrigan, is as much a gangster as he is, although he possesses the trappings of legitimacy, respectability, and status, or at least thinks he does. When Dexter's father-in-law speaks, we can immediately sense resonances between the novel's linking of the banking world with the gangsterism of Trump's presidency. Consider Cornel West's definition of gangsterism, deployed in his characterization of Trump as "a gangster in character and a neo-fascist in content": "To call somebody a gangster is not a subjective expression, it's an objective description of somebody who does not believe that there are constraints, does not believe there are boundaries, believes that they can use arbitrary power" (qtd. in Pluviose 2017). And we can also read Egan's centering of Anna's experience, not only at work but in her personal life, as commenting on gender roles; *Manhattan Beach* not only unpacks the past but it also takes as its subject female subjectivity and the politics of the private versus the public. The implications of exploring this difference means, following de Groot's analysis, that "these texts create a

[14] Reviewer Rachel Cooke writes, "The president is, however, having an effect on her reading: 'I'm reading Trollope now,' she says, almost confidingly. 'He's little read here, but he makes for a great juxtaposition with Trump because he is all about power and money. Every character is introduced along with their annual income: people literally have a price tag on their head.' Thanks to this, Trump may yet turn out to be a cog in the engine of her next novel—which Egan, the so-called postmodernist, is thinking about setting in the nineteenth century. That surely must tell us something about where we are right now."

[15] Consider Idra Novey's novel *Those Who Knew* (2018) or Helen Philips's *The Need* (2019), for example.

dissonant space in which various issues of legitimacy, authority and identity might be considered. The novels have a historiographical radicalism, 'giving femininity, which usually has a walk-on part in the official history of our times, the lead role in the national-drama' (Light 1989: 60)" (de Groot 2010, 68).[16] Indeed, Egan's work puts Anna squarely at the center of the "national drama" but in ways that defy generic conventions. It is useful here to refer to Hoberek's study of interiority in genre fiction, when he remarks that

> the very othering of genre fiction by twentieth-century literature allowed it to remain a preserve for the novelistic representation of things other than interiority, in effect creating an archive for contemporary writers interested in re-energizing fiction's commitment to the material and social world outside of the characters' heads. (Hoberek 2019, 570)

The terms are different, then, for genre fiction— and literary fiction that has turned to genre—than they are for North American realism, as much a genre as any other and has emerged, as McGurl contends, from the proliferation of MFA programs in recent decades.

It's also tempting to read *Manhattan Beach* as a post-9/11 novel that is also engaged in thinking about the development of the United States as a world power, emerging from the World Wars to take its global position. Egan herself contemplated this possibility, when she remarked in an interview that she didn't begin by writing a regular kind of narrative: "At first, I was going to rip things up again," she says,

> I thought the book would connect to 9/11, which I felt was the end of something, or at least an important event in a trajectory that had begun with the rise of America as a superpower at the end of world war two, and so there would be these leaps into the future, i.e., into our present. But all that was dead on arrival. It was so stale. There's nothing inherently exciting about any narrative move: it's only exciting if it works, and if it couldn't be done any other way. Everything else is gimmickry. (Egan, in Cooke 2017)

[16] Indeed, de Groot reminds us that the historical novel is "a form concerned with social movement, dissidence, complication and empathy rather than with the more individualistic novel form we are familiar with, born of autobiographical, personal, revelatory narratives" (de Groot 2010, 2). De Groot is drawing a distinction here between historical fiction and what Anis Shivani identifies as formulaic contemporary literary fiction: "strict realism," obsessed with "technique" and "craft," and firmly situated within the "trivial domestic sphere" (Shivani 2011).

Although Egan may think that the post 9/11 interpretation is "dead on arrival," her work actually answers, to a certain degree, Judith Butler's call for reframing the narrative of 9/11. Though *Manhattan Beach* does not fully decenter "the first-person narrative within the global framework," its attention to the wartime economy and its reflections on finance, political power, and global power situates 9/11 on a longer timeline (Butler 2004, 7). The novel can be read as a historicist project of providing the backstory, as it were, to 9/11, although that is something that Egan herself denies. But Megan O'Grady makes a compelling argument in "Why Are We Living in a Golden Age of Historical Fiction?" (2019), when she sustains that

> As visions of the future increasingly fail in the face of our present moment, literary authors are increasingly looking back, not to comfort us with a sense of known past, or even an easy allegory of the present, but instead—motivated by a kind of clue-gathering—to seek reasons for why we are the way we are and how we got here, and at what point the train began to derail. (O'Grady 2019)

But it is also possible to read this novel in another way, as "diagnostic," as Lanzendörfer would have it. In moving through and performing multiple genres, *Manhattan Beach* can be understood as not only calling attention to but critiquing "the contours and currents of our current moment—its temporal boundaries, its historical significance, its deeper social logics" (Martin 2017, 5). It is not controversial to affirm that historical novels are always about the contemporary. Consider Toni Morrison's *A Mercy* (2008), the historical novel set in the prehistory of the United States, published on the election of Barack Obama, for example, and its engagement with the possibility of a post-racial society.[17]

But neither an allegorical approach nor a purely historicist approach fully explains Egan's use of genre. In her mixing of or performance of multiple genres, Egan certainly reminds us that history if fictive, and thus de-centers—or perhaps draws critical attention to—the historical imaginaries deployed by Trumpism and its supporters in their attempts to

[17] See, for example, "Toni Morrison on Human Bondage and a Post-Racial Age," interview by Michel Martin (*Tell Me More*, *NPR*, December 10, 2008) https://www.npr.org/templates/story/story.php?storyId=98072491 and Jessica Wells Cantiello, "From Pre-Racial to Post-Racial? Reading and Reviewing 'A Mercy' in the Age of Obama" (*MELUS* 36.2 [2011]: 165–38).

construct their own terrifying 'America.' But it also repeatedly raises epistemological questions: What constitutes fact? How are facts or information communicated? How are things found out—with no telephone, catching people after work, knocking on doors, writing letters? All of these devices and recourses force us to slow down, countering the contemporary obsession with the fast flow of information.

Reading Genre, Reading Genre Fiction

Genre fiction, of course, is different from genre. It's common and useful to think of genre as convention and constraint, as thematic and formal formulae and boundary, for this view allows for the taxonomy that often organizes our classrooms, our bookstores, and other parts of our lives. However, the appeal and depth of much recent genre fiction, or literary genre fiction, rests with not only the way it deploys, interrogates, or plays with genre as taxonomy and as a set of formal and thematic organizational patterns and parameters, but also with the way it reflects on the construction of knowledge, interpretation, and critique. John Frow writes that genre is "a form of symbolic action: the generic organisation of language, images, gestures, and sound makes things happen by actively shaping the way we understand the world" (Frow 2006, 2). Genre organizes readers' expectations, thereby setting the stage for their understanding or interpretation. As Frow writes, "Generic structure both enables and restricts meaning, and is a basic condition for meaning to take place" (Frow 2006, 10).

Frow also suggests something extremely useful here: the world-building capacity of genre is not the "*complete* world, the infinitely complex totality of everything that exists" but rather a "schematic world, a limited piece of reality, which is sketched in outline and carved out from a larger continuum" (Frow 2006, 7; emphasis in the original). Reminding us that genre is always and intimately connected to and mediating on the questions of reality and truth and, hence, I argue, interpretation and critique, Frow claims that "far from being mere 'stylistic' devices, genres create *effects of reality and truth*, authority and plausibility, which are central to the different ways the world is understood in the writing of history or of philosophy or of science, or in painting, or in everyday talk" (Frow 2006, 2; emphasis added). This claim is especially true of the three genres—the historical novel, the crime/gangster novel, and the adventure tale—that Egan deploys.

Interestingly, the turn to genre and to scholarship about this turn coincides with the rise of 'postcritique,' a new practice that, some assert, will supersede the literary practice of critique 'as a genre,' as well as some pushback against it. Postcritique is a reflection on and a call for a 'recalibration' in the practice of literary studies. Positioning post-critique as evident in the proliferation of "alternatives to a suspicious hermeneutics" (Anker and Felski 2017, 1), Elizabeth Anker and Ruth Felski posit critique as a "distinct academic genre" (Anker and Felski 2017, 2), albeit one that is so capacious that it is impossible to catalogue it fully. For Anker and Felski, "Critique is, among other things, a form of rhetoric that is codified via style, tone, figure, vocabulary, and voice and that attends to certain tropes, motifs, and structures of texts at the expense of others" (Anker and Felski 2017, 3–4). More importantly, critique is "suspicious," a key term here, and as such it moves toward "diagnosis," which inevitably involves an "*expert*," who practices "*scrutiny*" "in order to decode certain *defects* or flaws that are not readily or automatically apparent to a nonspecialist perspective" (Anker and Felski 2017, 4; emphasis in the original). This suspicious form of reading would be analogous to, for example, the practice of psychoanalysis, except that in critique the text is the patient, who possesses "symptoms that would undercut explicit meaning and conscious intent" and that "are traced back to social inequities or ideological struggles that cannot be openly acknowledged" (Anker and Felski 2017, 5). For Anker and Felski, this impulse toward diagnosis, regardless of method or practitioner, is the centrality of allegory—which emerged in other critical enterprises, not only literature—[18]that operates "in literature as a manifestation of larger social hierarchies and inequalities," and that are excavated only by an interpreter (Anker and Felski 2017, 6). As such, allegory can lead to the "all-too-predictable style of reading, where characters in novels or films are reduced to the indexical function of signaling some larger social injustice (sexism, imperialism, heteronormativity)" (Anker and Felski 2017, 7). In this respect, Anker and Felski insist on one more element of critique:

[18] Anker and Felski write that "What defines literature, in this line of thought, is its capacity to engage in self-conscious commentary on the indeterminacies and aporias of language, thereby eluding the overconfident reader." Later, they observe that "allegory also persisted in literary studies at another level: in prevailing accounts of the role of the critic," who becomes the "defiant critic… especially in highly politicized fields such as American studies, queer theory, and postcolonial studies, where the hermeneutic project is often conceived in terms of an ethnical disclosure of structures of Otherness or oppression" (Anker and Felski 2017, 7).

"its strong investment in modes of *self-reflexivity*" (Anker and Felski 2017, 8; emphasis in the original). They write:

> Whatever is natural, taken for granted, essentialized, or transparent become the critic's target: such qualities are seen as not only theoretically inadequate (in failing to acknowledge the linguistic and cultural construction of reality), but also politically troubling (in 'naturalizing' social phenomena and thereby rendering them immune to criticism and change). As a result, critique has encouraged a recurring preoccupation with second-order or meta-analysis and a seemingly inexhaustible relay of skepticism and disclosure: hermeneutic insight emerges only to become the object of further suspicion, lest it fall prey to the stable, authentic, or authoritative knowledge that critique seeks to challenge. (Anker and Felski 2017, 8)

One of the problems of this tendency is, they suggest, "an entrancement with works of metafiction," a preference that has "gone along with a cult of formal as well as philosophical difficulty" (Anker and Felski 2017, 9).

Sounds familiar? Critique, at least as Anker and Felski characterize it, echoes Krystal's claim of the superiority of difficult texts against genre fiction that is understood as escapism, not only from everyday reality but from the work of reading. The two scholars catalog different alternatives to critique: instead of "symptomatic reading," Stephen Best and Sharon Marcus call for surface reading, or what Anker and Felski describe as "the open to view, the transparent, and the literal" (Anker and Felski 2017, 16), while Heather Love calls for "thin description" (Love 2013), and Ann Laura Stoler asks us to "explore the grain" (Stoler 2009, 50).[19] Could postcritique, then, offer a way of reading genre fiction and the turn to it? Can we read *Manhattan Beach* not for what is absent, not for its allegorical potential, not against the grain but for its affective or ethical content?

Say, for example, that we conceive of the election and subsequent actions of Trump and his MAGA complex as unimaginable or unnarratable, as loss and trauma. How many times have we heard, in many quarters, the disbelief and grief about what has happened? The lead-up to and four years of the Trump presidency produced, in many, bewilderment and disorientation, in large part because of Trump's unpredictability and the

[19] This is but a brief and necessarily incomplete account of post-critique. For a more thoughtful account, see Winfried Fluck, "The Limits of Critique and the Affordances of Form: Literary Studies after the Hermeneutics of Suspicion" (*American Literary History*, 31.2 [2019]: 229–248).

seriousness with which his tweets were taken; as Kirsch notes, the "problem with our 'post-truth' politics is that a large share of the population has moved beyond true and false," and, of course, in equally large part because of the extraordinary damage caused by the policies and politics of his term (Kirsch 2017). Constance Duncombe argues that popular culture can help unpack this phenomenon and provide an expression for the range of emotional registers that emerge in response to it: "Popular culture must now grapple with post-truth politics and the explicit anxiety and outrage that give meaning to the post-truth era (Duncombe, 544)."[20] Approaching *Manhattan Beach* with this framework helps us account for its historicity, its insistence on context, emerging from a detailed, heavily researched, and highly plausible account of a young woman during World War II. The novel's level of detail, much of it sensory, is grounding, authentic, and authoritative, providing an alternative to the disorientation that characterized, for many, the Trump era. The novel acts as a welcome prehistory to the contemporary, depicting a moment before things went wrong.

A number of scholars, however, pull us back to critique, albeit defined differently. In "We Have Never Been Critical: Toward the Novel as Critique," Anna Kornbluh argues that postcritique treats novels as object, failing to "position the novel as a *mode of knowing* (knowing language, knowing possibility, knowing sociality), precisely in the tradition of critique" (Kornbluh 2017, 399) that they write against.[21] Kornbluh situates this potential for critique in the world-building capacity of novels: the novel and other arts can function as critique themselves, precisely through their world-building capacity, their utopian potential, which is the ability to imagine otherwise:

> With a long and political-economic view of crisis, we can best conceptualize that the arts and literature contravene modern democratic capitalism through their constitutively speculative, generative utopianism—their deliberate building of something other than what already exists, their formalization of other, different, better ideas and relations than what is already here.

[20] Duncombe characterizes the Trump era in this way: "Many scholars and political pundits alike claim we have entered a new age of post-truth politics. For some this manifests as a 'reliance on assertions that "feel true" but have no basis in fact' (*The Economist* 2016); for others, this era is a blending of a growing mistrust of 'experts' with the 'brazen willingness to lie and the straight-forward refusal to accept clearly documented facts' (Hopkin and Rosamond 2017)" (Duncombe 2019, 543).

[21] But not one that is always present.

> In departing from the merely made world and proposing other worlds, literature operates both the negative and affirmative poles of critique, positing imaginative, alluring alternatives to our raging, dystopian hellscape of capitalist contradiction, climate catastrophe, and insurgent global fascism. (Kornbluh 2017, 398–399)

Conceiving of novels as critique themselves helps us out of the problem that postcritique sets out to solve. Case in point: Kornbluh ends her self-described polemic by looking at Colson Whitehead's 2016 alternate history, *The Underground Railroad*, which, she argues, "demands to be read as immanent critique, despite its embrace by Oprah's Book Club and the National Book Award" (Kornbluh 2017, 406) and reminds us of "the special kind of world making and world interpreting, that novels achieve" (Kornbluh 2017, 407).

Trace, for example, Eddie's disappearance/death through the multiple genres of *Manhattan Beach*. In the opening of the novel, Eddie remains a part of the historical fiction that revolves around Anna's coming-of-age in 1942 Brooklyn. In that genre, his is the story of the stock market crash and the Depression, his disappearance related, perhaps, to the pressures of family life in that era. When Anna meets Dexter Styles and begins to investigate her father's connection to him, Eddie's disappearance, which takes place between the first two sections of the novel, becomes the death of a snitch in the gangster novel, complete with a scene of Eddie being thrown off a small boat into the East River in the dead of night. But, once *Manhattan Beach* shifts again, we learn that Eddie, with those Houdini-like moves of his, escaped from the chains that weighed him down and surfaces a number of years later, in a different place (San Francisco) and different, albeit related genre, the adventure novel. This is a single-plot point that circulates through three genres, each one telling and re-telling the same event.

Manhattan Beach, thus, tells us that while some facts may be, in fact, objectively true (say the cost of a meal at the Brooklyn Navy Yard in 1942, a detail that seemed to preoccupy reviewers), others are not so easily marked as such, that they are subject to interpretation and reinterpretation.[22] The question and disruption of fact was central, of course, to the

[22] This question of fact was central, of course, to the Trump presidency and the decades before. See Brian T. Edwards, "Trump from Reality TV to Twitter, or the Selfie-Determination of Nations" (*Arizona Quarterly: A Journal of American Literature, Culture, and Theory* 74.3 [2018]: 25–45).

Trump presidency and the decades before and continues to be central to the cultural, political, and social landscape. Adam Kirsch makes the connection between the novel's preoccupation with fact, or rather "truth, fiction and lie" and that of the contemporary period:

> From its beginning, the novel has tested the distinction between truth, fiction and lie; now the collapse of those distinctions has given us the age of Trump. We are entering a period in which the very idea of literature may come to seem a luxury, a distraction from political struggle. But the opposite is true: No matter how irrelevant hardheaded people may believe it to be, literature continually proves itself a sensitive instrument, a leading indicator of changes that will manifest themselves in society and culture. Today, as always, the imagination is our best guide to what reality has in store. (Kirsch 2017)

The turn to genre of *Manhattan Beach*, then, is as much an ontological as epistemological project, both establishing the prehistory of twenty-first-century preoccupations and investigating the contingency of fact, the manner in which information is shaped by its occasions, and the possibilities for the novel in the construction of knowledge itself. Thinking of Egan's novel *Manhattan Beach* in this way returns us to Lanzendörfer's formulation of genre as diagnosis, for while *Manhattan Beach* is not as explicitly a 'Trump novel,' if compared to Rushdie's or Hiassen's, it is a novel profoundly engaged with contemporary social, political, and cultural anxieties.

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CHAPTER 6

The Day the Music Died: The Invisible Republic in Steve Erickson's *Shadowbahn*

Liam Kennedy

Abstract Steve Erickson's novel *Shadowbahn*, published in the wake of Trump's election, opens in the near future of 2021, with the dramatic and inexplicable reappearance of the Twin Towers in the Badlands of South Dakota. Not least astonishing is that they appear to emanate music. As people come to see the Towers "some hear the music and some don't," while people who hear the music hear different songs. As the Towers seemingly produce music, all over the US music begins disappearing. As we read, we perceive that music is functioning as a shadow narrative in the novel, signifying a desire for meaning that hovers at the edges of the textual narrative. While the soundtrack of the 'invisible republic' revisits national trauma, this is not confined to 9/11 but also references multiple violent divisions in the nation and especially those involving racial difference. In Erickson's telling, American popular music is, like the nation, corrupted at its root, and so he is wary of its redemptive promise. And yet, he values the communal power of music, its ability to connect an imagined

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community; that music stops across America following the apparition of the Twin Towers, signals a profound loss of history, civic community, and democratic possibility, an ambivalence that is also that of a writer challenged to imagine an alternative American reality in the era of Trump.

For a great many Americans, 'America' changed on the 9th of November of 2016. Recall the references to unreality and dislocation expressed by so many; some commentators spoke of a form of collective trauma. The political advent of Donald Trump (and of Trumpism) has signified a paradigm shift that journalists, pollsters and scholars have struggled to name and understand. Terms such as 'post-truth,' 'fake news' and 'illiberal democracy' are indicative of the discursive nature of this shift—all indicating the disruptive impact of new and social media in the public sphere, and concomitant concerns about the derealization of political and cultural discourses. At the same time, there has been a ground tone of unease and uncertainty about how to make sense of this disruption, an apprehension that there is something excessive and confounding about this presidency that not only beggars belief but impedes critical comprehension. In other words, 'Trump's America' posits not only an epistemological challenge, how to make sense of it, but also an ontological challenge, to acknowledge the fragility of American reality, that alternative realities are possible and that the edifice of reality is precarious.[1] Writing in the wake of Trump's election, the Bosnian-American writer Aleksandar Hemon observed:

> Societies generate realities and present them as self-evident […]. When there is a major rupture, the whole structure of self-evidence falls apart and the shock exposes how badly it has been maintained. It turns out that nothing is the way we thought it was […]. The moment when we cannot in any way connect what is taking place and what we know is a traumatic one, because the solidity of reality—the belief that its continuity cannot be altered—catastrophically falters. (Hemon 2017)

Hemon filters his perspective through his experiences and insights from living in Sarajevo during the Bosnian war, "through a time when what cannot possibly happen begins to happen, rapidly and everywhere"

[1] See Liam Kennedy, "Introduction," *Trump's America: Political Culture and National Identity* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2020).

(Hemon 2017). Chastising Americans for their "scramble for the ontological blanket of reality inertia" following Trump's election, Hemon comments: "In America, a comfortable entitlement blunts and deactivates imagination—it is hard to imagine that this American life is not the only life possible, that there could be any reason to undo it" (Hemon 2017). What Hemon identifies is a distinctively parochial American myopia about what constitutes normative political and social reality, a myopia that registers a profound naturalization of American reality, fed by delusions of continuity. Trump's presidency has fractured the illusion of liberal hegemony as the ontological bedrock of American reality. As such, it has presented a notable challenge for writers of fiction as it calls into question the value and authority of creative representation and asks fresh questions about literature as a representation of the real.

We might say, to borrow from Frederic Jameson, that Americans can more readily imagine the end of the world than imagine the end of liberal capitalism (Jameson 2003). However, while American literature plays a part in the process of normalizing (a version of) American reality, there are also writers who challenge it, positing alternative realities, alternative Americas. In this chapter, I will consider the work of one such writer, Steve Erickson, and in particular his novel *Shadowbahn* (2017).

The Dream Life of the Nation

Let's visit an earlier moment of seismic shift in American reality. Reflecting on the 1960 televised debates between presidential candidates Richard Nixon and John F. Kennedy, the novelist Philip Roth lamented:

> The American writer in the middle of the 20th century has his hands full in trying to understand, and then describe, and then make credible much of the American reality […]. The actuality is continually outdoing our talents, and the culture tosses up figures almost daily that are the envy of any novelist. […] on the TV screen, as a real public image, a political fact, my mind balked at taking [Nixon] in. Whatever else the television debates produced in me, I should like to point out, as a literary curiosity, that they also produced a type of professional envy. (Roth 1961)

This sense that reality was outrunning the capacities of writers to represent it was not new, but tellingly articulated by Roth as a challenge occasioned by the growth of televisual media and the transformation of politics into

spectacle. His comments indicated something profound and shattering: an epochal shift in 'the American reality.'

It is not coincidental that Roth was writing at the start of a period of intense social and political unrest in the United States. As he pilloried many contemporary American writers for failing to respond to this epochal change, he noted one exception: "There is Norman Mailer. And he is an interesting example, I think, of one in whom our era has provoked such a magnificent disgust that dealing with it in fiction has almost come to seem, for him, beside the point" (Roth 1961). Sure enough, in railing against what he termed the "totalitarianism" of middle-class American life in the 1950s, Mailer challenged the conventions of literary realism. His approach was articulated by a character in his story "The Man Who Studied Yoga" (1952): "He does not want to write a realistic novel because reality is no longer realistic" (Mailer 1992, 161). In the later 1950s, Mailer helped fashion a 'new journalism' that could cope with the emerging society of the spectacle in the 1960s. In his 1960 essay on Kennedy's election campaign, "Superman Comes to the Supermarket" (published in *Esquire* magazine in November 1960), he described the president-to-be as an "existential hero" who could tap into the drives that roil the national unconscious (Mailer 2009). This reflected Mailer's very particular vision of American history:

> Our history has moved on two rivers, one visible, the other underground; there has been the history of politics, which is concrete, factual, practical, and unbelievably dull […] and there is a subterranean river of untapped, ferocious, lonely and romantic desires, that concentration of ecstasy and violence which is the dream life of the nation. (Mailer 2009)

In Kennedy, Mailer saw someone who could fuse these two historical currents—these related but different Americas—and potentially renew the nation: "Only a hero can capture the secret imagination of a people, and so be good for the vitality of his nation" (Mailer 2009). To be sure, he recognized the dangers in celebrating a "superman" as leader, but reckoned Kennedy struck the right balance between rational substance and romantic style. Mailer's perspective may have been perversely romantic, but this was also its power as a dissenting vision, attuned to "the dream life of the nation."

American reality now seems to be undergoing another seismic shift, again in sync with a cycle of civil unrest. And once again, reality appears to

be outrunning American writers as they struggle to explain it, to make it credible. Step forward another *Übermensch*. Is Trump an existential hero in the mode Mailer described? And if he really is someone "who reveals the character of the country to itself," what does he reveal about the character of the US today? (Mailer 2009) There is no doubt that Trump has channeled the discontents of the nation and tapped into angers and resentments that are more than political. Trump's call to "Make America Great Again" is in some part an articulation and legitimization of what has been disavowed in the making of a liberal democracy. He promises national renewal, but not the progressive, forward-looking renewal promised by Kennedy. Instead, he offers a regressive, backward-looking nationalism. For Mailer, Kennedy's heroism was inherent in his ability to balance glamorous style with political substance. Trump displays no such ability—he displays an excess of style and a deficit of substance. His heroism, such as it is, marks a new stage in the aestheticization of politics in which entertainment and political life have converged as never before. Trump is the superman unleashed as celebrity phantasm, a figure of libidinal enjoyment who leeringly embodies the obscene underside of liberal democracy.

With Trump's election there was much handwringing by liberals about a crisis in democracy and national cohesion. A *New York Times* op-ed titled "The Collapse of American Identity," published in May 2017, notes that "recent survey data provides troubling evidence that a shared sense of national identity is unravelling, with two mutually exclusive narratives emerging along party lines" (Jones 2017). In truth, surveys had been producing such evidence for several years; it was now, with some panic, that the op-ed writers were paying closer attention. Trump's 'illiberalism' was apparent in the verve with which he took up and avidly politicized discourses of decline and division that were already present in US media and political culture from the 1990s onwards. The discourse served to focus anxieties about the dissolution of the national culture, about citizenship and about race relations.[2] For many commentators, America's decline was writ largest in a domestic crisis of liberal democratic citizenship, a fracturing or unraveling of civil society and atomization of the populace. In 2013, the journalist George Packer described an "unwinding" of the nation: "In the space of a generation, [America] has become more than

[2] See Liam Kennedy, "America Feels Like It Is in Decline Again—And Trump Is Just a Symptom," *The Conversation*, 19 May 2016. https://theconversation.com/america-feels-like-its-in-decline-again-and-trump-is-just-a-symptom-56864.

ever a country of winners and losers, as industries have failed, institutions have disappeared and the country's focus has shifted to idolize celebrity and wealth" (Packer 2014, jacket statement). Though short on solutions, Packer offers resonant claims that "the game is rigged" and the "social contract is shredded" (Packer 2013). This language of decline was magnified by Trump as he spoke to the sense of disinheritance and declining expectations expressed by many Americans and particularly by middle-aged, lower-educated white people. With his presidency political nihilism has grown more evident, no longer masked by the rhetoric of liberal democracy, while polarization and partisanship are solidifying political balkanization. What almost all agree on is that America is now more divided than ever before, more and more we are told there are now 'two Americas'—red and blue, conservative and liberal, urban and rural—that American national identity is riven in two. It is a binarism that has many permutations and we may recall the "two rivers" of American history imagined by Mailer, with the "subterranean river of untapped, ferocious, lonely and romantic desires" now flooding the liberal mainstream.

How are writers responding to this new American reality? How, to paraphrase Roth, will they make it credible? It is worth noting that Roth remained alert to the fragility of American reality throughout his career and returns to the subject in his novel *The Plot Against America* (2004), a counterfactual history in which Charles Lindbergh is elected president in 1940, leading to widespread persecution of Jews in the United States. The narrative references the conditions that give rise to fascism as the ordinariness of daily life is warped by political exigencies and creeping discrimination. The Jewish family's confidence in American institutions unravels, shaking the narrator's sense of identity. Add to this the novel's treatment of the susceptibility of Americans to the cult of celebrity and that the real Lindbergh was a member of the isolationist America First Committee and it is hardly surprising that in the wake of the Trump election many commentators pointed to Roth's novel as a prescient pointer to Trump's political emergence. A connection that seemed to be underlined with the television series based on the novel being aired on HBO in 2020.

Roth's late 1950s claim that American reality is outdoing the imagination of writers has been widely echoed in recent years, with many cultural

producers asking similar questions today.[3] As writers have sought to tune in to the shift in American reality that Trump's election announced, their responses have taken many forms. A common theme is the narrative probing of assumptions about what constitutes American identity and the historical and mythical underpinnings of these, with many writers producing speculative counternarratives, revealing alternative American histories and realities. A celebrated example is Colson Whitehead's *The Underground Railroad* (2016), a fantastical reimagining of nineteenth-century slavery that turns the metaphorical route of escape from slavery into an actual train that travels underground. A character tells the protagonist, Cora, an escaped black slave, "If you want to see what this nation is all about you have to ride the rails. Look outside as you speed through and you'll find the true face of America" (Whitehead 2017, 83). That true face remains disturbingly elliptical, both an illusory promise and a violent threat for black Americans—Cora intuits that "America was a ghost in the darkness, like her" (Whitehead 2017, 216). In this chapter, I will focus on the work of a less celebrated writer but one also attuned to alternative American histories and realities, Steve Erickson, and in particular his novel *Shadowbahn*.

American Weimar

Erickson's work is difficult to categorize, which may explain his lack of mainstream success. It casually switches and fuses genres, even within individual novels and can be formally demanding. The author is often described as a 'surrealist' and 'fantasist,' yet his writings are grounded in realistic detail and character and attuned to political and historical realities as well as to myths of America—he shares something of Mailer's fascination with "the dream life of the nation." Time travel and dream logics are commonplace in Erickson's novels, with radical shifts in time and space suggesting

[3] This has been notable among those writing in a satirical vein, with many expressing frustration that the critical thrust of satire is neutralized in Trump's America and fatally compromised by its limited appeals to like-minded audiences in their bubbles or echo chambers. Traditionally, satire has functioned as a form of political communication that attacks but also relies on the solid-seeming reality secured by existing institutions and relations of power. In the era of Trump though, Americans seem to have lost belief in a shared referential world. Can satire be effective if there is no underlying belief system? See Liam Kennedy, "'Reality has a Well-Known Liberal Bias': The End(s) of Satire in Trump's America," in Kennedy, *Trump's America*, 310–34.

the elasticity of American reality. In *Rubicon Beach* (1986), his first novel, Los Angeles is depicted as both real and imaginary, the latter a post-apocalyptic dystopia that is erupting into the real with the menacing logic of "a dream that destroys what is not fulfilled" (Erickson 1993, 32). *Arc d'X* (1993) begins as a historical novel, with the story of Thomas Jefferson and Sally Hemmings, and switches to an admixture of science fiction and noir as Hemmings moves through time to an alternate American present. In *Our Ecstatic Days* (2005), a lake appears in the middle of Los Angeles and a mother swims through a vortex within it in search of her son in a parallel Los Angeles. The motif of parallel realities recurs in Erickson's writings, an uncanny doubling that powers his critical perspective on divisions in national identity and, in particular, the divisions of race within history and the present.

Like Mailer, Erickson has also written nonfiction coverage of American politics and election campaigns and this work has often detailed his perspectives on American political culture and national division. In 1995, he published an essay titled "American Weimar" in the *Los Angeles Times*, focused on the swirling discontents surrounding the Clinton presidency and the recent election. His essay begins:

> America wearies of democracy. […] America feels at the end of its power, and the result is a hysteria of which we're barely conscious, a hysteria in which democracy appears as a spectacle of impotence and corruption. As Americans we have come to act more oppressed by freedom than invigorated by it, more concerned with freedom from rather than freedom to. We divide between the vast majority of us who—out of futility, confusion or indifference—are so disengaged from democracy we never vote at all, and those of us who vote not to thoughtfully resolve complicated issues but to express our rage. (Erickson 1995)

This sense of a hysteria emerging from the waning of democracy in America acutely identifies the rage that would intermittently burst into the mainstream of American culture and politics in the early twenty-first century until it would fully erupt in the 2016 election. Feeding this rage is the ongoing culture wars that have their roots in the 1960s but were reignited around Clinton in the 1990s. Erickson saw that "Clinton's demonization is not about politics":

> the Right argues that a democracy that produces a Clinton presidency invalidates itself. […] At both the leadership and grass-roots levels, the country's new majority party is energized and funded and driven by people who believe that many of their fellow Americans are not real Americans, not normal Americans, but the Enemy. (Erickson 1995)

We would see features of this fundamental disavowal resurfacing during the Obama presidency when the referencing of 'real Americans' was increasingly emphasized by conservative leaders and media, perhaps most infamously by Sarah Palin during the 2008 election—it is at one with the phenomenon of the so-called birther movement, which was strongly supported by Trump. Of course, to borrow Erickson's terms, Obama sought to "transcend national rage" and failed, while Trump sought to exploit it and succeeded. Erickson's dystopian portrait of a fractured "American Weimar" in 1995 echoes across his writings through to the present, culminating in the apocalyptic imaginings of *Shadowbahn*.

Shadowbahn

Shadowbahn is difficult to summarize or to define in genre terms. It is part fantasy, part road novel, part science fiction, part music criticism, and part prose poem. It risks incoherence, there is only the bare semblance of plot and the style is allusive and dissociative. If it is about anything, it is about a country losing its bearings, so perhaps it is fitting that the form of the novel almost loses its bearings. *Shadowbahn* opens in the near future of 2021, with the dramatic and inexplicable reappearance of the Twin Towers in the Badlands of South Dakota, an apparition that attracts thousands of people and immense media attention and global speculation about what their reappearance means. The Towers are empty though we soon learn there is one inhabitant, Jesse Garon Presley, the stillborn twin of Elvis Presley, who awakes as an adult on the top floor of one of the Towers. In the America of the novel, it is Elvis who died at birth and his absence has shaped the subsequent history of popular music. Jesse cannot sing but he is haunted by the sound of his brother's voice and he dreams of his mother, covered in the blood of childbirth, saying to him: "Only *he* could sing like that… you ain't nothing but the shadowborn that did precede him" (Erickson 2017, 65). The ghostly towers and the revenant twin announce the author's interest in doubles, doppelgangers and dualities, in a shadow America of alternate realities, an America where everything has its double,

including democracy. The Towers are twin ghosts of a national trauma that is founded in historical division and violence and not only in the events of September 11, 2001. On the second page of the novel, as a truck driver first sees the Twin Towers, we note the bumper sticker on the rear of his truck that reads "SAVE AMERICA FROM ITSELF" (4)—the condensed message of the essay "American Weimar."

Perhaps the most prominent story in *Shadowbahn* is that of a brother and sister on a road trip from Los Angeles to Lake Michigan to visit their mother, listening to their deceased father's music (he was an avid compiler of song lists) and all the while squabbling with each other, enunciating intimate differences of race and gender. The older sibling, Parker, is white, and Zema is his adopted black half-sister, and their fraught relationship serves the author as a disquisition on questions of identity that are more amplified in the national divisions of the country. The America of this near future is deeply riven by cultural, political, and regional differences. It appears to be divided into territories called "Union" and "Disunion" and "Rupture," there are references to secession, although all of this political context is oblique.

> …Parker and Zema penetrate deeper the continental center as more flags display the traditional thirteen red and white stripes with a black field where stars would ordinarily be. Some feature an incensed and glaring Jesus, sandy hair pushed back behind his ears like a biker's. Others depict a former president X'd out in red, the way newsmagazine covers used to X out deposed tyrants and wartime enemies. (130)

As Parker and Zema drive across the United States, there are several references to "a secret highway called the 'shadowbahn' that cuts through the heart of the country from one end to the other with impunity… allegedly the secret highway runs from an undisclosed western point to an undisclosed eastern, as though there is no America at all of physicality or fact, only the America of the mind" (53). This imaginary highway references diverse cultural myths of American journeying, including the underground railroad and the lost highways of popular song.

Adding to the mythic context of this allusive road narrative is the presence of music in the novel, where it serves as much more than either background or reference point. Rather, music overwhelms the narrative in that it haunts the actions and memories of the characters and primes the perceptions of readers too. Not least astonishing about the apparition of the

Twin Towers is that they appear to emanate music. As the truck driver stares at them "he hears music, or something like it;" it "rises from out of or around the Towers" (14). As people come to see the Towers "some hear the music and some don't. Some hear it take shape as a recognizable melody, some hear only a mass of harmonics" (14), while people who hear the music hear different songs. A family from Virginia hears the folk song "Oh Shenandoah," a married couple hear a version of "Round Midnight" sung by Julie London, a Mormon family from Salt Lake City hear Ennio Morricone's "Ecstasy of Gold" from the soundtrack of the film *The Good, the Bad and the Ugly* (1966), while a Sunni family from Egypt "spend several days on the Internet to determine that what they've heard is 'Lost Highway' by a long dead country star" (18–19). As the Towers seemingly produce music, all over the United States music begins disappearing from all recordings and sources of production, apart from one other source, the radio in the car that Parker and Zema are driving—eventually the radio goes silent but then music begins to emanate from Zema.

As we read, we perceive that the music is functioning as a shadow narrative in the novel, signifying a desire for meaning that hovers at the edges of the textual narrative. This desire is clearly symbolized by Parker and Zema's father (a novelist, resembling Erickson) who compulsively creates and recreates playlists as though seeking the sequencing that will give up a hidden meaning. "The problem with musicians," the father complains, "is that they're not novelists; they have no sense of narrative" (211). The playlists pair selected songs, another example of doubling or twinning, allowing them to work off each other in their musical and cultural registers. And so, for example, Ray Charles's version of "That Lucky Old Sun" is paired with the Beach Boys' song "The Warmth of the Sun." There are allusive connections between the two and Erickson notes that the assassination of John F. Kennedy is a potent link. The Ray Charles song, a cover of a 1949 standard, became a hit after Kennedy's death and was infused with the mourning of a nation, while the Beach Boys' song was first conceived and written in the days before and after the assassination and has taken on near mythic stature as a result. Erickson asks about the Beach Boys' song:

> …who's to say what epiphany explodes in the course of that bullet's trajectory? Can *the warmth of the sun, it won't ever die* only have been written before the gunshot, or only after? Is the song transformed […] simply by the moment with which it coincides? (189)

As the songs speak to each other, combining music, memory, and myth, they condense the cultural histories of America and suggest alternative histories that haunt the present. In this way, music references thicken the cultural resonance of the narrative. The reference to a shadow network of highways, for example, is an idea echoed across many genres of American popular music—blues, folk, country and rock—such as Hank Williams' "Lost Highway."

As he compiles his playlist, the father becomes fixated on a fragment of a song lyric—"Here comes the planes, so you better…"—and eventually finds out it is from the song "O Superman" by the American artist Laurie Anderson, first recorded in 1981. The song is an eight-minute performance of dread and menace that would take on new meaning following 9/11 (just as Ray Charles's "Lucky Old Sun" did after the assassination of Kennedy) principally due to the lyrics: "Here come the planes. They're American planes… Hello? Is anybody home? Well, you don't know me, but I know you. And I've got a message to give to you. Here come the planes. So you better get ready" (Anderson 1981). As one critic observes, "The lyrics chimed out like an answering machine message sent to the future, picked up several decades too late" ("O Marlboroman" 2015). But "O Superman" also took on this new significance due to the intense sense of sonic dread that the song imparts.[4] On the playlist in *Shadowbahn* "O Superman" is paired with "Oh Shenandoah," another symbolic twinning, this one endowed with an epiphanic power and prophecy. Early in the novel, as a visiting couple to the ghostly Twin Towers hear "Oh Shenandoah," the narrator refers to it as

> The great national metamorphosis-song […] "Oh Shenandoah" is a hundred songs in one depending on who has sung or heard it at a given moment over the past two hundred years: pioneer song, sailing song, slave song, Confederate song, a French trader's love song for his Indian bride. (Erickson 2017, 17)

Later, we are told that Elvis Presley made a recording—a 7-inch single, of which only one copy exists—of "Oh Shenandoah" and that the B-side recording was "O Souverain" (a version of Massenet's aria from *Le Cid*,

[4] Susan McClary notes that the movement between chords is the source of the unease, a "musical semiotics of desire and dread, of hope and disillusion, of illusion and reality" (McClary 1991, 135).

which was an influence on Anderson's "O Superman"). Of course, no such single exists.

In *Shadowbahn*, the history and future of America is poised between these equally haunting visions, the expansive, inclusive perspective of "Oh Shenandoah" and the dread of imminent disaster expressed by "O Superman." The tension between these visions remains unresolved in the novel—for Erickson, they represent dialectics of betrayal and redemption that define American national identity. The novel ends with Zema entering one of the Towers and her brother suddenly aware that music is once again coming from the car radio; it is a muted sign of hope. In foregrounding these dialectics, Erickson signals his continued if self-conscious and metafictional commitment to the American romance genre. Many of the genre's tropes are present in the novel, such as the road trip, the American songbook, the sense of wonder and adventure. Yet, unlike many writers and cultural producers who utilize these tropes, Erickson also insists on their corrupted nature. Notably, the song "Oh Shenandoah," the redemptive wing of his bifurcated American history, reflects this, expressing the desire of the white pioneer for the daughter of a Native American chief. In Erickson's telling, American popular music is, like the nation, corrupted at its root, and so he is wary of its redemptive promises; rather, he finds in music a shadow history of America that reminds us of that original, founding corruption. As he wryly notes in his book *Leap Year*, "Thomas Jefferson invented rock and roll" (Erickson 1989, 30). The effects of that founding trauma persist in Americans' refusal to come to terms with the fact of slavery, a theme Erickson returns to again and again in his work.[5] And yet, he valorizes the communal power of music, its ability to connect an imagined community; that music stops across America following the apparition of the Twin Towers signals a profound loss of history and community, a loss of civic and democratic possibility. Reflecting on this loss during the Obama presidency, Erickson observes that this "is as much about our failure to hear the music anymore—and how the moment no longer seems to allow for it—as it is about anyone's failure to make it. The music exists not just by virtue of the singing but also the

[5] In an interview, Erickson remarks that "the great paradox of America, the paradox that distills America, is that this greatest of American contributions to humanity, this American contribution that probably has influenced more people around the world for the good, that probably has brought more people around the world unqualified joy, was born of America's greatest evil, slavery" (Moody 2017).

listening" (in Chaplinsky 2012). And so the concerns of his "American Weimar" essay feed through to the present, dramatizing the American weariness with democracy.

The Invisible Republic

Erickson's commitment to the democratic potential and redemptive national properties of American music, albeit questioned and attenuated in *Shadowbahn*, is echoed by a range of American cultural producers and critics. It has been a core theme in the work of the influential popular music critic Greil Marcus. Marcus has celebrated the diverse sources and narratives of American vernacular music, finding within them what he calls an "invisible republic" of alternative American realities, mythic landscapes, and marginal lives. In his book *Mystery Train: Images of America in Rock'n'Roll Music* (1975), he argues that the blues singer Robert Johnson evokes a "shadow America" in his music and legend, and he analyzes how deeply the figure of Elvis Presley is merged in the American subconscious, with "dead Elvis" haunting contemporary American culture—just as he haunts the America of *Shadowbahn* (Marcus 1975, 36).[6] For Marcus, as for Erickson, America is not reflected in popular music, it is produced by it. This is to say that the music constantly recycles the myths of America, remaking the invisible republic. In this, music is not only redemptive, it is also constitutive, positing counternarratives and creating counterpublics, acting both as a balm of empathy and a beacon of protest. It is in the distended corpus of Bob Dylan's music that Marcus most particularly and imaginatively locates this narrativization of the invisible republic. He proposes that acted out in the songs and performances is a vision of democracy, but not a democracy of politics and governance; it is instead a democracy of voices from marginalized and disdained communities, "a weird but clearly recognizable America within the America of the exercise of constitutional majoritarian power" (Poole 2011).

Dylan has long been the bard of America's dream life, tapping into the national unconscious for nearly sixty years. Rarely addressing political issues or contexts directly, he has nonetheless referenced these as he re-narrativizes American history and myths. In March 2020, he released a seventeen-minute song titled "Murder Most Foul," a sprawling elegiac

[6] See also Greil Marcus, *Dead Elvis: A Chronicle of a Cultural Obsession* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1999).

ballad that moves freely across that dreamscape, but always circles back to the death of President Kennedy in 1963, marking out its traumatic nature through compulsive return and repetition. The song begins descriptively if mawkishly with the moment of Kennedy's death—"Twas a dark day in Dallas, November 63" (Dylan 2020)—and slowly, allusively spins out of that moment and across a deep history of American popular culture, with several references to Shakespeare along the way (including the song's title, from *Hamlet*). It references iconic moments of "the 60s," from "The Beatles are comin, they're gonna hold your hand" to the violent denouement in Altamont, and moves on to reference Little Richard, Johnny Cash, Oscar Peterson, Beethoven, Houdini, Buster Keaton, Marilyn Monroe, Warren Zevon, Stevie Nicks, Lady Macbeth, and many, many more (Dylan 2020). In lieu of a coherent narrative there are repeated allusions to debts and dread and death, to time running out. Do we want to hitch a ride in "a long, black Lincoln limousine," not only Kennedy's hearse but America's? (Dylan 2020). Are we moving toward redemption or a reckoning or both? The language becomes apocalyptic:

> The day that they killed him, someone said to me, "Son,
> The age of the anti-Christ has just only begun."
> […]
> I said the soul of a nation been torn away
> It's beginning to go down into a slow decay
> And that it's thirty-six hours past judgement day. (Dylan 2020)

The song itself is barely a song, more a dirge with minimal instrumentation. Dylan's voice is the key instrument, its sardonic tone suggesting a weary witness to humanity's ruin. The performative effect is a bit flat in the first half but then it turns into something deeper and more captivating as Dylan repeatedly asks for songs to be played, like a preacher asking for prayer.

> Play Jelly Roll Morton, play Lucille
> Play Deep in a Dream and play Drivin' Wheel
> Play Moonlight Sonata in F-sharp
> And Key to the Highway by the king of the harp (Dylan 2020)

This becomes a litany of requests as Dylan treats the cultural history of the United States like a jukebox, asking for songs across genres and periods.

With the song's release Dylan fans became busy decoding the meanings of the requested songs. The interpretations can be interesting and informative in revealing sources, but the song's fuller meaning and Dylan's intent remains elusive as is usually his wont. The deeper meaning is in the fluid associations and reverberations, as Dylan rhythmically and lyrically maps the dreamscape of the invisible republic. In this he underscores the role of jeremiad he has long played, calling the nation to its better self, while recalling Kennedy's visionary contract, "Don't ask what your country can do for you," and its deferral, "I'm never gonna make it to the new frontier" (Dylan 2020). The playing of the national jukebox constitutes a national fugue into which Dylan has written and sung himself—the last song request of "Murder Most Foul" is "play Murder Most Foul" (Dylan 2020).

Dylan and Erickson are drawn to the idioms and conventions of the American romance, and in lesser creative hands this could veer us into the kitsch territory of Americana. However, they are not reanimating the long-defunct American Dream; rather, they are exposing its dark underside, that which has to be disavowed to compel belief in it. What lends depth and resonance to their romantic visions is their understanding of the darkness and dread, what Mailer termed "that concentration of ecstasy and violence which is the dream life of the nation" (Mailer 2009). While the soundtrack of the invisible republic revisits national trauma, this is not confined to the death of Kennedy but also references multiple violent divisions in the nation and especially those involving racial difference. Dylan and Erickson know this and signify it in their texts. When Dylan sings "Take me back to Tulsa to the scene of the crime" in "Murder Most Foul" he is counterpointing what happened in Dallas in 1963 with another primal scene of national division, when in 1921 a "race massacre" occurred in Tulsa, as an aspiring black community was attacked by white residents (Dylan 2020).[7] As we noted, Erickson may seek redemptive promise in "Oh Shenandoah" but he also recognizes its roots lie partly in white settler colonialism.

For all their weariness and wariness though, Dylan and Erickson also valorize the communal power of popular music, its ability to connect an imagined community. When the music stops across America following the apparition of the Twin Towers in *Shadowbahn*, this signals a profound loss

[7] The 2019 HBO TV series *Watchmen* starts from the same traumatic scene and follows its own dark arc of alternative history into the present.

of history and of civic, democratic possibility. For his part, Dylan keeps the music going through his 'never ending tour,' with over 3,000 shows since 1988.

Saving America From Itself

There is an idealism in the work of Erickson (and Marcus) that holds onto even as it critically questions the value(s) of national community in the United States. We might view the bumper sticker mentioned at the beginning of *Shadowbahn*—"SAVE AMERICA FROM ITSELF"—as an indicator of the author's perspective, seeing both self-betrayal and self-redemption in the development of the nation. His writings have increasingly sounded the alarm that American democracy is "a dream that destroys what is not fulfilled." When reviewers greeted the publication of *Shadowbahn* as a prescient forecast of the political advent of Trump, Erickson responded:

> …it was the first week of 2014, and less a matter of prophecy than paying attention, because what happened this last November has been coming awhile. Let's not let ourselves off the hook by supposing Donald Trump is something that happened to America. Rather, America happened to America, and Trump is the result. (Milazzo 2017)

If Ericson's apocalypticism appears to have found its historical moment, it is also a reminder to Americans of just how precarious the social and political order so many take for granted is, and how fragile the illusion of American reality.[8] Once again, we recall Roth's 1960 essay, where he muses on what it will mean for writers to lose grasp of their subject, this new "American reality," and he asks: "what then if one is not mystified, but stupefied?" This is the heightened danger posed by 'Trump's America' in Erickson's view, as he states in interview:

> The problem these days […] is that America has become a nation of surrealists. […] In a country where the powers that be have declared war on truth, writers who sojourn into the imagination without a moral compass or a

[8] Is it not a little shocking that Americans should need to be reminded of this? Perhaps not, perhaps (as Erickson implies) the amnesia is a component of the American worldview. The American writer Tom Wolfe echoed this amnesia in mocking fashion when he remarked that the "dark night of fascism is always descending in the United States and yet lands only in Europe" (Wolfe 1976, 117).

> sense of the real risk rendering themselves irrelevant, not to even mention irresponsible. […] I don't know if frolicking on the playground of the imagination cuts it anymore. (Milazzo 2017)

Stating that the task of the American writer today is to "come to grips in some way with […] the murder of American democracy" (Knippel 2019) underscores a newly intensified political commitment for this particular writer. It is a crime he has long been imagining though, as the logic of "a dream that destroys what is not fulfilled" (Erickson 1993, 32).

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CHAPTER 7

"The direction of the bizarre": Reimagining History in Colson Whitehead's *The Underground Railroad*

Sonia Weiner

I feel the presence of the spaces beneath me, and am reminded how much of our existence remains in mystery, how much of reality continues to elude us, how much deeper our world runs beyond what we know.
—Will Hunt (2019, 266)

Abstract In Colson Whitehead's novel, *The Underground Railroad* (2016), the past and the present are interconnected by means of a two-way (rail)road. Whitehead takes his readers on imaginative thought-routes, as well-established literary, historical, and geographic territories veer peculiarly off-course, destabilizing and scrutinizing the known and familiar. By

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linking what literary critic Ramón Saldívar has called "the fantasy of the imaginary" with "the real of history," Whitehead creates a literal and metaphorical underground railroad that takes us, as one character says, "to places we know and those we don't." By employing the speculative underground railroad as the central metaphor for his novel, Whitehead signals his readiness to challenge the myths surrounding it. He does so by turning to the fantastic, the imaginary and the anachronistic, raising thereby questions concerning 'reliability' and 'authenticity,' which have become pertinent in Trump's post-truth America. Using the example of Whitehead's 'Museum of Natural Wonders,' this chapter examines Whitehead's dialogue with P.T. Barnum, Joice Heth and the disconcerting overlap between science and popular culture, to suggest that integrity is located not in the verisimilitude of the representation of the past, but rather (following Michel Rolph Trouillot's *Silencing the Past*) in the nature of its encounter with the present.

On March 9, 2016, racing to gain the Republican presidential nomination, Donald Trump held a rally in Fayetteville, North Carolina. Throughout the event, Trump called for the removal of a small group of protestors. He used demeaning comments and incited the crowd with lines like: "See, in the good old days this didn't use to happen, because they used to treat them very rough. We've become very weak" (qtd. in Sides et al. 2018, 1). When Rakeem Jones, an African American protester, was escorted out of the venue by the police, he was punched in the side by John McGraw, who later accused Jones of "not acting like an American," adding, "The next time we see him, we might have to kill him" (Sides et al. 2018, 1). This incident, one of many, reveals how Trump shrewdly exploited simmering racial attitudes prevailing in the United States in the years preceding the 2016 elections. By using explicit appeals to racial resentment alongside complacent versions of history, he bolstered white supremacy, creating a strong partisan divide. The escalating resentment and violence were the backdrop upon which Colson Whitehead wrote his 2016 novel, *The Underground Railroad*.

In Whitehead's novel, the past and present entwine through the trope of the underground railroad to form a complex spatial temporality. The temporal incongruities that result from the convergence of slavery with events from later historical periods create a counterfactual or alternate history while the underground lends a complex spatial dimension to the construct. The merging of the central genre of the slave narrative with other

less realistic genres also places the novel within the realm of speculative realism, interlinking, to borrow Ramón Saldívar's phrase, "the fantasy of the imaginary and the real of history" (Saldívar 2011, 592). As known history veers peculiarly off-course in the novel, the protagonist, Cora, observes that "the heading of the underground railroad was laid in the direction of the bizarre," alluding to the possibilities inherent in examining consensus history through a speculative slant (Whitehead 2016, 90). This chapter will consider Whitehead's choice of "the bizarre," the extraordinary or wondrous, as a powerful means for exploring the past as it focuses on Cora's stopover in South Carolina. Its unique setting, a conflation of past and present permeated by the spatiality of the underground, permits Whitehead to explore scientific racism and eugenics practices through the unusual lens of Cora's performance in the "Museum of Natural Wonders" alongside related instances of racial uplift, exposing thereby deep and troubling connections between eras and ideologies. The discussion aims to reveal the transformative capacities of the alternate history genre which, through acts of imagination, undermines the dead-end narratives currently shaping our present.

Whitehead's use of the underground as a literary device sutures the clandestine historical organization with an imaginary subterranean train that crisscrosses the southern US in mid-nineteenth century. By foregrounding the underground, Whitehead primarily signals his challenging of myths. The historical underground railroad, operated predominantly by African Americans, was a minor movement even in its heyday. Historian David W. Blight explores the ways in which the classic book *The Underground Railroad* (1898), by Wilbert H. Siebert, "convert[ed] the realities of the underground railroad into romantic adventure stories" featuring white heroes and "helpless black vagabonds" (Blight 2006, 241). According to Blight, this perception of the underground railroad remains "one of the most enduring and popular threads in the fabric of America's national memory" (Blight 2006, 2–3), implying the nation's ongoing need for a romantic fix that conceals complex racial realities and reckonings. Cultural critic Kathryn Schulz identifies the underground railroad as "a comparatively comfortable place [for whites] to rest in a profoundly uncomfortable past," namely a site in which to appease the "national conscience" (Schulz 2016). By reclaiming the underground railroad as a site of African American agency, Whitehead's narrative aims to complicate this false legacy.

In dismantling the myth of the underground railroad, Whitehead draws on proliferating meanings of 'the underground' in popular culture and literature, not least on Ralph Ellison's *Invisible Man* (1952), where the protagonist retreats underground to amass strength and illumination for future action. In his recent research on the worlds beneath our feet, author Will Hunt, who spent significant time literally underground, emphasizes this empowering aspect of underground spaces, observing that "We go underground to die, but also to be reborn, to emerge from the womb of the earth; we dread the underground, and yet it is our first refuge in times of danger;" and not least, he adds, the underground is not only "the realm of repressed memory" but also crucially of "luminous revelation" (Hunt 2019, 29). Hunt additionally designates the underground as a site where "the seams of ineffability in the world" become apparent, that is, a site of wonder beyond words (Hunt 2019, 266). Whitehead's underground conceit contains all of the above, and is saturated with the wondrous, which permeates both its theme and genre.[1]

The term 'underground' additionally evokes the urban subway. By concretizing the underground railroad, Whitehead, who is known for his entrenched urban sensibility (that informs works such as *The Intuitionist*, *Zone One*, and *The Colossus of New York*), partakes in a sub-genre of urban fantasy termed by literary critic Elana Gomel as "collapsing." Collapsing is exemplified in the trope of the "urban black hole," which Gomel defines as an underground traumatic space:

> A city is haunted by ghosts of its past, populated by spectral memories of collective traumas. War, genocide, and terror create uncanny spaces, holes in the city fabric, which are mute testimonies to the community's desire not to remember the violence of the past. These 'traumatic' spaces are mirror images of official state memorials. The latter bury the memory by enshrining it; the former keep it undead. (Gomel 2014, 177)

If we imbue the antebellum south, as imagined by Whitehead, with 'the urban' of Gomel's articulation, Whitehead's underground conceit emerges clearly as a traumatic space that haunts the present. The uncanny black hole of the underground spatializes temporality and challenges the way the history of slavery has been officially "enshrined" in the American

[1] This analysis offers an alternative to Stephani Li's reading of Whitehead's novel. She argues that "Whitehead's underground railroad struggles to signify" due to its failure to contextualize or historicize its own conceit (Li 2019, 3).

collective memory and official narratives. Whitehead's wondrous and fantastic underground works to keep these forgotten histories "undead." Cora emerges from the depths of the underground to challenge the various quasi-realistic American settings above ground and in the present; her presence creates havoc in every situation, like a ripple in the historical narrative. Furthermore, in Whitehead's *Underground Railroad*, as in the urban imaginary, space and time refuse to remain separate. Literary critic Anna Kornbluh has similarly noted that in the novel "the past [is gathered] into the present, the South into the North" (Kornbluh 2017, 406). As a result, Whitehead's narrative representation of slavery, like that of Gomel's urban black hole, entangles "memory and trauma, utopia and dystopia, desire and fear," as well as past and present (Gomel 2014, 178). Cora's turbulent journey on the railroad thereby becomes a contemporary journey to expose racial injustice and work towards its eradication.

Whitehead returns to the familiar narratives of slavery and the underground not merely to expose how their underlying obstinate ideals of paternalism, racial determinism, and racial inferiority served the ideology of white supremacy, but also to underscore what literary critic Samuel Cohen (drawing on Hayden White's notion of emplotment) calls "the deforming shape" of past narratives that continue to inform our current moment, our environments, our institutions (Cohen 2009, 27). Whitehead's reliance on the imagination and the fantastic enables him to 'redraw' that which historical narratives sought to conceal. He actively disrupts dominant aesthetic practices, requiring readers to create new links to connect textual moments; he challenges readers to rethink the historical narrative by foregrounding the presence of African American agency within a grim racist environment.[2] In what follows, I will turn to the "South Carolina" episode to consider the ways in which the extraordinary, the wondrous, the fantastic, and the imaginary unhinge consensus history by examining Cora's varying encounters with scientific racism, the pseudoscientific belief that biology could prove inherent black inferiority.

South Carolina is Cora's first stop on the railroad after running away from the Randall plantation in Georgia with her partner in escape, Caesar. South Carolina is in dialogue with the futuristic aspect of the underground railroad through instances of modern technology in the fields of medical

[2] The reference to 'links' draws on Winfried Fluck, "The Role of the Reader and the Changing Functions of Literature: Reception Aesthetics, Literary Anthropology, Funktionsgeschichte," *European Journal of English Studies* 6.3 (2010): 258.

science and architecture, yet in fact retains racist practices similar to those Cora escaped from, albeit under a concealed and hence more pernicious guise. On the surface, South Carolina appears progressive. The US government has purchased many of the country's enslaved, including Cora in her counterfeit identity as Bessie Carpenter, providing them with "food, jobs, and housing" as well as the freedom of movement and marriage (Whitehead 2016, 93).[3] However, this enlightened façade slowly crumbles to reveal more sinister intentions, for which the underground will offer the only alternative. Whitehead's South Carolina, with its intersecting industries of science and economics, evokes what cultural critic Kodwo Eshun identifies as the "futures industry," which preprogram the present in order to control the future (Eshun 2003, 290). Prospects for African futures within the narrative of the "futures industry" are demoralizing. Whitehead, looking back to the past to move forward to the future, intervenes in the narrative by revealing how the futures industry fosters alienation in the black subject (Cora) that is, at the same time, empowering, in the form of double consciousness. He further disrupts the teleology of these industries through his intervening fantastic narrative that lays bare "the contextualizing and historicizing framework of institutional knowledge" (Eshun 2003, 292).

Reality as staged fantasy is symbolized by a twelve-story building in the center of town.[4] In a witty interplay between science fiction and fantasy, South Carolina's skyscraper is called the Griffin Building, combining the futuristic skyscraper with the mythological griffin. The griffin, typically found as a decorative element on buildings, acts as a guardian of their treasures, an ironic gesture in Cora's case. As Cora walks past "the remarkable edifice" on her way home from work each day, she initially regards it as a "monument to her profound change in circumstances" (*TUR*, 87). Yet Cora will ultimately discover that she has been seduced and deceived by its guise, for in fact, the Griffin building hosts the offices of the system that safeguards slavery. On its various floors we find a "bank," "insurance agents, government offices, and export firms," as well as "a warren of […] offices [where lawyers] worked on contracts, primarily in the cotton trade" (*TUR*, 87). As Cora labors toward what she believes is freedom and upward mobility, she is unwittingly more fully ensnared and enslaved by a

[3] Henceforth, all parenthetical references to Whitehead's *The Underground Railroad* (2016) are abbreviated as *TUR*.

[4] The first skyscraper, the *Home Insurance Building*, was constructed in Chicago in 1884.

perverse and exploitative system: South Carolina's hidden agenda is racial extermination under a pretense of civility and faux-empowerment.

Initially eager to continue northward, Cora and Caesar are lulled by comfort and appearances into a blissful forgetfulness that jeopardizes and forestalls their pursuit of freedom. Caesar, who is keener than Cora to settle down in South Carolina, pays for his decision with his life; in laboring to survive within the system of concealed slavery in South Carolina, he succeeds only in hastening his death. Cora's predicament similarly highlights this entanglement between what Kornbluh terms "the labor of struggle," the work to survive in a nation that does everything in its capacity to prevent such survival, and the "struggle of laboring," namely slavery (or modern instances of bondage) (Kornbluh 2017, 406). In order to retain her cover as a runaway and to avoid recapture, she is fit into the government system where she is assigned a job (as a nursemaid), yet, in a Catch-22 situation, it is her very act of laboring towards survival that traps her within a life-threatening system. The connections Whitehead draws between labor and struggle are a critique not only of the nation's history of slave labor but also of our current moment, where black labor is often harnessed into exploitative channels and in which the labor of struggle has not fully materialized into equal rights and opportunities.

Aspiring towards upward mobility, Cora is promoted from her job as nursemaid (attending two white children) to work at the newly minted "Museum of Natural Wonders" (*TUR*, 108). This establishment is primarily aligned with the model of the Museum of Natural History, "a learned institution dedicated to higher education and scientific research," which emerged in major cities in the United States at the turn of the nineteenth century (Rieppel 2016, 246). In their role as educational and scientific establishments, Natural History museums exhibited taxidermy collections, mechanical devices and cabinets of curiosity containing artifacts from around the world. Whitehead's "Museum of Natural Wonders" similarly exhibits a broad historical context intended to "educate the public" about "American history," familiarize them with the "flora and fauna" of North America, and enable them "to see its people" (*TUR*, 109). Furthermore, "Authenticity" according to the curator, "was [the museum's] watchword" in its attempt to portray "the truth of the historic encounter" (*TUR*, 116).

Cora is displayed as part of a living history exhibit on slavery within this larger context, yet she will soon begin to question its veracity and authenticity. Recognizing the inaccuracy of the display titled, "Typical Day on

the Plantation," that features a slave placidly working at a spinning wheel outside her cabin—in stark contrast to the harrowing scenes described in the Plantation sections of the novel—Cora suspects that the two other settings, "Scenes from Darkest Africa," and "Life on the Slave Ship," are similarly false. She confronts the curator, calling into question the historical and scientific objectivity of the displays which require her complicity with her own objectification within the gross misrepresentation of slavery as a benevolent institution. The curator concedes to minor historical and scientific inaccuracies, yet attributes them to practical considerations. If he could, he tells Cora, he would "fit an entire field of cotton in the display" and have "a dozen actors to work it" (*TUR*, 110). The curator's words ironically recall Jorge Luis Borges's short parable "On Exactitude in Science," in which the cartographers' commitment to accuracy eventually causes the map to overlap the entire territory it sought to chart, raising questions concerning the accuracy and authenticity of a given representation (Borges 1999, 325). Whitehead critiques the presentation of slavery in the museum as a simulacra which could invalidate its reality in the past(-present), as well as the erroneous display of slavery that falsifies the reality it sets out to represent.

As historian Michel Trouillot examines in his book *Silencing the Past*, authenticity in a long historical perspective "resides not in the fidelity to an alleged past but in an honesty vis-à-vis the present as it re-presents that past" (Trouillot 2015, 148). Rather than faithfulness to the "historical record" that conceals silences and erasures determined by relations of power and domination, he emphasizes the importance of the context in which historical narratives are encountered in the present. In illustration of his point, he explores the complications involved in a planned Disney theme park (to be based in Virginia, 1994) that would exhibit installations featuring slavery. He identifies the problem not as one of historical accuracy (which he believes can be overcome) but as the authenticity of the encounter. When we imagine Disney's project "and visualize a line of white tourists munching on chewing gum and fatty food, purchasing tickets for the 'painful, disturbing and agonizing' experience," he writes, "what is obscene is not a relation to The Past, but the dishonesty of that relation as it would happen in our present" (Trouillot 2015, 148). These conditions of viewing, as political anthropologist Yarimar Bonilla underlines, sever the connections between the inequalities of the past and those of the present, thereby neutralizing institutional responsibility and trivializing the distance between slavery and the present (Bonilla 2013, 71). It

is not just slavery that needs to be denounced, Troulliot argues, but more pertinently "the racist present within which representations of slavery are produced" (Trouillot 2015, 148). Following Trouillot, we understand Cora's display in the museum as inauthentic not only because it is meant to obfuscate the real, dehumanizing conditions of plantation slavery but also due to the conditions under which it is viewed: "The children banged on the glass and pointed […] in a disrespectful fashion […]. The patrons sometimes yelled things … comments that the girls couldn't make out but gave every indication of rude suggestions" (*TUR*, 111).

How then, Whitehead asks through his own fictional endeavor to represent slavery, can a representation of slavery be both accurate and authentic? There is no question of the dishonesty of the slavery museum display within the fictional moment of the novel. The exhibit, in the service of the ideology of white supremacy, works to both justify and naturalize, via a benign misrepresentation, slavery within American culture and history, and reveals the way science sought to legitimize racism. However, Whitehead's narrative representation of a museum that displays a false exhibit of slavery in order to uphold white supremacy offers a disturbing honesty to a twenty-first century audience still plagued by a similar rhetoric. Through his verbal simulation of the quasi-scientific museum, Whitehead enacts what Eshun terms "museological emulation," revealing and exposing the ways in which institutional knowledge is historicized and contextualized; he mimics the museum while simultaneously laying bare its underlying ideological structures (Eshun 2003, 292). Whitehead thus utilizes the museum to create a racist fantasy while maintaining the accuracy and authenticity of the exchange in the present moment and exposing the biases embedded within institutional knowledge.

Furthermore, Cora and two other black women are the only 'living exhibits' in the museum that otherwise relies on taxidermy and plaster, revealing their connection with 'human curiosities,' or *lusus naturae*, literally meaning 'freaks of nature.' Although curiosities were occasionally exhibited in early nineteenth century in museums as "data to be examined in quest of answers to the pressing scientific questions of the day," sociologist Robert Bogdan writes, "they were not the featured attractions" (Bogdan 1988, 29).[5] Human curiosities were more closely associated with

[5] Bogdan notes that while Charles Peale exhibited albinos and other human curiosities in his Philadelphia Museum (opened in 1784) alongside natural history specimens, they were sidelined for "they attracted too much frivolous attention" (Bogdan 1988, 29).

the dime museum, known for its commercial appeal as an amusement venue featuring ambiguous attractions of rehearsed deception, geared to attract and titillate audiences. The very name of Whitehead's fictional establishment, "Museum of Natural Wonders," corresponds with titles given to late-nineteenth and early twentieth-century freak show venues, such as the "'Hall of Human Curiosities,' 'Congress of Human Wonders,' or 'Museum of Nature's Mistakes,'" and effectively fuses the blurred territory between science and hoax typical to the freak show (Bogdan 1988, 3).

As Bogdan explores in his pioneering work *Freak Show* (1988), the social construction of 'the freak' distinguished between 'freaks' born with physical anomalies and those who were not (i.e. people who feigned abnormality or developed a novel act).[6] Non-Western 'others' consisted of another type of freak, and were exhibited on the basis of their physical and ethnic difference. The exhibition of ethnic others originated in Europe, where 'specimen' from European empires were publicly displayed, first in solo shows, as in the case of Sarah Baartman of the Khoikhoi people of South Africa (labeled as "The Hottentot Venus"),[7] and later in "human zoos" that were showcased in World Fair exhibits in the mid-nineteenth century to allegedly justify the necessity of European imperial conquest. In the eighteenth century, one-person curiosities traveled across the United States, exhibiting at fairs and carnivals, often alongside animal curiosities from far-off countries. Scientists began to show interest in these odd human displays which they saw as evidence for scientific questions of monogenesis and polygenesis (freaks could furnish 'proof' for both theories). This 'scientific' angle granted the curiosities entrance into museums, yet their sensational appeal prevented them from being centrally exhibited. Identifying their financial potential in drawing crowds, it was showmen who institutionalized the freak show within the dime museum.

While the display of 'freaks of nature' had been practiced since medieval times in Europe, it was the American freak show of the mid-nineteenth century that transformed it into something more pernicious, where corporeal difference attained alleged scientific meaning. Displayed alongside

[6] Bogdan explains: "being extremely tall is a matter of physiology [but] being a giant involves something more," namely "the performance of a stylized presentation" and the marketing of the freak image (Bogdan 1988, 3).

[7] Brought to England by the army surgeon Alexander Dunlop in 1810 at 20 years of age, Sarah Baartman was exhibited extensively in Europe until her death in Paris in 1815.

people with physiological and mental disabilities, racial and ethnic others were billed as 'freaks' by American showmen revealing, as medical ethicist Harriet A. Washington observes, the porous boundary "separating popular display from medical display" (Washington 2007, 137). Washington found that "Some medicalized freak body types were exclusive to blacks, who had […] in the United States, a near monopoly on 'primitive peoples'" (Washington 2007, 137). The blurring of boundaries, therefore, between persons with 'eccentricities' and those of racial others inevitably routed the racial other into the niche of the freak. Literary scholar Benjamin Reiss similarly notes that the "increasing control of the freak's body was accompanied by the incorporation of freakishness into the developing notions of racial science" and was harnessed into "scientific attempts to essentialize race in the antebellum period" (Reiss 1999, 85; 79). As the convention of the freak show merged with pseudo-scientific discourse, it created, according to cultural historian Uri McMillan, "an additional didactic imperative to read the racialized bodies of so-called 'freaks,' especially black ones, as corporeal evidence of medical abnormality" (McMillan 2015, 36). Thus, the freak show, through so-called scientific inquiries into racial essence, played a central role in creating and upholding white supremacist ideologies (Reiss 1999, 84–5). On display in the "Museum of Natural Wonders," Cora clearly corresponds with the idea of the African 'freak' as an inferior specimen, reflecting back to the museum visitors their own alleged superiority.

However, a unidimensional reading of Cora's role as a freak is complicated through an association with showman P. T. Barnum, the man behind the most famous freak show of all. Situated within Barnum's *American Museum* in New York (1841–1865), the show cleverly exploited the unstable boundaries between science, hoax, and entertainment by combining diverse attractions under one roof. A zoo, a lecture hall, and scientific taxidermy exhibits coexisted alongside a wax museum, a theater featuring minstrel shows, and a freak show, which was the lynchpin of the museum. Barnum's famous exhibits included pure hoaxes such as the Feejee-Mermaid (part-monkey-part-fish), persons with physical anomalies or extreme disabilities, such as General Tom Thumb and the Siamese twins Chang and Eng, and non-Westerners, who ranged from 'the exotic' to those suffering from vitiligo and microcephaly.[8] If the display of human

[8] These later individuals were used to provide "'the missing links' in an evolutionary chain extending upward from monkey to black man to white" (Reiss 2010, 42).

curiosities in the past had been more open to racial ambiguity, Barnum's institutionalization of the freak show utilized the curiosities to fix definitions: "By holding bodies that were supposed to be abnormal and deviant up for display, freak shows asked their audiences to dwell implicitly on the normative meanings of the body: particularly what it meant to be 'white' or 'black'" (Reiss 2010, 42). Whitehead's decision to place Cora in a live exhibit draws on this new type of urban spectacle and its heady fusion of science and entertainment, a fusion that has, in the twenty-first century, crept back into the limelight.[9]

Barnum as the virtuoso of the freak show is especially relevant for Cora's performance in the "Museum of Natural Wonders" insofar as his entry into what would become a blazing career in show business was intimately connected to an enslaved woman named Joice Heth, whom Barnum purchased from R. W. Lindsay of Kentucky in 1835.[10] Heth was billed as a 161-year-old black woman who had served as a nursemaid to young George Washington. Blind, paralytic, and emaciated, Heth became a traveling exhibit for Barnum in New York (Niblo's Garden, August 1835) and throughout New England until her death seven months later (February 19, 1836). Reiss, who has explored the Barnum-Heth enterprise in depth in *The Showman and the Slave*, emphasizes that Barnum's success with Heth was his ticket into an exploitative and financially lucrative business. Heth's tour launched the 'golden age' of freak shows in the United States, with Barnum at the helm, conning his way into fame. Upon Heth's death, Barnum orchestrated a public autopsy that stabilized her identity into a legible framework and lined his pockets with cash.

Reiss observed that Heth's exhibit (while alive) was marked by "a curious multivalence," as she was variously perceived as a human oddity, a scientifically valuable specimen, a patriotic emblem of the past, an embodiment of ancient religious practices, and a good performer (Reiss 1999, 81).[11] Her physical embodiment of multiple possibilities raised a variety of contradictions, not least her blackness as opposed to her connection to the patriotic past, her old age alongside her vibrant storytelling, and her

[9] Beyond the rise of white supremacism in popular culture, see also Angela Saini's *Superior: The Return of Race Science* (Boston: Beacon Press, 2019) and Robert Wald Sussman's *The Myth of Race: The Troubling Persistence of an Unscientific Idea* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2016).

[10] Lindsay sold his interest in Heth's exhibit to Barnum, who became her "new manager and virtual owner" (Reiss 2010, 1).

[11] Reiss includes descriptions of her physical disfiguration that appeared in the media.

indeterminate status as a slave in the free North. These indeterminacies of race and identity drew large northern crowds whose attitudes fluctuated between "identification and objectification, exaltation and denigration, nostalgia and disgust" (Reiss 1999, 81), illuminating the extent to which the audience was preoccupied with slavery and the degree to which it mediated their identity (Reiss 2010, 7). Cora is in dialogue with Heth through the fusion of science and the freak show, and through the contradictions between agency and objecthood that characterize both of their performances. Her humiliating experiences at the museum reveal how her role as a scientific exhibit coalesces with her attraction as a freak.

Uri McMillan's *Embodied Avatars* adds another relevant aspect to the discussion. In examining Heth's short but intense career with Barnum, McMillan locates the audience's fascination not necessarily with her indeterminacy, but within what he terms "Mammy Memory," namely a "sentimental link between childhood, race, and nostalgia," born of the historical role designated to the black nursemaid who raised her white master's children (McMillan 2015, 26). McMillan focuses on the "affective surplus" produced by spectators while viewing Heth, enabling them to "reexperience" their own sentimental bond with their caregivers, momentarily letting the "abject status" of Heth as a slave "[shift] out of focus" (McMillan 2015, 27). Childhood innocence, as African American Studies scholar Robin Bernstein has argued, is raced white and can extend to include the nursemaid, while her black body simultaneously continues to act as a racial foil to bolster white American identity (Bernstein 2011). This affective 'maternal' connection between Heth and her white audience is therefore sullied; Heth may fascinate as a link to an idealized national and childhood past, but "sinister racial undertones," McMillan warns, "lurk […] below the surface" of this "saccharine affection," as the black nursemaid is ultimately castoff as an abject "racial monstrosity" (McMillan 2015, 27; 28).

McMillan's arguments are couched within his larger discussion of black American women performers from the antebellum period onward who "performed objecthood" as a powerful tool of subterfuge and as a skillful method to bypass hegemonic limitations imposed upon them to attain agency. If their objecthood was externally imposed by whites, learning to perform it from their own subject position had the effect of transforming the women into artistic statements of alterity (McMillan 2015, 7). Not without dangers, this kind of rehearsed objecthood can however lead to "an emancipated subjectivity" (McMillan 2015, 8). McMillan argues that

while Heth's performance of Washington's nursemaid furnished 'proof' for an entirely fictional state that her audience was eager to uphold, she may have willingly helped to create and sustain the image in order to maintain a modicum of agency within its multiplicity of "ontological hoaxes," which empowered her to enact a form of antebellum performance art (McMillan 2015, 40; 61). There is possible evidence she had vocally objected to the role she was made to play, by interjecting a "*sonic of dissent*" that disrupted the otherwise "manufactured" narrative (McMillan 2015, 58; emphasis in the original). Reiss has also grappled with the question of Heth's agency, with the degree to which her performance was scripted by Barnum, and to what extent, if any, she retained any control over it. Based on a minor detail in an archive, Reiss imagines a speculative biography for Heth in which she was the originator of the nursemaid hoax, and hence her own agent.[12]

Whitehead's Cora engages with the question of scripted performance and agency in major ways. On display, she initially felt as though she were "back in the furrows of Georgia" subjected to "the merciless eye," not of the overseer but of the public (*TUR*, 125). Cora's alienation becomes a venue for a form of self-empowerment as she perceives that "Truth was a changing display in a show window, manipulated by hands when you weren't looking, alluring and ever out of reach" (*TUR*, 116). Emboldened by her understanding of her role in the performance of slavery, she retaliates by endowing it with distinctive agency. Primarily, she inflicts an "unwavering and fierce" steady gaze, an "evil eye," upon the occasional white spectator until they "broke" and reverted their gaze in fear or confusion. One individual at a time, Cora strives to teach the larger community that "the slave, the African in your midst, is looking at you" (*TUR*, 126). In charging her performance with brazen agency, Cora interrupts the pseudo-scientific discourse and reveals that the actual beasts are on the other side of the glass-pane windows; in her eyes they are "white monsters" who "[push] their greasy snouts against the window, sneering and hooting" (*TUR*, 116). Although Cora is displayed as an object within a racist setting, her performance of her alleged objecthood serves to fuel her subjectivity, enabling her to achieve a measure of emancipation.

[12] Heth, he speculates, may have devised the narrative of Washington when she was a trusted 'house slave' in the home of William Heth, one of President Washington's inner circle, and then of his brother Andrew of Louisville, Kentucky (*Showman*, Ch. 11: "A Speculative Biography," 211–24).

Furthermore, Cora's role as a nursemaid before she comes to work at the museum places her within a maternal context, drawing on McMillan's "mammy memory." Significantly, Cora's former charge, "pigtailed Maisie," comes to visit the museum, "wearing one of the dresses Cora used to wash and hang on the line," drawing the reader's attention back to Cora's affective role alongside her subsequent denigration. "Maisie didn't place her at first. Then Cora fixed her with the evil eye and the girl knew" (*TUR*, 126). As the other children point and jeer, Maisie is transfixed by the convergence of Cora's gaze with her own. Cora's strong will prevails over Maisie's attempt to pin her like one of the insects in the adjacent collection: Maisie's "face twitched in fear" before she "scamper[ed] out of the frame" (*TUR*, 127). Furthermore, Cora's bold performance reveals how a black woman, forced to perform "objecthood" within an oppressive social situation, has "seized" her situation, her alienation, as an opportunity to "gain agency," and "challenge foundational (and often fetishized) notions of 'truth' and accuracy" that the museum attempted to convey (McMillan 2015, 16; 14). Cora challenges not only the authenticity of the exhibits but also of the audience's encounter with them, and in the process, she exposes the underlying racist ideology supporting them.

In controlling her performance, Cora becomes what theater scholar Daphne Brooks refers to as a "bod[y] in dissent" (Brooks 2006, 8). As she undermines the white gaze, she is transformed into a "dark [point] of possibility" that has the power to reconfigure "black and female bodies on display" (Brooks 2006, 8). This becomes relevant for the reader, who is viewing Cora's performance as a protagonist of a novel, itself a material object circulated, among other things, for audience interest and for profit. The popularity of the book, which won the National Book Award in 2016, the Pulitzer Prize for Fiction in 2017, and was adapted to a limited drama series by Amazon in 2021, implies an ongoing public interest in the legacy of slavery and the question of 'racial' identity. Whitehead creates an intersection of gazes between the reader and Cora, requiring twenty-first-century readers to question whether and/or to what extent 'the other' (any other) informs the construction of their own identity.

Cora additionally reenacts Heth's status of enslaved-freedom, or free-enslavement, as she performs a fantasy of slavery for a white southern audience while still officially a slave herself; like Heth, her "corporeality became a tacit form of proof, even though the truth she exhibited was a complete fiction" (McMillan 2015, 40). It is precisely in her enactment or performance of slavery that Cora finds resourcefulness and innovation to

engage in subtle acts of resistance. Cora additionally uses the discriminating installations to rewrite the preordained script, illustrating, as scholar of black expressive cultures Jayna Brown puts it, how black performing women "ragged the rhythms of worktime" (Brown 2008, 8). Not only does she 'break the fourth wall' by directing a piercing gaze at her audience, she also reorganizes her schedule to revise the historical narrative of slavery into a "soothing logic" (*TUR*, 125). Cora's logic is anti-Enlightenment: time goes backward and America itself is undone. Ideally, she begins as a slave on the "Plantation" display; she proceeds to "Life on the Slave Ship," and ends as a free woman in "Scenes from Darkest Africa." By blurring 'work and play,' or by "translating alienation into self-actualizing performance," Cora, like other black women performers, was able to reclaim her body "*in*, as well as *from*, the world of work" (Brooks 2006, 3; Brown 2008, 7; emphasis in original), and thus, through performance, achieve a modicum of freedom. This "unwinding of America," which revises the stigma of Africa as the Dark(est) continent, transforming it into a desirable destination, "never failed to cast her into a river of calm" (*TUR*, 125). In altering the narrative, Cora is, as Heth before her, "tripping up the logic of linear time" (McMillan 2015, 14).[13] For the museum goers, Cora embodies the primitive past by force of the official narrative within which the museum situates her. By revising its logic, she prevents the historical narrative from solidifying, or from "stay[ing] dead or seemingly [being] finished" (McMillan 2015, 14). An avatar from the underground, her performance both haunts the narrative that South Carolina aims to construct and compels the contemporary reader to examine persistent twenty-first-century narratives of racial bias and discrimination.

Despite Cora's illuminating moments of agency, the daily performance-cum-labor in the museum underscores her link with servitude and her display as 'freak,' constantly forcing her back into the fantastic-reality that the smooth façade of the Griffin building works to conceal. It is not by chance that the museum opened on the same day as the new hospital, which had previously been located in the Griffin building. Cora visits the clinic twice, once in the old location, and once in the new building. On her first visit to the clinic on the tenth floor of the Griffin, Cora undergoes a medical examination. Her observation that the "gleaming steel instruments in the examination room looked like tools Terrance Randall might

[13] Heth's capacity to trip the logic was also a factor of her alleged embodied connection to Washington and to her advanced age.

have ordered from the blacksmith for sinister purposes" is a premonition she fails to heed (*TUR*, 118–19). Her second visit to the clinic in the new building introduces Cora to the physician Dr. Stevens, who attempts to persuade her to undergo a "new surgical technique wherein the tubes inside a woman were severed to prevent the growth of a baby" (*TUR*, 113). The technique, he tells her, "had been perfected on the colored inmates of a Boston asylum," where he had studied (*TUR*, 113). It begins to dawn upon Cora that black women in South Carolina "were property that the doctors could do with as they pleased" (*TUR*, 114). However, contrary to 'breeding' slave women for economic profit, as was customary in chattel slavery, the doctors in South Carolina aimed for extermination through sterilization.

Dr. Stevens, the main character in the short section, "Stevens" (which occurs chronologically prior to the South Carolina chapter, yet appears directly after it in the book layout), is intimately linked with these quasi-scientific practices. Aloysius Stevens, then a poor medical student in Boston, works the night shift to fulfill his university fellowship. His job is to assist the body snatchers, Carpenter and Cobb, to dig up dead bodies and deliver them to the medical school for dissection. The "body trade," which had become reckless due to new legislation amidst a growing demand for cadavers, has Carpenter turn exclusively to black bodies; their families never appealed to the law when the "bodies of their loved ones disappeared" (*TUR*, 139). Stevens's belief that "a colored cadaver […] did more for the cause of colored advancement than the most high-minded abolitionist," draws a morbid link between the history of scientific experimentation and African Americans (*TUR*, 139).[14] Stevens's reference to "colored cadavers" signifies on Joice Heth's autopsy, which "dramatized some of the new meanings of racial identity and provided an opportunity for whites to debate them […] as they gazed upon or read about her corpse" (Reiss 1999, 79). It also relates directly to Cora, as Stevens's ongoing research on black female bodies seeks for their ultimate disappearance.

[14] An example of scientific experimentation and African Americans is the notorious Tuskegee Syphilis Study, a forty-year project (1932–1972) conducted by government doctors from the Public Health Service, who examined the effects of untreated syphilis in a group of black men from Macon County, Alabama, under the pretense of treating them. In *Bad Blood*, James H. Jones writes that the men "were simply being watched until they died and their bodies examined for the ravages of the disease" (Jones 1993, 1).

As a certified doctor, Stevens's career in the "body trade" continues its course through the practice of sterilizing African American women in South Carolina. Cora, under her alias "Bessie Carpenter"—which bears morbid affinities with the body snatcher—and through her aforementioned links to the 'freak,' is clearly doomed by these 'scientific' practices. She later learns (from stationmaster Sam) that her examination was a preliminary stage in the state's "strategic sterilization" program, and that the practice of eugenics (alongside a medical experiment resembling the Tuskegee Syphilis Study) is none other than a government-devised program intended to diminish and ultimately eradicate the African population in the state (*TUR*, 146). The quasi-scientific discourse practiced by Dr. Stevens draws on Sir Galton's quasi-science of eugenics, which journeyed across the Atlantic in the late nineteenth century, finding fertile ground in the American brand of scientific racism. The movement peaked in the early twentieth century with the *Buck vs. Bell* sterilization ruling, which permitted compulsory sterilization of the 'unfit.' The definition of fitness, open to interpretation, was determined by prevailing cultural values and social beliefs.[15] Records reveal that compulsory sterilization and passive euthanasia were practiced in the United States on the racially and ethnically undesired, the economically impoverished, and the medically infirm well into the second half of the twentieth century.[16]

By displacing eugenics onto slavery, Whitehead raises awareness towards its under-recognized practice in the United States, implying that similar attitudes fuel not only slavery but also government-fostered uplift. When Cora witnesses a black woman in South Carolina screaming, "My babies, they're taking away my babies!," she assumes the woman is haunted by her plantation past. When Cora understands that the woman was a victim of selective eugenics practices, she considers the question of 'fitness' vis-à-vis her former employer, Mrs. Anderson, whose depression did not disqualify her from motherhood: "Did [her 'black' moods] make her unfit? Was her

[15] In the early twentieth century, 'freaks' fell under eugenics practitioners' definition of "pathological rarities," whose "diseased" condition was better suited for a hospital and not public entertainment (Bogdan 1988, 64).

[16] See Harriet A. Washington, "The Black Stork: The Eugenic Control of African American Reproduction," in *Medical Apartheid* (New York: Doubleday, 2007), 320–66 and Rebecca Kluchin, "Sterilizing 'Unfit' Women," in *Fit to Be Tied: Sterilization and Reproductive Rights in America, 1950–1980* (New Brunswick NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2011), 72–113. Both authors discuss in detail the "Mississippi Appendectomy," involuntary hysterectomies performed in larger percentages on African American women, often in violation of the law.

doctor offering her the same proposal? No" (*TUR,* 135). Ironically, the 'unfit' black woman was nonetheless qualified to be a nursemaid for the white woman's children. However, these practices are not something of the past. The perception of racial others as inferior continues to inform contemporary social and institutional practices. Harriet A. Washington, who has examined birth control contraceptives administered by Planned Parenthood clinics, has found that government policies continue to control population growth in low-income black women. Washington cites the example of the long-term Norplant Contraceptive implant that "was selectively marketed not only to poor black women but also to thousands of young black girls" through "public and low-income clinics" (Washington 2007, 326). She further explores how Norplant is used as a coercive tool for sterilization by the legal system in punishing low-income black mothers (Washington 2007, 332).[17] Washington's work reveals how Whitehead's temporal displacement of eugenics may be seen as a means for considering its ongoing legacy.[18]

South Carolina's sinister plans to dilute and eradicate its black population is thus thinly disguised under the pretense of racial uplift. Racial 'uplift,' as race historian Ibram X. Kendi has recently explicated, is itself steeped in racist presuppositions. "Uplift suasion," Kendi explains, "was based on the idea that White people could be persuaded away from their racist ideas if they saw Black people improving their behavior, uplifting themselves from their low station in American society" (Kendi 2016, 124). Yet this very strategy pivoted on the racist idea that "'negative' Black behavior […] was responsible for the existence and persistence of racist ideas" (Kendi 2016, 124–5). Partaking in uplift suasion in the hope of undermining racism and integrating into mainstream culture has not only failed, Kendi argues, but has achieved the opposite results: "Uplift suasion has brought on the progression of racism—new racist policies and ideas" (Kendi 2016, 505). In Whitehead's South Carolina, uplift is practically synonymous with eugenics.

[17] For further discussion of the abusive use of Norplant and Depo-Provera on African American women, see Washington (2007), 319–34.

[18] Eugenics also persists in current political discourse. In her article, "'This May Be the Most Dangerous Thing Donald Trump Believes': Eugenic Populism and the American Body Politic," American Studies scholar Susan Currell illustrates how Trump employed rhetoric similar to that used by eugenicists in the early twentieth century to fuel white supremacist agendas and foreground his own "genetic superiority." See Susan Currell, *Amerikastudien/ American Studies* 64, no. 2 (2019), 292.

The dangers of uplift are amplified towards the end of Cora's term in South Carolina. Ascending the rooftop of the Griffin building to gaze down on the South from a god's-eye view, Cora, "giddy" with height, enjoys "see[ing] how diminished the world became when you gained the proper distance" (*TUR*, 118). Yet, the deceitful heights attained through the pretense of the Griffin building cloud Cora's perspective to the extent that she fails to see the looming dangers, and in particular, the swiftly approaching demonic slave catcher, Ridgeway. 'Up-lift,' literalized here not only by the skyscraper but also by the mechanical technology of the elevator (or lift), turns out to be a dangerous life-threatening compromise.[19] To avoid recapture, Cora flees to the alternative technological wonder, the underground railroad, narrowly escaping a violent death. Whitehead's underground emerges as an antidote to, and an inversion of, "vertical thinking," which privileges and values lofty regions (heaven) and loathes the nether ones that have traditionally been likened to "darkness, filth, danger, and monstrosity" (Gomel 2014, 181–2). In contradistinction, for Cora the underground functions as an empowering alternate horizontal axis of refuge and rebellion, where her "labor of struggling" materializes in a journey in defiance of slavery and towards the possibility of freedom. The subterranean spatiality and illuminating darkness become an embodiment of possibilities for Cora, whose body, in its undeniable corpo-reality, scarred by repeated beatings, stamped by a thousand hostile gazes, is literally borne onward by the underground, through space and time, to the twenty-first century, where it demands recognition not as a spectacle, but as equal.

As a performing black subject, Cora finds freedom within the narrative, using art to negate and reshape the destiny allotted to her by and in America. It is the underground railroad that enables her to move towards (although not to reach) an idea of freedom despite America's persistent attempts to thwart her progress. Cora's determination is testimony to her rejection of a preordained script. Her resolve is literalized in the final stages of her journey, which requires her to groundbreakingly carve her subterraneous way in the tunnel in order to advance: "Was she traveling through the tunnel or digging it? Each time she brought her arms down on the lever, she drove a pickax into the rock, swung a sledge onto a railroad spike" (*TUR*, 303). Cora's re-scripting of the racist myth is echoed in Whitehead's narrative rhetoric and conceit of the underground, which

[19] The elevator is a theme explored by Whitehead in *The Intuitionist* (1999).

like a pickax, hacks into historical myths and reexamines "the truth of the historical encounter." Similar to his protagonist, Whitehead's narrative is both a journey and an action, resulting in a novel that has the potential to spike awareness of lingering racial inequities and establish a broader based support for change.

Placing Cora within the discourse of the freak and associating her with P. T. Barnum's elaborate Joice Heth hoax allows us to read the various ways in which Whitehead's novel exposes and dismantles the kind of 'lies' that formed historical 'truths' and racist narratives. Critics have shown that in order to maintain the Heth hoax Barnum shrewdly exploited the press at the precise moment that news became commodified in a nascent capitalist market, enabling him to manipulate the 'truth' for his personal interest. As Kevin Young, poet and newly appointed director of the National Museum of African American History and Culture puts it, Barnum "tapped into American democracy at its most primal, as well as American hypocrisy at its height" not only by "relying on or inventing experts, but [by] making experts of his audience" (Young 2017, 32). Young further identifies Donald Trump as P. T. Barnum's modern inheritor. As a showman, Young claims, Trump is "powerfully aware of media, by turns defiant of and dependent on it in ways that only reinforce the spectacle's power" (Young 2017, 441).[20] Like Barnum, he "exploits deep-seated social divisions" that "echo the very same ones of race and difference on which the history of the hoax has long relied" (Young 2017, 442). Whitehead's narrative is a clear response not only to the racist discourses informing the past hoax but is also a challenge to its twenty-first century successor: post-truth.

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[20] Beyond numerous similarities, including bankruptcies, running for office, and the burning down of Barnum's museum and Trump's Casino (his "symbolic" museum), Young also notes differences, the major one being that Barnum catered to the crowds, and not the reverse. In the past, finding oneself "fooled, scammed, diddled, entertained," was part of the pleasure of the hoax (Young 2017, 432). Today, sowing misunderstanding seems to be the point.

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CHAPTER 8

Underground Airlines, Chaos, and Dehumanization

Karen Hellekson

I said when the book came out that it was "an alternate history that wasn't alternate enough." Now, sadly, a year out from publication, that is even truer than it was.
—Ben Winters (2017)

Abstract Ben H. Winter's *Underground Airlines* (2016), a novel by a white man that focuses on the experience of a morally ambiguous Black bounty hunter in a contemporary United States where slavery is enshrined in the Constitution, is an alternate history that focuses on history as entropic—that is, history as a force that tends to disorder and chaos. Alternate history, like all science fiction, uses displacement to create a different world that permits insight into the existing one; *Underground Airlines* comments on the horrific legacy of slavery in the United States and explores the complicity necessary to keep a white supremacist system

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in place. Although the composition and release of the book predate Trump's ascendance to the US presidency, the cultural moment that permitted Trump's rise informs Winters's noir–sf mashup. Winters's world, where slavery still exists, is a terrifying extension of Trumpian dehumanization of the other, where the last vestige of humanity is stripped from the Black body. The chaotic nature of the abject protagonist and his world are central to the novel's message: slavery is still with us, and the abject, dehumanized other is required for the smooth running of the nation-state even as the nature of that other forces chaos. However, the chaotic force of history, with those inside and outside the geographical and metaphorical edges of the state constantly struggling against each other and thereby constituting one another, incessantly provides hopeful new openings that may be exploited.

Literalizing a Metaphor

Ben H. Winter's winning *Underground Airlines* (2016), a novel by a white man that focuses on the experience of a morally ambiguous Black bounty hunter in a contemporary United States where slavery is enshrined in the Constitution, is one of the few alternate histories that focuses on history as entropic—that is, history as a force that tends to disorder and chaos. As a genre, alternate history, like all science fiction, uses displacement to create a different world that permits insight into the existing one; we must tacitly lay the alternate version of historical events next to what we understand to be reality and mine the differences for insight into our own world. Indeed, part of the pleasure of reading alternate histories is identifying the nexus moment when it all changed, then tracing the resulting effects as they move forward in time. *Underground Airlines* uses this genre's displacement to comment on the horrific legacy of slavery in the United States and explore the complicity necessary to keep a white supremacist system in place. In an interview about the novel, Winters notes, "There is no way to untangle these contemporary evils from our historical evil, and I thought that maybe literalizing the metaphor—changing 'in a way slavery is still with us' to 'slavery is still with us' would be a compelling way to think about the world" (Winters 2016a). The choice to write an alternate history allows him to posit a world where the enslavement of Black subjects remains literal.

Although the composition and release of the book predate Donald Trump's ascendance to the US presidency in 2017, the cultural moment that permitted Trump's rise informs Winters's noir–science fiction mashup. However, the novel also holds special resonance because its themes of race, institutionalized violence, and corporate greed match the tenor of the Trump presidency. The novel's big reveal is that corporations based in the Hard Four states that permit slavery (Alabama, Louisiana, Mississippi, and a unified North and South Carolina) are engaged in experiments designed to further strip humanity from Black subjects by using genetic material stolen from Black women to engineer a worker who will not be considered human. Winters's world is thus a terrifying extension of a Trumpian dehumanization of the other, where the last vestige of humanity is stripped from an abject Black body in the name of commerce. The entropic, chaotic nature of the text is central to its message: slavery is still with us, and the dehumanized other is required for the smooth running of the nation-state even as the nature of that other forces chaos.

Writing About the Black Abject

Winters received both expansive praise and blowback for his book. In general, the book is considered well written and exciting, and it won the 2016 Sidewise Award for the year's best novel-length alternate history. Critics liked the book, calling it "astonishing" and "in the genre's very first rank" (Finch 2016), a "thrilling, tightly plotted and noirish thriller" (Barnett 2016), and a "smart, well-crafted book with a big, attention-grabbing conceit" (Grady 2016). Kathryn Schulz cogently notes that Winters "is ultimately far more interested in the political, intellectual, and moral compromises that people make in order to live in the presence of, and sustain the existence of, legal bondage. […] He wants to get us to see the past in the present—the innumerable ways that we still live in a world made by slavery" (Schulz 2016). Writer Lev Grossman notes, "This is a white writer going after questions of what it's like to be Black in America. It's a fearless thing to do" (qtd. in Alter 2016). Black Twitter didn't necessarily agree: "Octavia Butler did this in 1979," Saeed Jones (@theferocity) wrote on 5 July 2016, linking to the *New York Times* review that quoted Grossman, responding to the review's headline, "In His New Novel, Ben Winters Dares to Mix Slavery and Sci-Fi." Daniel José Older (@djolder), in a string of 4 July 2016 tweets that pick up on and criticize Grossman's "fearless" comment, writes, "The bar for what is 'fearlessness' for

privileged people writing 'the other' is so low and the rush to forgive when they fuck up is so fast" (2016a), continuing, "*Being* a writer of color is risky and requires fearlessness. Writing characters of color when you're white means you get called brave" (2016b).

Winters (2016a) addressed some of this criticism directly, indicating that of course he knew he was not the first person to mix science fiction and slavery: "There was a *NYT* profile of me, which managed to give the impression that I was the first person in history to use genre fiction to address slavery, and the internet decided I had never heard of Octavia Butler. So for the record: I have heard of Octavia Butler! I love her and have written of how much I love her!" He also attempted to describe how he negotiated his fraught subject position as a white man writing a first-person account of a Black man in a world where slavery still exists:

> There is a long and ugly history in this country of white artists representing African-American voices and African-American characters in ways that are stereotypical or sort of coarse or, you know, merely exploitative. […] it was definitely very much my intention when I set out to write the book […] to not be one of those books […] to be thoughtful and to do my homework, […] to make the character not sort of some stereotypical, narrow-minded view of what a black person is like but rather a human exploration of who this specific person is like in this specific world. (Winters 2017)

Winters's protagonist, Victor, shares the author's fraught duality, doing a job that perhaps he shouldn't be doing, but doing it thoughtfully and well—well enough to be called brave when that was never the point, and well enough to succeed, only to discover that his subject position makes him always already abject.

An Alternate World

Underground Airlines comments on the legacy of slavery in the United States and explores the complicity necessary to keep a white supremacist system in place. In this alternate history, there was no Civil War and slavery continued. Table 8.1 lists the major points of historical difference.

Victor (which is not his real name), a Black man just turning 40, who escaped enslavement in his teens, is, as a condition of not being returned

Table 8.1 Points of difference in *Underground Airlines*

Our world	*Alternative world*
Civil War (1861–64)	No Civil War
President Lincoln assassinated in 1865	President-elect Lincoln assassinated before 1861 inauguration
1860 Crittenden Compromise failed	1860 Crittenden Compromise passed
Slavery abolished	Slavery enshrined in Constitution

to slavery, pressed into service by the US Marshals to capture fugitive slaves as per the 1860 Crittenden Compromise, also known as the fugitive slave laws.[1] He is provided with special training to give him the tools to search for runaways, while a surgically embedded chip ensures he cannot run away himself. The Underground Airlines of the title is the term used to refer to the loose confederation of people who spirit people out of slavery and into freedom, which is not done by grand gestures like storming facilities that use slave labor but rather by manipulating paperwork:

> Underground Airlines is a figure of speech: it's the root of a grand, extended metaphor, "pilots" and "stewards" and "baggage handlers" and "gate agents." […] The Airlines flies on the ground […]. It flies in the illicit adjustment of numbers on packing slips, in the suborning of plantation guards and the bribing of border security agents, in the small arts of persuasion: by threat or cashier's check or blow job. (Winters 2016b, 97)

Victor is assigned to find Jackdaw, who recently escaped from a garment-making factory, GGS, so Victor has to find where the Underground Airlines has hidden him. To that end, he attempts to infiltrate a local Airlines branch run by a priest.

We learn that Jackdaw, who is really a free college student named Kevin, was sent in undercover to smuggle out information about company attempts to evade no-slavery trade agreements, the idea being that publicizing underhanded complicity to evade the law by large, important actors would force the megafactories that use slave labor to shut down as a result of the scandal—an outcome that Victor considers remote even as

[1] The full text of the Crittenden Compromise (1860), written by John J. Crittenden in an attempt to keep the states of the Union together and avoid southern states' secession, is available online (https://en.wikisource.org/wiki/Crittenden_Compromise).

he discovers that his handler has instructions to kill Jackdaw and destroy the package, indicating that the US Marshals are in on the conspiracy too. Victor ponders what to do now that he knows the state is complicit and is running an off-the-books operation, but Jackdaw dies before revealing where he hid the package.

In the second half of the novel, Victor infiltrates GGS and obtains the package, only to discover that the information Jackdaw was ostensibly after was a ruse. Jackdaw was really supposed to smuggle out proprietary genetic material. This is no simple case of corporate malfeasance that the government was trying to help cover up. Genetic material of enslaved women is being used to bioengineer a worker who will not be classified as human. Should the experiments succeed, trade blockades meant to force the slave states to give up their megafactories would fall because legally, they would no longer be using human slave labor. GGS seeks to literalize the enslaved worker into a nonhuman.

Dehumanization and Violence

The novel takes place in the present day, so changes set in motion in 1861 with the assassination of President-elect Abraham Lincoln, followed by the passage of fugitive slave laws, have snowballed. Accretion of detail adds to the story's verisimilitude; the protagonist mentions James Brown, Michael Jackson, Jesse Owens, and other people we know in our world, now with different careers and trajectories. Some areas of technology seem a little slower than in our digital present. For example, in the United States, tape decks are just starting to give way to CD players, although everyone has a cell phone. However, through Victor's eyes, the world seems much like ours, with familiar places, landmarks, and objects. The differences therefore jolt.

However, some things seem all too familiar. Among many other daily indignities, Victor must endure institutionalized stop and frisk; as a Black man, he can be challenged at any time, thanks to the fugitive slave laws. "I am an undercover operative in a dangerous line of work, but understand that I am also an African American male living in the United States of America," he notes. "There are *going* to be checkpoints. I am *going* to get stopped. […] When that sort of BS happened I had no choice but to submit" (33; emphasis in the original). Sometimes, a bit of theater is needed to throw the cops off the track. When Victor goes to a drop site to meet someone involved in smuggling persons bound to labor, or PBs, to

freedom, his Black contacts beat him up and drug him into unconsciousness before spiriting him away to safety. "Two black folks slipping in a car together is a conspiracy," he is told later. "Couple black boys beating the shit out of another one, that ain't nothing. That nobody cares about. Black folks scrapping, cops ain't looking" (229–30). He also requires a white friend to help him gain access to GGS; as a Black man, he is not allowed to go about unaccompanied in the south, with no white person chaperoning him. Even so, before he is allowed into the facility, he has to undergo an invasive search much like the one at the border: "Scalp and armpits, teeth and tongue; pants down, shirt up," leading to "Lesson 1: your body is not your own" (252).

That lesson is one that forces the abject—or, as Julia Kristeva defines it, that which "does not respect borders, positions, rules. The in-between, the ambiguous, the composite. The traitor, the liar, the criminal with a good conscience, the shameless rapist, the killer who claims he is a savior" (1982, 4)—into that very position. We as readers read these daily indignities as running parallel to the similar daily indignities on an abject Black body experienced in a postbellum world. The acquittal of Black teen Trayvon Martin's murderer in 2013 led to the creation of the #BlackLivesMatter movement and hashtag, and BLM gained further impetus after Freddie Gray's death in 2015 while in police custody, drawing popular attention to the racist underpinnings of policing the bodies of the other (Black Lives Matter n.d.; Hermann and Cox 2015). Max Weber's (1918) notion that the state reserves for itself legitimate violence to maintain order is terribly relevant here, with territorial violence comprising and bounding the state. Victor's failure to respect borders is literal, with the book broken into sections called NORTH and SOUTH to indicate where he is geographically, although in this alternate history, the words have a sinister connotation because dark skin is the mark of the abject—just as it is here in the real world, Winters tells us. This alternate world isn't alternate enough.

Victor manages these indignities by pretending he isn't a person: "I had a lot of names. Or, more precisely, it was my practice at the beginning of a new job to think of myself as having no name at all. As being not really a person at all. A man was missing, that's all—missing and hiding, and I was not a person but a manifestation of will. I was a mechanism—a device. That's all I was" (16). When breaking and entering to search rooms, Victor notes, "I really was not a person. I was neither black nor white. Just action. Just work. A machine" (49). He feels like he must dehumanize

himself in order to survive, which is why he is unable to cope when strong feelings break through. Simultaneously, he creates personas designed to get the job done, flirting here and apologizing there, with fake names and fake backstories. He slots the personality into the machine of his body, just action, just work.

It quickly becomes clear that he is not a reliable first-person narrator. He is not straight with us. In good noir tradition, there is always something underneath; there is always a plot twist, his actions always in aid of a hidden plan. When a contact frisks him and finds a butterfly knife, undermining his mild-mannered cover identity, we think, "Oh, Victor, you idiot! You blew it!" as we watch him attempt to regain his rhetorical footing. But later we discover that the knife contains a tracking device, which provides crucial information that permits him to find where Jackdaw has been concealed. The knife's capture was his plan all along. Further, he is always self-consciously aware of what he looks like to others, the better to ensure that the current con goes down. For the priest who fails to help him, as part of his act, he sheds tears, describing them as "slipping slow, one at a time, down my weathered cheeks" as he "compos[es] this face of grief" (11), the very tableau of abject unfulfilled desire.

Victor's relationship with his handler, Brooks, follows this same trajectory. He sometimes jokes with Brooks, even thinks of him as human, but Jackdaw's case file has interesting missing parts, and when Victor pushes, Brooks pushes back, refusing to acquiesce to Victor's need for further information, to Victor's surprise and dismay: "*You understand what that means,* he said, and I did. Violence had always been behind our conversations. What's behind everything, what's under everything. Violence" (117; emphasis in the original). One condition of Victor's continued existence as quasi-free relies on the locator chip in his body, which permits surveillance and therefore, should he try to escape, the promise of violence. The other condition is that he betrays other Black bodies by surveilling and catching them—the very thing that happened to him. He is complicit in replicating the conditions of his own abjectness. The microcosm of interpersonal violence mirrors the macrocosm of institutionalized violence by the state; the existence of the Hard Four and the fugitive slave laws have made acquiesce free states responsible for enforcing slavery by returning abject escapees, which means anyone, northern or southern, perceived as Black may be stopped and frisked by law enforcement.

Victor's search for Jackdaw, his reaction to his handler's betrayal, the glimmer of hope that he can turn his situation into freedom if he can play

his cards right, his negotiation of a landscape inimical to his very existence, his troubled and troubling memories of slavery before his escape, his transformation into one identity, then another, then another, none apparently real—all reflect the erasure of the abject other. The possibility of freedom means that there is a possibility he could be a real person, not an ex-PB marked by the color of his skin. He is Jackdaw/Kevin's double. One is free, pretending to be enslaved; the other is enslaved, pretending to be free.

Chaos and History

As I have noted elsewhere, "entropic models of history assume that history is a disorganized, random, chaotic process" (Hellekson 2001, 88). In scientific terms, entropy is a lack of available energy, but it also results in increasing disorder, which is the metaphor Winters uses to focus the plot. *Underground Airlines* further posits this view in the person of Victor. His endless layers and hidden master plans, which can turn on a dime as situations change, mean that it is difficult to get a read on him. Is he gentle Jim Dirkins, tears artfully running down his weathered cheeks? Is he the violent man who beats up two white guys, at long last out of control and thus showing us his true colors? Or is he the confidence man with a card up his sleeve who tries to outthink his handler to obtain his freedom, keeping information from us out of habit? Victor is not a single person but rather a chaotic collection of animated masks, swapped out as needed to play the correct role. Similarly, his memories of his time as an enslaved person are disorganized and unclear. From the sketchy, fragmented information provided, run through with strong emotion, we can read between the lines: it is likely that Victor killed his brother so he could escape to freedom. He gave up his sole affective relationship on a gamble, and he is not sure he won.

The mode of alternate history means that we read doubly, attempting to link the events in this alternate world to our world, catching a name check and interested to read the details of these other James Browns or Michael Jacksons. Similarly, we must also attempt to link the past, enslaved Victor revealed in flashbacks with his current slick con-man self. We try to make sense of the world, the narrative, and the characters. We try, in short, to tame the chaos with order. Yet this novel is noir science fiction with a hard-boiled detective protagonist; the genre practically insists that there is always another twist. "This is what happens: shit gets worse," Victor tells

us. “It doesn’t get better. It gets worse. Incidents ripple up, then they ripple away again. […] Time makes things worse; bad is faster than good; wickedness is a weed and does not wither on its own—it grows and spreads” (314). He could be describing entropy, with its tendency to disorder leading to chaos. He could also be describing the genre of alternate history, with incidents rippling outward, causes leading to effects.

Indeed, Winters occasionally gives us information about his created world’s nexus differences—that is, the historically different moments that result in the history’s being alternate. As Victor waits for contact by a statue of President-elect Lincoln, he studies the images comprising a bas-relief: “It was all here, illustrated in stone, the whole story of Old Abe’s assassination—the martyrdom that saved the union, the murder that remade the country,” with the Confederates returning, “moved by the death of a president, wary but willing, ready to start anew” (74). Lincoln’s death saves the union, but results in slavery institutionalized in an amendment to the Constitution. All effects ripple outward from this cause. Yet the result is something all too familiar: institutionalized racism. Such racism contrasts with the more tacit racism in the real world. Race-targeted stop and frisk in our world is an abuse of existing laws, but in Victor’s world, such activities are overt because they are linked to fugitive slave laws.

The overt versus occult nature of institutionalized racism is important because the novel’s take on this dichotomy—that they actually have the same result—comprises a major theme. This theme is particularly resonant thanks to President Donald Trump’s endless tweets, inflammatory remarks, overt race baiting, and demonization of the other. If the Obama administration’s years led Americans to hope for a post-racial future, the Trump administration’s years led to the realization that such a future was nowhere near. Winters’s novel, deliberately or not, reflects this cultural moment. Trump’s Twitter posts note that “illegal immigrants […] infest our Country,” that we must not “show any weakness” lest “millions of people […] journey into our country,” that Black-majority Baltimore is “very dangerous and filthy” (Fig. 8.1). The other here is the chaotic, abject outsider, with the immigrant presented as vermin and the nonwhite as dirty, the better to contrast with the tacit cleanliness and law-and-order strength of the (white) majority. In Trump’s world and in Winters’s, the border and the other must both be policed.

Trump’s inflammatory rhetoric even carries into official organs of his administration. Figure 8.2 is a screenshot of a post on a web page for the US Department of Homeland Security that presents a strong border as

Fig. 8.1 Trump tweets illustrating a focus on chaos, disorder, imprisonment, and dehumanization

We Must Secure The Border And Build The Wall To Make America Safe Again

Release Date: February 15, 2018

Walls Work. When it comes to stopping drugs and illegal aliens across our borders, border walls have proven to be extremely effective. Border security relies on a combination of border infrastructure, technology, personnel and partnerships with law enforcement at the state, local, tribal, and federal level.

- U.S. Customs and Border Protection (CBP) apprehends over 1,100 people a day crossing the border illegally. The Department of Homeland Security (DHS) refuses entry to 7 known or suspected terrorists every day, 50 every week, and 2,500 every year.
- DHS has seen a **300 percent** increase in unaccompanied alien children (UACs) in the last eight months of 2017 – and a **600 percent** increase in family units.
- In Fiscal Year 2017, Border Patrol saw a **73 percent** increase in assaults on officers along the Southwest border.
- Thousands of aliens illegally re-enter the United States each year, with approximately 15,700 sentenced for illegal reentry in fiscal year 2016. This does not even include the many thousands more who evade detection, or those who are not charged with illegal reentry as part of a plea agreement.

Fig. 8.2 Screenshot of a US Department of Homeland Security (dhs.gov) web page dated 15 February 2018 showing official focus on excluding the other

being crucial for keeping out the other, with "known or suspected terrorists" particularly called out. There must be boundaries; there must be a stalwart us and an unclean other. How else may a nation be defined? Knowingly or not, Trump's rhetoric focuses on Weberian notions of institutional violence performed on the other to ensure safety and security. The borders must be secure lest terrorists invade: this assertion conflates the other with a violence that can only be averted with exclusion that is maintained through state-sanctioned violence, such as putting children in cages with insufficient food in "a chaotic scene of sickness and filth" (Dickerson 2019). Yet Trump remarks during a 2020 presidential debate that "they are so well taken care of. They're in facilities that were so clean" (Varela 2020)—patently untrue, but also bizarrely missing the point.

As Trump demonstrates, forcing the other into state-sanctioned abjection is a mode of performative nation building. The very nature of the other is chaotic, so it must be caged to ensure order and control. It is not acceptable to put people in cages, but what if they are not people? What if they are vermin infesting the United States? Dehumanizing the other, along with ensuring that the other is placed inside a delimited space to contain the chaos, are required to make such scenes palatable. Victor puts it like this: "There had to be a *reason* they were in cages—it couldn't just be because their suffering sowed the cottonseeds and ran the bundling machines; how could it be so? It had to be because under their skin […] they were monsters" (269–70; emphasis in the original).

To ensure its survival, the state must enforce a rule of law that uses the threat of legitimately administered violence to ensure compliance. Trump feels free to make this connection overt. However, the underpinnings of this violence are not always legitimate, a fact made abundantly clear in the United States when a video of violent police altercations leading to deaths in custody shows police actors misusing their authority, then lying about it (Paybarah 2021). Similarly, Victor knows that enslaved people who are inconvenient will be injured or killed: "There are laws. There are rules. Violent slavery is against the law. But rules are forever being broken. Guards get carried away. Workloads get dangerous. Franklins get bribed; Franklins are sloppy; Franklins don't give a shit" (181). To the other, equal application of the law will never occur; its unequal application is meant to ensure that the abject other, the monster, remains outside the boundaries of safety. However, the state can never achieve order because its very existence depends on the constant policing of borders. As Kristeva notes, the abject "lies outside, beyond the set, and does not seem to agree

to the latter's rules of the game. And yet, from its place of banishment, the abject does not cease challenging its master" (Kristeva 1982, 2). The chaotic struggle between the state and the abject is required for the existence of both.

Conclusion

As an alternate history, *Underground Airlines'* creation of a world where institutionalized slavery is the driver of southern commerce as a result of changed historical events lets us compare a world where the south saw slavery enshrined in the US Constitution with one where the Civil War led to the abolishment of slavery. The point is that the worlds are terrifyingly similar. Yet as Constance Grady notes, the novel "posits that slavery might insidiously take over your very body, but there will always be the possibility of escape" (Grady 2016). As a white author writing Black experiences into being, his fitness contested, Winters imbricates himself, as does Victor, in the push and pull of identity, calling into question who gets to tell the story. Chaos insists that the story be continually reframed. Displacement from our world forces attempts to create order out of the plot and out of the unreliable character of Victor. At almost every turn we are foiled. History continues to spin out of control, uncaring of our attempts to tame it.

Trumpian rhetoric drives home the fact that the United States relies on othering not only to maintain its borders but also to make state violence acceptable to its inhabitants. The state-sanctioned stop-and-frisk rules of Victor's alternate America, performed to ensure that escaped PBs will be caught and returned to a circumscribed world of labor, do not seem different from the rules governing that practice in our world, with evidence gathered to rationalize institutionalizing the other in prisons. In both, othered bodies are required to enter a world of privation as a way for the state to enforce order.

Trumpian ideology requires turning the other into monsters; Winters literalizes this with the genetic material smuggled out of GGS portending a new reality free of legal strictures. The chaotic force of history, with those inside and those outside the geographical and metaphorical edges of the state constantly struggling against each other and thereby constituting one another, incessantly provides new openings that may be exploited. As Victor, that unreliable first-person narrator, notes, "Every day is two

worlds; every day we split into two. […] Everything can happen. Everything is possible" (322). Winters assures us that amazingly, in the end, there is hope.

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PART III

Humor as Contestation

CHAPTER 9

How Do We Laugh about This? Literary Satire in Trump Times

Teresa Botelho

Abstract In his 1995 text *Fables of Subversion*, Steven Weisenburger draws a useful distinction between two types of satirical modes: on the one hand, traditional or generative, whose choice of a target is independent of the text itself and that, deriving its meaning from specific contexts, assumes a corrective gesture outward that is dependent on implied normative consensual codes; on the other, degenerative satire, which can be seen as more radically oppositional, interrogating and subverting all kinds of codified knowledge, including the text itself, which is exposed as an act of 'fiction-making' by frequently using shifting narrative viewpoints, and transtextual interplay with prior texts.

Many satirical responses to the disruptive landscapes of 'Trump times'—mostly in televisual format—have explored the comical and even farcical flow of queues offered by the personal performances of political agents by assuming a corrective, normative rhetoric that presupposes and restates a consensus of values, which it does not attempt to disrupt. This chapter

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discusses whether literary works that explore the same landscapes invest in more subversive strategies inherited from the postmodern tradition, investing in satirical discourses that eschew the assumptions of social consensus, and focuses its analysis on two recent novels: Gary Shteyngart's *Lake Success* (2018) and Mark Doten's 2019 *Trump Sky Alpha* (2019).

Bad for America, Good for the Novel?

When Salman Rushdie suggested, after the presidential elections of 2016, that "what is very bad for America is very good for the novel" (2017b)—since the election of Donald Trump provided a "light-into-darkness trajectory" that would predictably inspire new and innovative literary articulations—he seemed to predict a new wave of fiction deliberately engaged with the politics of the moment. The fact that he excluded his own 2017 novel *The Golden House* from that category, arguing that the transition between "the great optimism of the Obama years and its opposite" stood in the background of the plot and not in the foreground, and that, not having been written as a "Trump novel," it should not be "read as some kind of straightforward allegory" (Rushdie 2017b), suggests a somewhat narrow understanding of the object and format of the literature he predicted would emerge, as dependent on the centrality attributed to the political landscapes invoked.

Similar expectations and speculations about literary responses to the Trump presidency have been widely voiced since 2016. Peter C. Herman, for example, in an article fittingly entitled "America Needs Literature to Explain the Trump Phenomenon," argues for the urgency of a literature of interpretation and explanation that goes beyond exposure and denunciation, one that can facilitate an understanding of the social and psychological maps that made the 2016 election possible. Giving as models writers who, like John Updike, wrote about post-9/11 terrorism in an attempt to "see the world from the other side" and to "understand what seems to be incomprehensible," Herman suggests that similar gestures might bridge the knowledge gap that creates the myth of an inscrutable, unimaginable pro-Trump America and begin the job of "explaining ourselves to ourselves" (Herman 2019). Johannes Wally, on the other hand, discusses whether the "unpredictable and unsettling" realities of Trump's

election[1] might herald the return of politically motivated literature, a vague enough term that he sees as a "continuum" encompassing a diversity of modes and authorial strategies dependent on the centering or decentering of the realities under scrutiny (Wally 2018, 66–68).

A brief overview of contemporaneous literary responses to the Trump presidency might clarify whether these predictions and expectations are being fulfilled and gives way to a number of hypotheses as to why specific literary modes and tropes have been more frequently employed to serve the objective of representing the trajectory Rushdie identified. A good place to start might be the *Trump Fiction Project*, an initiative of the *Washingtonian Magazine*, one of several projects that imagined the future of the new Presidency, including *Slate*'s *Trump's Story Project*. Launched in December of 2017 and explained by its editor in terms of the implausibility of the very existence of a Trump election and presidency, which "would have been panned for being ludicrous" if it had been imagined as a novel (Means 2017), the project asked five fiction writers to write a story set in the coming year of 2018.

The proposition that what happened in 2016 and in the first year of the Trump presidency was literarily unimaginable is highly questionable and can only be taken as rhetorical hyperbole, since many American novels have imagined equally disruptive presidential elections—from classics like Sinclair Lewis' *It Can't Happen Here* and Philip Roth's *The Plot Against America* to other alternate history narratives that propose different Americas that could have resulted from presidential election outcomes that never came to be.[2] But taken as a widely shared diagnosis of a particular reading of a reality experienced as rupture, the perceived implausibility of the Trump presidency can be seen as particularly entangled with two associated interpretative frames that have a direct impact on the fictional strategies used to represent it, as Aleksandar Hemon discusses in an essay published shortly before the inauguration. One is what he describes as

[1] Wally examines the allegorical representation of Donald Trump in the British novel *Pussy* (2017) by Howard Jacobson; he also discusses the literary representations of Brexit, namely in Ali Smith's 2016 novel *Autumn*.

[2] See for example the collection *Alternate Presidents*, edited by Mike Resnick, published in 1992, which imagines, for example, Alan Burr defeating Thomas Jefferson in the 1800 election and creating an autocratic dynastic regime and serving for nine terms, Abraham Lincoln losing the election to Stephen A. Douglas in 1860, postponing but not avoiding the Civil War, or Barry Goldwater defeating Lyndon Johnson in 1964 and using nuclear weapons against North Vietnam to win the war.

"reality inertia," understood as the human dependence on the "delusion of ontological, psychological and moral continuity" that creates the expectation that there is a "stable connection between the present and the future," making the imagination of a real-life radical rupture difficult to conceive (Hemon 2017).[3] The second is a particularly American "comfortable entitlement" that "blunts and deactivates the imagination" of what is unfamiliar and hidden from view but had always been there, part of reality and not a mind-blowing idiosyncrasy.[4] Trump, Hemon concludes, "is as American as apple pie […] Trumpists were always here and we didn't see or take their presence seriously" (Hemon 2017).

Navigating the consequences of these two cognitive and cultural traps—the implicit disbelief that such drastic ruptures with a sense of 'normality' would be possible and the myth of insulation provided by American exceptionalism[5]—the authors writing for the *Trump Fiction Project* approach the task of imagining the coming year using very different visions of what might be possible. While some contributions explore a future 2018 with Trump still in the White House, most propose different scenarios of pending or effective ends of his presidency. Thomas Mallon's "Ex Marks the Spot" imagines former President George W. Bush violating "the rules of the Club, the fraternity of exes" and plotting an alternative Republican candidacy for 2021, encouraging Ben Sasse, the

[3] This hypothesis, also cited by Kennedy (2019), is illustrated by Hemon as having explained his traumatic experience in Sarajevo when, just before the armed siege of the city, "the pre-war mind was still busy convincing itself that war is, must be, avoidable, because it simply didn't make sense—who would want war?" only to realize, once war had started, that his misreading of its likelihood was shaped by a cognitive bias: "My mind refused to accept the possibility that the only life and reality I had known could be so easily annihilated" (Hemon 2017).

[4] Hemon had previously articulated this same point when explaining why he had not joined 450 other authors in signing the *Open Letter to Our Fellow Americans*, posted in *Literary Hub*, opposing the candidacy of Donald Trump; besides arguing that the best way to defeat Trump was to vote and not to exclude his candidacy, he suggested that Trump's words "tarnish the comforting picture of American history" which should be questioned, since other American political inequities—namely the post-9/11 era—had not been met (especially by writers) with equal anger (Hemon 2016).

[5] For a comprehensive view of European-based interpretations of the Trump election, see Liam Kennedy's chapter "American Realities: A European Perspective on Trump's America" (in *The Routledge Companion to Transnational American Studies*. London: Routledge, 2019: 297–303).

Never-Trumper Junior Senator for Nebraska,[6] to think of Tom Sawyer and "suit up and get into the game" (Mallon 2017). In "Barbershop Quintet," by David Nicholson, a group of middle-aged African American men reminisce about Trump's project to "Make Washington White Again" while, in the background, a television shows the departure of the former President from the White House after his forced resignation over the Russian collusion charges, and one of them jokingly admits that "he is gon' miss Orange Julius" for the entertainment he provided (Nicholson 2017). The most improbable of the futures imagined in this collection emerges in Tom Carson's "Operation Covfefe" which announces its tone and target in its very title.[7] The story projects a fake news scenario turned against Trump himself, as a group of 'adults in the room' (John Kelly, H.R. McMaster and Jim Mattis) stage a coup, lying to the president about an apocalyptic nuclear attack on the United States staged by the concerted efforts of North Korea, China, Russia, Iran and the United Kingdom that had purportedly devastated the whole country leaving only 600,000 survivors. Hunkered down in a bunker, continuously fed previously recorded reruns of *Hannity* and *Fox & Friends* (he is told no broadcaster has survived) and anxiously wondering how many survivors follow him on Twitter, the fictional Trump believes it all, even the "inclusion of *Merrie Olde England* in the axis of evil," a measure of his geopolitical ignorance (Carson 2017).

As part of the first wave of American Trump fiction,[8] to use the term employed by Stephen Hock to designate the literary texts that directly depict or refer to the 45th president where he functions as a signifier (Hock 2019, 4), these short pieces clearly reflect an almost irrepressible authorial choice to respond to the sense of implausibility invoked by the editor through an investment in what Charles Knight defines as a "satirical frame of mind," even when they do not formally adhere to the traditional

[6] Senator Ben Sasse was one of the seven Republican Senators to vote in favor of the second impeachment of Donald Trump for incitement to insurrection in 2021.

[7] The 'Covfefe' in the title points to an episode on May 31, 2017, when a misspelling by Donald Trump in a tweet against "the constant negative press covfefe" generated a wave of memes, parodies and debates about the significance of language in 'Trump times.'

[8] The first fictional allegory of Trumpism, the satirical novel *Pussy* by Howard Jacobson, was published in the UK in April 2017.

formal conventions of the satirical genre,[9] eliciting nevertheless the reader's ironic response[10] (Knight 2004, 1–3).

This choice is not unique in presidential fiction, although it has been unevenly distributed and reserved for particular controversial subjects.[11] This long American literary tradition reveals a range of textual formats, a corpus that suggests that the frequency and typology of literary engagements with its subjects is related to the impact of their role in specific historical contexts but also to the possibility of a deep reading of their individual inner or public selves. Abraham Lincoln, by far the most recurrent source of inspiration, has been reimagined in more than sixteen titles ranging from the formally historical novel format of Gore Vidal's 1984 *Lincoln*, to the more recent dark fantasy tropes of the 2010 novel *Abraham Lincoln: Vampire Hunter* by Seth Grahame-Smith, and the poignant 2017 imaginings of the president's grief landscapes in George Saunders' *Lincoln in the Bardo*. On the opposite side of the likeability spectrum but equally attractive if for the wrong reasons, Richard Nixon has emerged as the subject of at least ten titles, all of them shaped by an oppositional gaze and many steeped in satirical or comical overtones, as in Philip Roth's 1971 *Our Gang*, Russell Lees' play *Nixon's Nixon* (1996) or Thomas Mallon's 2012 *Watergate*.

However, unlike this extensive corpus, the Trump fiction published during his administration has been shaped by some unique features and circumstances that may explain the attraction to the satirical gaze, beyond the idiosyncrasies of the subject himself. The first more evident difference is one of temporalities, of the urgency of 'the now' that seems to have led so many writers to attempt to confront the discomfort and revulsion of his presence without waiting for the insights that historical record and memory might provide. The second factor that in some ways may explain the rush to write the Trump presidency, besides the long familiarity generated

[9] Knight's approach proposes a view of satire that is more concerned with what satire does than with formal classifications and boundaries.

[10] In Olga Grushin's story "Timothy Miller Got a Puppy," more concerned with imagining an authoritarian future dominated by the surveillance of possible foreign agents, small details still carry a satirical undertone, as exemplified by the discovery made by children visiting the White House over Christmas that on the Trump Christmas tree the traditional ornaments had been replaced by "small golden men swinging sticks and hundreds of hard white balls" (Grushin 2017).

[11] A tentative and clearly incomplete list provided by the Lincoln City Library network includes ninety titles of novels where a real president is at the center of a narrative.

by the ubiquity of Trump's popular media presence in American life before he was a candidate, is the existence of pre-election fictional representations of his avatar, an almost unique factor in the history of presidential literature, since no other American head of state had been fictionally represented before his election, although their life before the presidency has been frequently addressed.[12] As Hock points out, the fictional trail left by Trump can, in retrospect, be read as "a cultural prehistory" of his presidency, especially since those early personas and allusions can be "resignified" by our current knowledge (Hock 2019, 5; 6) as prefiguring the most toxic discourses of his post-2016 persona. A much-discussed example of the operation of this process can be seen in Bret Easton Ellis's 1991 *American Psycho*, where Trump is depicted as an object of hero-worship by the Manhattan investment banker and serial killer Patrick Bateman. Finally, and perhaps as significant as these unique facets, is the background of a media landscape saturated with caricature, especially in a televisual format, from stand-up comedy to late-night talk shows and comedy impersonations,[13] multiplying gestures that invoked the comical and even farcical flow of cues offered by both Trump and the individual performances of political agents of his administration, "comically reframing politics" and eliciting both laughter and anger, dependent on the drawing of circles of inclusion and exclusion (Hakola 2017).

The exercise of writing Donald Trump seems, therefore, to be conditioned by the confluence of different and sometimes opposing frames and pulls—part of a long tradition of presidential fiction but singularly distinct from the protocols frequently associated with it. It is shadowed by the imagery of literary and public discourses that predate his rise to political power and by competing non-literary comedic mimicry, challenged by both the impulse to denounce, expose and ridicule and the instinct to go deeper and scrutinize the half-hidden sociomaterialities that made his election possible.

[12] The best-known case might be Richard Nixon's role as the protagonist and narrator in Robert Coover's *The Public Burning* (written in 1977 after Watergate) in his capacity as Eisenhower's Vice President during the 1953 trial and execution of Julius and Ethel Rosenberg.

[13] This is the case of late talk shows, including NBC's *The Tonight Show*, Comedy Central's *The Daily Show*, CBS's *The Late Show with Stephen Colbert* and the sketch comedy show *Saturday Night Live* with its highly popular impersonations of Donald Trump by Alec Baldwin, Sean Spicer by Melissa McCarthy and Jeff Sessions by Kate McKinnon; these are obvious examples of this parodic format.

Taking a wider view than that embraced by Rushdie, and including under the category of Trump literature novels which address, however indirectly, the worlds created and affected by Trumpism, reveals two parallel modes and strategies emerging in the last four years that occasionally converge—one that focuses on weaving problematizations of meaning, treating Trump as a sign of something that should be interpreted, and the other dedicated to the construction of a complex satirical gaze, grounded on the subject and his ignominious peculiarities, frequently corresponding to different narrative strategies of centering and decentering Donald Trump's fictional avatar.

If, like Salman Rushdie's *The Golden House*, the very recent faux memoir *Homeland Elegies* by Ayad Akhtar (2020) introduces an oblique Trump presence lurking behind the Hobbesian national mood that explained the election, other novels that never feature him as a character or an allegory have done much to explain Americans to themselves, without recourse to satire. This is what Jonathan Lethem's 2018 novel *The Feral Detective* does, presenting the electoral shock as the motivational background for the drop-out personal journey into a hidden America of a character—a female former *New York Times* journalist who recalls "the notorious day in November when my boss and all the rest of them sat deferentially with the Beast-Elect at a long table behind closed doors, to soak in his castigation and flattery," pushing her to quit her job, blaming New York "for producing and being unable to defeat the monster in the tower" (Lethem 2018, 20).

One of the most successful examples of this strategy of the literary backgrounding of Trump to address the social landscapes that explain his election may be Barbara Kingsolver's *Unsheltered* (2018), where the president is, to quote critic Diane Roberts, "a malodorous cloud," "a symptom, not the disease himself" (Roberts 2018). In the novel, which weaves together two time frames separated by a century, Trump's candidacy in the 2016 election is an inescapable presence represented by radio talk shows favored by Americans "offended to distraction by the idea of a non-white man at the helm of their great nation" (Kingsolver 2018, 110), by the noise of his racist belligerent speeches coming out of car radios as the "Bullhorn" promises that "the dream is going to wake up for us, not the criminals and illegals who are running America right now" (132) and especially by the rantings of an elderly working-class white character. When the protagonist of the 2016 narrative strand asks her pro-Trump father-in-law why he respects Trump, his reply awkwardly summarizes all

the pent-up cultural anger, racism and prejudice, sense of loss and delusion that motivated many voters. "Respect him … he respects me," he stated, adding what the 'dream' would mean to him: "Eat what I want, drive a big damn car and say what I want to … niggers and faggots … wear a biggest fucking gold watch. No dick-ass liberal telling me … ashamed a getting what's mine" (412).

These examples of a literature of understanding engaged with the task of bridging the knowledge gap suggested by Peter C. Herman, without the mediation of satirical tropes, is still rare in the fictionalization of 'Trump times' published in the four years of his presidency and it is plainly evident that most authors have chosen the critical tools provided by the satirical mode to confront the discomfort and revulsion of his presence. Identifying how these frames have been used and how some recent novels provide alternative possibilities of convergence between the political agendas of scrutinizing and understanding Trump times and potentialities of complex satire might suggest how effective this early Trump fiction has been in making sense of a troubled recent present that is far from being safely consigned to the past.

It's Difficult Not to Write Satire

Juvenal's assertion that when faced with what he saw as the corruption and decadence of values in Rome "it is difficult not to write satire" (Juvenal 2004, 1.30–32) identifies clearly the source, function and stance of this literary mode, moved by outrage and an urge to expose and facilitate moral correction of what has been diagnosed as unseemly or pernicious. Defined by Steven Weisenburger in *Fables of Subversion* as a "rationalist discourse, launched against an exemplar of folly and vice, to rectify it according to norms of good behavior and right thinking" (Weisenburger 1995, 1), traditional satire (as opposed to parody) requires, therefore, the existence of an object of attack outside the text, a corrective intention and a rational argument grounded on implied consensual normative codes. The assumption of this gesture, where a collective semi-unanimous 'us' ridicules the odd values of the eccentric or deluded others, is that the assumed 'we' holds the moral high ground as Jonathan Swift so eloquently put it when he defined satire as "a sort of glass wherein beholders do generally discover everybody's face but their own" (Swift 1886).

The limits of this traditional frame in contemporary satire are obvious: the existence of stable codes of morality or decency against which

individual or group folly can be challenged are elusive, even considering the possibility of a temporary unity of divergences in response to the shock of the Trump presidency. In addition, it is difficult to conceive that a model of satire based on these requirements would go beyond the relief and pleasure of in-group laughing and present itself as corrective, considering what Susan Strehle has identified as a contemporary "intense skepticism about the possibility for amelioration," especially when "values are implied only by their absence from a disintegrating chaotic world" (Strehle 1996, 146).

Recognizing the limits of this traditional satirical frame, which he describes as "generative," Weisenburger identifies another mode present in a wide corpus of postmodern American literature, which he calls "degenerative." This is truly oppositional and disruptive of all certainties, where the extratextual, real world object may be dispersed or plural, where stable normative grounds for the corrective rhetoric may be absent or merely implied, and where the possibility of amelioration is tinged with deep skepticism, interrogating and subverting all codified knowledge, destabilizing the authority of the text by itself, exposing the act of "fiction-making" by frequently using shifting narrative viewpoints, and pointing to the world hiding behind and within discourses (Weisenburger 1995, 11; 14). These characteristics make the mode, as Jonathan Greenberg points out in his discussion of Menippean satire, particularly useful when the targets of the critical attack are "the bureaucratic and ideological institutions of modernity," turning its attention to institutions and systems, rather than just "individual vices"[14] (Greenberg 2019, 213–214).

With this in mind, the question the following discussion will address is whether the traits associated with this alternative mode can be found in Trump fiction that is invested in a satirical frame but attempts to go beyond denunciation, caricature and parody, rather than recycling common cartoonish depictions of Trump and Trumpism as in the novella *The Captain and the Glory* (2019) by Dave Eggers.[15] It will also consider how successfully this particular satirical mode facilitates the establishment of the wider vistas and protocols of understanding that have been missing

[14] This mode of satire is particularly prevalent in contemporary African American literature, for example in the work of Paul Beaty and Percival Everett.

[15] The novella uses comedic allegory to depict the chaotic fate of a great ship named *Glory* whose inhabitants elect a new ignorant and inexperienced captain (over a competent old hand) claiming that they want to shake things up.

from most Trump novels written during his presidency, analyzing two very different examples—Gary Shteyngart's *Lake Success* (2018), a quasi-picaresque realist novel that features a self-reflexive journey into election-time America, and Mark Doten's 2019 *Trump Sky Alpha*, which assumes the tropes of speculative fiction to project an extrapolative dystopian world shadowed by the presence and actions of a fictional 45th president.

In *Lake Success*, Donald Trump's ascension to power—from the primaries to the presidential election—functions both as a background and as a measuring tool to construct maps of subjectivity and collective dysfunction. The novel follows the meanderings across America of Barry Cohen, a middle-aged New York hedge-fund manager about to be subpoenaed for insider trading, who is also on the verge of a nervous breakdown, haunted by the collapse of his marriage and the autism of his young son, and torn by the pulls of a somewhat contradictory selfhood.

Although the novel has been welcomed by most critics for "saying something big about America" (Corrigan 2018) and for being "a state-of-the-nation novel about the miasma of discontent that produced the astonishing election result of 2016" (Theroux 2018), it was dismissed by some critics for its supposed lack of focus on Trumpism. Gareth Watkins, for example, fustigates it for evoking Trump enough but saying "nothing of substance about him," and for failing to contextualize his election as "the fulfillment of decades, centuries perhaps, of deliberate acts by Republicans, Democrats, big business and the very real, quite boring deep state" (Watkins 2019), an accusation that seems to miss the communicative protocols of literature, demanding it to state rather than to imply or show. Literary scholars like Hock, while refuting these grounds for the dismissal of the novel, point out that it also misses what "Trump literature" should be doing, namely to "mention Trump to say something *more* […] as an avenue to address the contexts of Trumpism" (Hock 2019, 8). His description of *Lake Success* as "Trump fiction manqué" (Hock 2019, 8) seems not to take into account how frequently the novel invites an oblique understanding of Trumpism, grounded on corrosive satire aimed at many directions, centered on the interpretative hypothesis of an extremely unreliable protagonist who tries to read but often misreads the signs of the other America he meets for the first time.

A Republican who had contributed to Marco Rubio's campaign but who tells his Democrat wife, as evidence of his affection as they are breaking up, that he was "going to bundle money to get you a job with the attorney general when she won" (Shteyngart 2018, 41; "she" being

Hillary Clinton),[16] he tests his own capacity to interpret the political reality in a very early episode, when he encounters the America he does not know and which he decides he wants to experience by embarking on a road trip, travelling humbly and dropping most of his signs of privilege. As he waits in vain for a ticket counter at a Greyhound station to open, a white woman tells him that it is closed due to "technics difficulty," a moment that he reads as part of his political education: "Barry was starting to get something about this Trump phenomenon. Like an idiot he had thrown 1.7 million, almost 2 bucks, after Marco Rubio" (*LS*, 8). Recalling how he and a friend had decided not to support Ted Cruz, he tells himself that "they should have met this woman first. There was nothing Rubio could do for her" (*LS*, 9).

This automatic association of an uneducated working-class white woman with Trump (who presumably could do something for her, or at least get her vote if he were ever nominated) is one of the many instances in the novel where Barry's interpretative frames provide visible clues to the common vision of society, power and privilege he and Trump share as former Queens boys who had triumphed in Manhattan. His unrepressed arrogance—he does not believe in wealth redistribution because "most poor people wouldn't know what to do with substantial sums of money" since "they're very low information, and wealth can be confusing. In a sense, you have to train yourself to be wealthy" (*LS*, 35)—is moderated with occasional philanthropic impulses which assume ludicrous formats: his do-good plan to change the world is to "launch a collection of billionaire trading cards for poor kids, with all the billionaires' financial stats, such as net worth, Forbes list ranking and liquid and paper assets on the back … so that the black kids could get inspired to do better at school," asserting his non-racist credentials with the promise that "Oprah would have her own card, too" (*LS*, 86).

This social blindness manifests itself in his Greyhound crisscrossing of the 'other' America that he sometimes imagines as a middle-aged *On the Road* through which he may recover a more genuine selfhood. How he repeatedly misunderstands what he sees is part of the satirical frame that dominates the construction of a character who could be seen as an allegoric Trump, were it not for his marriage to a woman of Indian ascendency and for the vulnerability imposed on his sense of success by the

[16] Henceforth, all parenthetical references to Shteyngart's *Lake Success* (2018) are abbreviated as *LS*.

autistic condition of his son—he admits that he only began to dislike Trump "after he made fun of a disabled reporter, fluttering his arms around in imitation of his affliction" (*LS*, 67). The encounters on the bus, where most of the time Barry is the only white passenger, systematically teach him something that his one-percent positioning cannot process. He ditches his phone and later his credit cards (but not his priceless collection of watches) looking for a temporary break from part of who he is, but he cannot ditch his assumptions and expectations.

One of the most revealing of these episodes is a discussion with a bus driver who wants to collect his ticket, which he refuses to hand in as he wants to keep it as a souvenir, a trophy of his adventures. Finally accepting that he has to "submit to this small, gnarled Vietnam veteran with a New York State commercial bus driver's license" (*LS*, 15), he indignantly concludes that "the bus driver's authority was complete," that "as a country we were, at heart, heavily regimented and militaristic" and that "despite our cowboy ethos we were really under orders," the Greyhound being like "a branch of our armed forces, and Barry nothing but a buck private" (*LS*, 17).

This reluctance to accept the very minor powers of those he inherently considers inferior is later reaffirmed in Baltimore. One day after being "set loose in the country, but already feeling young and bold and ready for anything," his delight in being able to "float through the world without a phone pinging with the latest news on Valupro's crater stock price" (*LS*, 61), roaming in a "regular marginalized neighborhood" (*LS*, 62) where "those people lived" (*LS*, 67), is abruptly interrupted by a young African American drug dealer who, suspicious of his meanderings and attempts to make friends, tells Barry that "if you ain' buying rock, get the fuck off my block" (*LS*, 69), a small assertion of business-related delimitation of borders that he understands as an utterly humiliating assertion of power against his privileged whiteness: "So *this* was America. A cruel place where a man could be thrown off the street because of the color of his skin, the cut of his watch. It was disgraceful. Didn't want any part of it" (*LS*, 71; emphasis in the original).

The arc of his comedic social blindness blocks what readers are initially led to believe would be a middle-aged Bildungs narrative, and Barry's project of "seeing the country as it really is" (*LS*, 99) becomes more and more entangled with his attempts to make sense of the noise of the Trump campaign everywhere he stops. In a Greyhound café without monitors, he

hears the ramblings of the Republican nominee-to-be and cannot help perceiving it through his own personal experience:

> Trump was complaining about the mainstream media. Without the visuals he sounded like a genuinely sad older man from the outer boroughs. He sounded like Barry's own dad, who had caught Trump fever from the start. […] Barry was a moderate Republican and his dad was a moderate Nazi. They were a moderate family. (*LS*, 116)

Later on, travelling deeper into the South, the "country as it really is" (*LS*, 99) shows itself to be even more puzzling for Barry, and the people who are getting ready to elect Trump more and more baffling. Taken by Jeff Park, a former employee he is visiting, to a local bar in Atlanta to watch Trump's convention acceptance speech, surrounded by "Republican boy-hipsters ready to cheer on their nominee" (*LS*, 155), he hears the bartender's justification of how she plans to vote: "'Socially, I'm a bit more liberal' she said. 'But Trump is going to rebuild the economy to where it should be. The Condos around here aren't being built fast enough under Obama'" (*LS*, 154), and he cannot make sense of it. "She was a bartender in a lousy racist bar," he muses. "Barry was as trickle-down as any guy, but what did the building of Buckhead condos have to do with her lot in life?" (*LS*, 154). "Who were these people around him?" (*LS*, 155).

And even when he does understand, the limits of his capacity to act as a moral actor are mediated and set by who he knows he is, regardless of his experiments with change. Barry considers taking a stand when, passing through Louisiana, he encounters a rabid Alt-right former marine would-be-preacher—in one of the few occasions when he is not the only white passenger—and hears his loud voice carrying all over the bus, announcing how *Breitbart News* and *Infowars* are predicting that "the times they are a changing" and that Mike Pence "is a good man" who "knows that big things are coming," rambling on about Jews and Muslims, about George Soros, Paul Singer and one world government and on the prospect of white-only universities (*LS*, 191–193). "He felt himself starting to rise up from his seat;" he looks for clues from the African American passengers who he sees as trying to ignore the racist noise and asks himself: "How could he avenge them?" (*LS*, 195). But soon enough this impulse not to let the obnoxious racist win, as he puts it, is subsumed by the realization that what he calls "the Breitbart franchise" included six men, and that "he

was from Manhattan" and understood the consequences of his actions, and that "he did not need the police dragging him off the bus" (*LS*, 194). Leaving his maybe-I-could-be-a-moral-hero moment behind, when directly challenged by the loud bigoted passenger to explain his heritage, thinking he has probably "Jewished him down," Barry declares himself an Orthodox Greek, a way out that appeases the verbal aggressor who concedes that "Greeks and whites are the same people, almost" (*LS*, 194).

If part of the satirical frame that hangs over *Lake Success* is projected by these networks of misunderstood social clues and missed opportunities to understand the Trump phenomenon, it is magnified by the kind of oppositional discourses and strategies Barry and his circle are able to imagine. Before he had left New York, during the primaries, discussions about Trump ran as normal after-dinner routines, the prospect not really taken seriously. Barry recalls one occasion when, sipping a two-thousand-dollar bottle of wine, he and his neighbors "talked about Trump, for a bit, the men dividing the discussion between them, then ceding small portions of the conversation to the women who added their own worry about their nation's future, framing it in terms of their children and the world they would inherit" (*LS*, 23). When the vague concerns turn into a distinct possibility after the Republican Convention coalesces around his candidacy, and after Barry has already recognized the link between Pepe the Frog, MAGA, and the concept of 'race traitor' and the Holocaust, Pol Pot and the Rwanda killing fields, after participating in a university class taught by his former girlfriend Layla, the unease never really turns into something decisive. Like Jeff, who frames his resistance as a withdrawing of custom—"I used to stay at the Trump Tower on Columbus Circle whenever I visited New York. Never again" (*LS*, 140)—Barry's apprehension remains within the boundaries of the private sphere. Back in New York, he goes out to dinner with his soon-to-be-former wife to celebrate the release of the embarrassing 'Pussy' videotape, convinced that the October surprise would be the end of Trump's candidacy and that "all was going to work out for the Country and for the Cohens" (*LS*, 295). It does not and, after the election and the beginning of his divorce, he still hasn't learned what his former wife has after he is lightly punished for his financial wrongdoing and avoids jail; even if he feels despondent while contemplating a group of high school kids whose lives would be partially dominated by Donald Trump, who "would try to drag them down to his level" (*LS*, 303). She wanted a divorce, she lets him know, because "she didn't like *what* Barry was. Not *who* but what" (*LS*, 307; emphasis in the original) and because

both he and Trump were signs of the same malaise: "We lived in a country that rewarded its worst people. We lived in a society where the villains were favored to win. There was a direct line between Barry getting off with a slap on the wrist and Trump's victory" (*LS*, 307), since like Trump, she tells him, "you are a man who makes tons of money while the world goes to shit. You make money *because* the world goes to shit around you" (*LS*, 308; emphasis in the original).

Unlike *Lake Success*, which attempts to read the Trump election through a focus on a present constituted by social contexts and psychological insights, Mark Doten's *Trump Sky Alpha* spreads its vistas wider and in other directions. It can best be understood, as Tom LeClair points out, as a systems novel, which places Trump "in global and historical systems of economics and technology" beyond the more narrowly defined borders of the national and politically specific (LeClair 2019), investing in the cautionary tropes of apocalyptic dystopia and intercepting them with satire. Donald Trump is at the center of the novel's complex polyphony because his fictional self is responsible for the specific decision that launched World War III and a nuclear Armageddon that killed four billion people, but the many layers of the text situate his presidency within the logic of a sickness brought about by the current uses and misuses of the internet, of which he is seen as both a symptom and a consequence.

This play of centering and decentering is produced by the novel's narrative strategy. Trump's presence and voice bookends the plot, occupying its preface and epilogue, but most of its core takes place one year later, and is focused on a journalist who stumbles into the confluence of events that led to the catastrophic Trump decision. Readers are introduced to events obliquely, in a prologue dominated by a third-person reconstruction of Donald Trump's chaotic and self-absorbed inner voice, where each sentence goes on interrupted for more than three pages, complete with its syntactic quirks, from which the reader has to untangle an incomplete account of what had happened before. Trump is in Trump Sky Alpha, his luxurious Zeppelin, which regularly glides between Washington DC, Trump Tower and Mar-a-Lago and from where he regularly live-streams his diatribes. The use of the imagery of the Zeppelin is significant, as Bruce Krajewski thoroughly argues, invoking sex, power and corruption, as Trump had used it as a "vehicle for graft of epic proportions" selling tickets for its 224 seats to the very wealthy with an appetite for branding and exclusivity in exchange for favors (Krajewski 2019, 192). From high up in the skies, remembering the "chanting and weeping and howling

protesters" after his first nuclear strike and his own daughter Ivanka repeating desperately "*no, no no no*" (Doten 2019, 9),[17] his rambling discourse reconstructs the moments before he authorized that plan:

> he had just sat there, Trump in the situation room with the joint chiefs and cabinet secretaries, options set down in black binders in front of him, options whose windows were passing rapidly, gone and replaced with new binders, Trump's only real movement when Pence mentioned a possible transfer of power, just for the day, for a few minutes, really, so a couple key decisions could be made and Trump turned and half stood, slow and bearlike and implacable, and open-palm smacked Pence's face, knocked him down with a crack that silenced the dozen murmured conversations happening on the other side of the room, and there was a tense moment […] and then all at once people were speaking, *Mr. President there are a range of options, here's the big one, these are more measured, we advise an immediate response, it's a dynamic and unfolding situation, we advise something limited but decisive, it's an ongoing situation, let me walk you through the details…* Trump again silent, slouched in his chair, vacantly staring… (*TSA*, 9; italics in the original).

Eventually, it is launched, "the big event, the one we've been waiting for for the better part of a century, the button got pushed, it was easy, sure, it really was, now that it was done, and across the Midwest and elsewhere the missiles took to the sky as President Trump landed softly on the roof of Trump Tower" (*TSA*, 22).

The use of 'Trump Speak' in the two sections of the novel given over to the reproduction of what linguists have called an "incoherent verbal miasma" (Slotta 2020, 53), with its "burst of noun phrases, odd side remarks" (Slotta 2020, 53) and false starts sprinkled with documentable imprecision and lies, has repeatedly proved to be an irresistible source of parody and an anchor for satire. Ben Greenman, who used a similar strategy in his *Don Quixotic* (2017), a text that was not meant to be a satire but an attempt to give the character some emotional complexity, notes that inevitably what is irresistibly laughable for some readers may be seen as entertaining and fun for his supporters (Greenman 2018), a reflection of how the cultural–political divide impacts the perception of language in the current American public sphere.

[17] Henceforth, all references to Doten's *Trump Sky Alpha* (2019) are abbreviated as *TSA*.

Although the language-based satire frames the novel, its bulk is mostly dedicated to the aftermath of this decision. One year after that fatal 1/28, only ten percent of the Earth's population remains alive, and it is through the conversations of survivors that readers learn that the cause of the attack was a mysterious four-day global internet shutdown caused by some unknown agents with no specific demands. It was in response to the ensuing chaos when "power grids fail, […] all groceries empty out, […], medical supplies are gone, […] the resupply mechanisms are fucked" (*TSA*, 64) that Trump took the decision to go nuclear. "What would have happened if it was one of these more normie types?" (*TSA*, 65), survivors speculate. "What would Hillary or Rubio or whoever have done?" (*TSA*, 67).

Now, in a devastated America, most radiation-poisoned survivors are anchoring down in state-run facilities. It is there that we meet the novel's protagonist, Rachel, a former tech journalist who, grieving for her wife and daughter who died during the conflict, accepts, in exchange for permission to visit the site where they died, a writing assignment for the still-operating *New York Times Magazine* on "internet humor at the end of the world" (*TSA*, 41), to be based on the surviving archives that saved the messages and memes that users posted on social media as they realized that humanity faced imminent destruction. In the process of doing research for this work, which is really a cover for the government's objective to use her to identify the password linked to Birdcrash, a possible agent behind the attacks, she finds him and *Aviary*, the hackers' group responsible for the global collapse of the internet. They had been inspired by a number of conspiracy theories and by a novel, *The Subversive*, which is partially reproduced within the novel along with an interview with its dying Filipino author Sebastian de Rosales, in a decentralization of what the reader expected to be the main plot. The text asks the reader to contemplate the implications of the power of the networked systems on which we all depend, or at least to muse on what social media does to its users, as the satirical gaze turns towards a collective 'us' and not just a 'he' whose follies we want to denounce and correct. The reading of the absurd tweets and memes sent by the soon-to-be-dead social media users that the text reproduces cannot but have that effect in mind: "*howdy. i'm the sheriff of we gom die. We gom die.* 1.113 retweets, 3394 likes" (*TSA*, 28), "*Intercontinental ballistic missiles can't melt steel beams*" (*TSA*, 87), "*Fave if your safe, retweet if your [GIF: screaming, flaming skull]*" (*TSA*, 89) or "*Thank God Obama spent all his time on global warming*" (*TSA*, 90), illustrating the mental impoverishment that the novel identifies as the

"terminal stupidity" not only at the end of the world (*TSA*, 86) but leading to it. When the voice is given back to Trump in the epilogue, now in the first person, as he hovers alone over a destroyed world, each reader may be there with him in some way, not sharing the absurdity of his justifications, as he defends his actions to himself, but as an unwitting participant in the degradation of the public sphere that may have led to the election of someone who we can imagine saying these words:

> These generals we've got, they are amazing and they've said to me, We are so glad it's you […] and what they are saying is this is a very small little bomb that's being used over there, a small nuclear device, and what we used, and can use, it's so much bigger. Would I be up here if it was any real danger? You run down the line with what's happening in these places around the world, these are almost all very small little bombs, and even the ones that are a little more serious, even those, ours are much, much bigger, so people can understand that we are in control of the situation and everything that's happening in these last hours, well we are going to have a very, very successful number of days. (*TSA*, 248)

In her 2017 Goldsmith Prize Lecture with the title "The Novel in the Age of Trump," the British writer Ali Smith predicted that the novel "will tell us […] what the anything and the everything of living in a time of Trump and a time of Brexit are, and in a form that allows the time's articulation to be layered, complex, full of all our paradox and ambiguity as a human race" (Smith 2017). As I have argued in these pages, writing a Trump novel in the satirical mode might suggest a gesture directed towards a parodic bipolar political simplicity, invested in lampooning a targeted other, the very opposite of Smith's requirements of depth and multivectorial perspectives. While examples of this kind of Trump satire are abundant, it can be argued that they rarely go beyond the self-satisfying activation of what Robert Phiddian calls the "CAD triad of emotions—contempt, anger and disgust" (Phiddian 2019, 3). In contrast, the two novels discussed seem to use satirical frames to approach very differently the 'anything' and 'everything' that might tell the stories of the Trump era, providing possible, partial maps of understanding of a moment that is far from finished, looking in many directions including the self of the reader, disrupting the Swiftian metaphor of the glass where we see every face but our own and confirming the deeper critical potential of degenerative satire. As readers wait for the already mythical Great Trump Novel, or

for fiction that relates to wider temporalities and more plural human landscapes, decentering the 45th President from the story might be key to a successful strategy of "explaining ourselves to ourselves" that the trauma of a long post-2016 present seems to demand.

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CHAPTER 10

American Dirt's Trumpian Discourse and the Latinx Parodic Response

Anna Marta Marini

Abstract Published in January 2020, Jeanine Cummins' novel *American Dirt* provoked a stir in the literary and public spheres. A narrative about the ordeal of a Mexican immigrant across the Southern border, the novel was endorsed by celebrities and became a bestseller. At the same time, protests sparked against the invisibilization of Latinx creators in the publishing industry and critics condemned its exploitative and clichéd nature. Furthermore, the Latinx community on Twitter reacted by mocking the novel by means of witticism and parody, sharing mock synopses of their imaginary 'Latino novel.' Reading Jeanine Cummins's novel from the standpoint of critical discourse analysis, several connections can be drawn between both its diegetic and extradiegetic discourses and Trump's discursive constructions of topics related to immigration and the Latinx subject. The superficiality of Cummins's choices stands out especially when read in parallel to the "writing my Latino novel" corpus of tweets. This chapter will analyze how these unconventional bits of literary creation

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dissect and reproduce tropes, themes, and stereotypical representations of Latinx heritage, behaviors, and values, and how they serve as a corrosive and cathartic response against the harmful representations of this ethnic minority community, both in the literary world and in US public discourse.

Published in January 2020, Jeanine Cummins's *American Dirt: A Novel* caused a stir in the literary sphere, as well as on social media. On the one hand, the book soon became a bestseller and was praised by several celebrity endorsers, which was evidently part of the massive marketing campaign undertaken by the publisher. On the other hand, it provoked harsh reactions from the Latinx[1] community and critics in general, who disparaged it as exploitative and decried what they considered to be misguided depictions of the migrant experience. This chapter will argue that *American Dirt* is, indeed, a discursively problematic text, as several connections can be drawn between its discourses—analyzed on both diegetic and extradiegetic levels—and Trump's discursive constructions of topics related to immigration and the Latinx subject. Since the announcement of his first presidential campaign in 2015, the migrant subject matter was central to the Trumpian discourse, as it was the judgement on the acceptability of the Latinx population as a whole, conflated with old rhetorical tropes and fantasies on migration, as well as notions of 'law and order' that betrayed an undeniable ethno-nationalist undertone. The Manichean opposition between "good [migrant] people" and "bad hombres" was articulated in and complemented by the construction of supremacist categories of 'real Americans' in which conservative Latinx voters could fit, feeding the already-existing conflicts internal to the related ethnic minorities.

In this context, Latinx creators took the chance to publicly question the publishing industry for what they believed was an opportunistic appropriation, intrinsic to the novel and in stark contrast to the invisibilization they have been regularly subjected to. Criticism of the novel and of the author's exploitative attitudes soon took to the social networks, and in particular Twitter, where the community reacted by mocking the novel by

[1] Throughout the chapter, the adjective 'Latinx' will be used to identify the community and/or population sharing a Latinx heritage in broad, non-gendered terms. Conversely, the term 'Latino/a' is used as both noun and adjective when referring to persons in accordance with their preferred gender.

means of witticism and parody. Supported by the analysis of the Trumpian elements underlying the novel's discourse, an analysis of the parodic reactions by Latinx writers evidences how Cummins's stereotypical and exoticized misinterpretations are harmful to the Latinx community, both in the literary world in particular and in the United States' public discourse more generally.

Trump vs. the Latinx Community: A Discourse Analysis

Throughout his 2016 presidential campaign and subsequent mandate, Donald Trump constructed his relationship with the Latinx electorate following evident discursive patterns.[2] Despite a superficial impression often caused by his generally xenophobic remarks—especially those expressed on Twitter—in his speeches, he inserted a series of recurrent topics with the specific intent of attracting Latinx right-wing voters. The crux of his discourse is the opposition between two antagonistic poles whose main difference is the display—or not—of an alleged 'true' Americanness. The definition of *us* (the true Americans) and *them* (those who are not) is purposely undefined in order to effectively welcome any voter who thinks they can belong to either one category or the other. The fundamental basis of Trump's discursive Americanness lies in the opposition to the liberal establishment and a rather confused notion of patriotism undergirded by white settler–colonist discourses (Pease 2020), as well as the idea that something was stolen from these rightful citizens and that it is necessary to get it back. The latter theme connects with most of the discursive constructions he exploited in his speeches in relation to the Latinx community, Mexico, and immigration. Moreover, Trump's discourse is characterized by a radical simplification of the specialized language commonly used in political communication. The syntaxis is reduced mostly to either basic clause construction (constituted by a subject, a verb, and one complement) or lengthy, rambling, and incoherent tirades, chaining one clause after the other and bereft of a clear phrasal focus. This type of

[2] The speeches used for this analysis form part of an extensive corpus of transcripts used by the author and based on the archive retrievable at https://factba.se/, select speeches will be referenced in parentheses (year, city-state) as retrievable examples, even though many more speeches contain the same discursive constructions and, quite often, the exact same collocations.

syntaxis is connected to his tendency toward overlexicalization (Fowler et al. 2018, 211) or overwording—the repetition of specific topics (Fairclough 1992, 193)—a discursive strategy that reveals a preoccupation with some specific aspects connected to his own ideological signification of reality. Trump often employs the first-person plural in his commissive sentences, a deictic strategy that allows voters to more easily identify with him and strengthens the construction of the positive pole of the opposition, *us*. His lexicon is reduced to unsophisticated terms of common use and their choice is often semantically inadequate; among the most recurrent keywords in his speeches, more than a half are related to immigration, Mexico, and the border (Gonzalez 2019).

From the start of his campaign in 2015, Trump inserted three main themes that shaped his relationship with the Latinx electorate: the purported help his presidency would bring to Latinx workers, the image of Mexico as "the new China," and the implicit non-Americanness of (illegal) immigrants. In his campaign speeches, he claimed that the Obama administration had failed Latinx citizens by causing an increased unemployment rate among them (2016e, Phoenix AZ). He insisted on the fact that "two millions more of Latinos [were] in poverty" since the start of Obama's presidency (2016d, Cleveland OH), and that his own prospective administration would "help Hispanics, Latinos" because he wanted to "help everybody" (2016c, Raleigh NC). One of the most recurrent constructions when he referred to social groups that allegedly represent a threat to national homogeneity was based on the simple and unverifiable claim that he "loves" them. During his campaign, he often—and in particular when the speech was given in areas with a relevant presence of Latinx citizens—reiterated that he "love[d] Latinos" (2016b, San Diego CA), at times adding that in such areas he would be liked because "the Latinos love Trump" (2016f, Pueblo CO). Both his presidential campaigns in 2016 and 2020 were supported by a movement called Latinos for Trump,[3] whose web platform was powered by Trump's official permanent campaign committee and, as specified in its webpage footer, "paid for by Donald J. Trump for President, Inc." Among the main themes the movement has touted about, there is the promise that Trump would protect "freedom and opportunity for all Latinos" and ensure the increase of employment opportunities for Latinx workers. Despite Trump's alleged

[3] The official webpage for Latinos for Trump, https://latinos.donaldjtrump.com/, is now inaccessible.

love for the Latinx electorate supporting him, the construction of the Latinx community is condescending and connected to the White Savior trope. When he insisted that he wanted to "help our Latino Americans," the implication behind his words was evident: Latinx citizens are a weak link in the American society—to which they don't quite seem to belong—and they evidently need the help of a superordinate social power in order to thrive. Trump's discourse is ascribed to the US dominant, monoglossic, Anglo nationalist discourse,[4] based on a set of ideologies that contributes to "the production, reproduction or transformation of relations of domination" (Fairclough 1992, 87) intrinsic to the structural violence US minorities are subjected to. Implicitly, it is only by assimilating—and thus 'bettering' themselves—that citizens of ethnic minorities can aspire to be included as rightful members of the 'true' American society; a process that is inevitably hindered by structural inequality and systematic institutional discrimination.

It is no secret that Trump drew on topics, as well as slogans and key concepts, already employed by former presidents and, especially, those used by Ronald Reagan during his 1980 campaign. Nonetheless, Trump's exploitation of the themes and his overall discourse lacked cogency and consistency, even if it was based on a consolidated public philosophy.[5] Furthermore, the socioeconomic and international conjuncture in which he started off his 2016 campaign was not characterized by any actual crisis or emergency; even on the border, the situation was not particularly critical then or in recent years, despite a steady increase of immigration from Central American countries since the turn of the century (a reality supported even by official data released by the US Border Patrol on the number of yearly border apprehensions[6]). In order to support his nativist ideology, Trump constructed the exceptionality of the situation at the US-Mexico border mainly through discourse, justifying and legitimizing the consequent immigration-related policies—in which the trope of 'the

[4] Among many, see Reginald Horsman, *Race and Manifest Destiny: The Origins of American Racial Anglo-Saxonism* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1981).

[5] Among many, see Iwan Morgan, "Make America Great Again: Ronald Reagan and Donald Trump," in *The Trump Presidency: From Campaign Trail to World Stage*, eds. Mara Oliva and Mark Shanahan (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2019), 62.

[6] Particularly interesting is the official data on yearly apprehensions at the border, which have been oscillating in the same range since the mid-70s (see United States Customs and Border Protection 2018a, U.S. Border Patrol Apprehensions; U.S. Border Patrol Fiscal Year 2018b).

wall' served as a perfect foil—as well as the state of exception according to which border enforcement agencies acted during his administration (Marini 2020b, 51). His insistence on the alleged hostility of "liberal" journalists and his unfettered use of the notion of "fake news" helped to fuel the idea that what is shown by the media is a partial, unrealistic version of the reality at the border. Nonetheless, it is worth considering that, especially during the main immigration surge in 2018 (corresponding to a well-observed cyclical seasonal spike), the mainstream media rendition of the 'crisis at the border' actually supported Trump's anti-immigrant discourse. The construction of immigration in the mainstream US public discourse has long been marked by the partial depictions reproduced by the media, based on well-established stereotypes of Latin American migrants and, by extension, of the Latinx population. The metaphors through which most stereotypes are expressed "are the key components with which the public's concept of Latinos is edified, reinforced, and articulated" (Santa Ana 2002, xvi). Such stereotypes are mostly based on narratives of illegality and criminality, while immigration has been described employing metaphors related to the semantic fields of catastrophe, war (Santa Ana 1997), and pollution (Cisneros 2008). The claim that shocked the public on the occasion of launching his candidacy in 2015, when Trump asserted that immigrants entering the country from Mexico were mostly rapists (2015a, New York NY), is based on a rather common construction that links Latinx migrants in particular to sexual and physical violence, as well as to animalistic behaviors (Santa Ana 1999). Likewise, the choice of photographic evidence of the cyclical surge has been favoring images that elicit and ground the idea of 'invasion' and 'massive' illegal crossing.

Trump has successfully instilled in the Latinx right-wing electorate the notion that the border and immigrants in general pose a serious threat to the Latinx population itself that is already rooted in the United States. The Latinos for Trump movement has supported the building of the border wall promised by Trump and, of course, Trump "loves" them for such a reason: "Latinos for Trump, I love you. You know—build the wall" (2016b, San Diego CA). He gradually incorporated the topic of immigration, marking the difference between lawful "Latino Americans" and Latinx immigrants. Furthermore, Latinx citizens are "great" when they are hardworking, and he knows so because he has "thousands and

thousands of Hispanics working for [him], thousands" (2015c, Richmond VA). The implicature of such specific construction—reiterated in numerous occasions—is that Trump evidently "loves" his Hispanics subordinated (Marini 2020a). Thus, in order to maintain his appeal in the Latinos for Trump's eyes, his references to the Latinx community favored a construction that might seem banal, but it is revealing of the ideology underlying his discourse from the start. The 'good,' truly American Latinx citizens are those who were born in the United States (possibly descending from a few American-born generations), well assimilated, hardworking in subordinate jobs, openly Christian, patriotic, conservative, and possibly Republican. Nativist assumptions have undergirded American policymaking in recurrent cycles, supporting anti-immigration measures and responding to economic crises and generalized unsatisfaction in the population. Nativist policies on immigration often exemplify the instrumentalization of citizenship, drawing "boundaries between those who belong and can access rights, and those who are variably excluded and marginalized" (Aptekar 2016, 2). Trump's "rhetoric and policies alike draw on and expose a deep well of all-American nativism" (Denvir 2020, 12) and leverage the Latinx conservative segments' fears of discrimination to gain their anti-immigrant support. The desired implicature of his message is quite evident: immigrants allegedly come to steal the 'good Latino' workers' jobs and thus, they have to be stopped. The use of the above-mentioned stereotypes is also instrumental to prompt US Latino/as to overtly distance themselves from Latinx migrants and, consequently, from possible social discrimination.

Despite the claim that he can tell if one is of Mexican origin or not (2020b, Charlotte NC), during his mandate Trump increasingly conflated the notions of Latinx and Hispanic with Mexicans. Mexico as a country, its population in general, and its government—a synecdoche often employed by Trump—is also guilty of all sorts of damage to the American society and economy. The main topic supporting his claim that "Mexico is the new China" (2016a, Bentonville AR) is represented by his condemnation of economic measures that favored the transference of businesses abroad, 'robbing' the Unites States of the jobs they provided in the new locations across the border. Evidently, Trump neglects to mention that such a dynamic of offshoring labor also offers the possibility of producing under less strict environmental and labor regulations, as well as lower

wages. His discursive relationship with Mexico improved in the second half of his mandate, when the newly elected Mexican president Manuel López Obrador acceded to keep incoming migrants south of the border, effectively entangled in a bureaucratic loop that has not been resolved any further, and to increase dissuasion by enforcement. Trump then suddenly began to praise Mexico and its people for "putting 27,000 soldiers at the border" (2019, Rio Rancho NM; 2020a Manchester NH; 2020c, Moon Township PA) without providing any actual detail about the deployment or the policies that justified it. On a different note, but showing the same level of opportunism and neglect, during both presidential campaigns he mentioned Cubans exclusively when attending events in Florida (2016f, Sarasota FL), where he obtained 55% of the Cuban vote in the 2020 elections. Throughout his mandate, he didn't seem aware that Puerto Ricans are US citizens and that many of them actually live in the United States as well. He only mentioned them when hurricane Maria hit the coast in September 2017 (2017, "Marine One departure") and to announce his plans to promote the pharmaceutical industry in Puerto Rico (2020d, Charlotte NC); of course, he also "really loved them" in such unique occasions. His attitude was belittling and hypocritical also when he actually visited the island to distribute supplies weeks after the natural disaster had occurred, when the cameras caught President Donald Trump contemptuously tossing paper towels into the crowd in Guaynabo on October 3, 2017.

American Dirt and the Idealization of the 'Good' Latinx Migrant

Authored by Jeanine Cummins, the novel *American Dirt* was released on January 21, 2020 by the publisher Flatiron Books, a US imprint of the Macmillan Group. The marketing campaign was extensive, with the book being endorsed by many celebrities from the start and, notably, Oprah Winfrey selecting it for her Book Club talk show. Nonetheless, the book raised raging controversies as disenchanted critics, Latinx authors, and many more readers began to review it. Details about its marketing strategy surfaced and were accompanied by Cummins's improper handling of the situation on social media, persisting in her apparent incapability to acknowledge certain issues raised by the misrepresentations pervading her novel. Her gleeful sharing (and later deleting) of pictures taken at the

publisher's dinner on occasion of the Book Expo 2019—showing flower arrangements made with barbed wire and bricks to evoke 'the wall'—was perceived as most outrageous. One week after the release, Flatiron Books canceled the book's tour amid the negative stir the novel was causing. Aside from these apparently extraneous issues, the novel itself reveals an underlying discourse on immigration and the Latinx community that is very much connected to Trump's own discourse, as described above.

The story revolves around a female character, Laura, and her eight-year-old son Luca, who embark on trip from Mexico to the United States with the aim of crossing the border illegally. Laura is the owner of a bookstore in Acapulco and leads a quiet life until her journalist husband is assassinated by a drug cartel led by Javier. Incidentally, the narcotraffic boss knows her well: the reader discovers that he is also a charming customer of her store with whom she has been flirting. When she decides to flee northbound upon the assassination of her husband, Javier sets off to pursue her. Along the way, she encounters other Latin American migrants—such as Nando, Neli, Ixchel, and Julia—and will experience the hardships of illegal migration. Cummins's novel is complemented by some reflections she shares in the Author's Note, where she explains the reasons behind her decision to write such a novel, or rather justifying and legitimizing her own work. Her discourse is quite well articulated and the actual implicatures behind her words might not be of immediate grasp; most of the note is built around self-entitling discursive strategies based, paradoxically, on negating her self-entitlement. Her incongruous arguments are diverse and span from the revelation that her Irish husband was also an "undocumented migrant" for five years before they married, to the fact that two of her family members were victims of a violent crime—on which she actually wrote her first book, *A Rip in Heaven* (Cummins 2004).

One of the most interesting ideas expressed in the Author's Note is her wish that "someone slightly browner than [her] would write [this novel]" (Cummins 2020, 385). Such a statement is problematic on many discursive levels: first, she claims a partial Latinx heritage—which she had never disclosed before the book launch—due to her Puerto Rican paternal grandmother, and yet she bases her justificatory discourse on evident colorist constructions that perpetuate ingrained racist social structures. American society has been long recognized as based on pigmentocracy, a hierarchy dominated by the White and structured by a governmental

system that perpetuates structural violence[7] toward specific non-white ethnic groups, limiting their access to adequate basic services such as education, healthcare, housing.[8] Nonetheless, since the advent of the Civil Rights movement in the 1960s and similar activist expressions, such racial stratification has been evolving and becoming more complex, basing its discriminatory mechanisms also on the level of assimilation demonstrated by the members of ethnic minorities. As some scholars have evidenced, the dominating White group has increasingly included, for example, light-skinned Latino/as who are evidently assimilated into the dominant Anglo culture (Bonilla-Silva and Dietrich 2009). White-passing is possible for many a Latino/a and it has been proven to be a common mechanism to cope with the differentiation internal to ethnic groups and the pervasive stratification based on color gradations (Bonilla-Silva 2002, 5), as relatively darker-skinned Latinx immigrants and citizens experience higher levels of discrimination.[9]

Discourse and its related practices allow members of the dominant group in a specific situation to exercise and enact power abuse and control (Van Dijk 2008, 65); considering the US context, this kind of discourse is instrumental to the reproduction and perpetuation of the pigmentocratic social hierarchy. Cummins's choice to identify Latinx migrants as "browner than her" situates her not only in a position of social privilege—which she admits to—but also reveals that a colorist and therefore racist bias informs her whole work. Colorist discourse can be covert, as its manifestations can be subtle, seemingly casual, and based on "carefully hidden stereotypes" (Wilder 2010, 203). On a merely linguistic level, the definition of 'brown' Cummins seems to base her statement on is hard to infer and she accompanies it with the adverb "slightly," which makes it even more confusing. Is she referring to a set of complexion hues the reader is not aware of? In

[7] See Johan Galtung, "Violence, Peace, and Peace Research," *Journal of Peace Research* vol. 6, no. 3 (1969): 167–191.

[8] Among many others, see David R. Roediger, *The Wages of Whiteness: Race and the Making of the American Working Class* (New York: Verso, 1991), 43–92; Cedric Herring and Anthony Hynes, "Race, Skin Tone, and Wealth Inequality in America," in *Color Struck: How Race and Complexion Matter in the "Color-Blind" Era*, eds. Lori Latrice Martin et al. (Rotterdam: Sense Publishers, 2017), 1–18; Cedric Herring et al., *Skin Deep: How Race and Complexion Matter in the "Color-Blind" Era* (Champaign, IL: University of Illinois Press, 2004).

[9] Among many, see Reanne Frank et al., "Latino Immigrants and the U.S. Racial Order: How and Where Do They Fit In?" *American Sociological Review* 75, no. 3 (2010): 378–401.

the Note, she also condemns *our* perception of migrants as "at best, a sort of helpless, impoverished, faceless brown mass, clamoring for help at our doorstep" (Cummins 2020, 384), but it is never clear what social group she identifies with. White Americans? The reader can only guess. Yet she seems to endorse the identification of Latinx migrants as a "faceless brown mass," using the same colorist indicator and reprising the kind of White Savior trope Trump has used to build the commissive claims about how his administration would have "helped" the Latinx community. Within the novel, a covert colorist discourse is also present. For example, the protagonist observes that—due to the unusual exposure to sunlight—her child is "a shade browner than usual," implying that the noticeable consequence of their trip as migrants is that they acquired a tan, as also "her arms are as tan as childhood" (Cummins 2020, 145). Clearly, both she and her son are fair-skinned, and a tan comes across as something they rarely happened to get due to their privileged lifestyle prior, and is here depicted as one more instance of the degrading hardships they will have to endure as a result of their trip.

In her Note, Cummins also refers to the complex bureaucratic system that underlies immigration policies, by implying that the process was unfair to her Irish husband, who is "one of the smartest, hardest-working, most principled people [she has] ever met. He's a college graduate who owns a successful business, pays taxes, and spends a fortune on health insurance" (Cummins 2020, 383). The description does not quite correspond to the context and possibilities of the majority of migrants, and it introduces the main topics of the discourse which undergirds the novel. Aside from the Author's Note, *American Dirt*'s construction of the 'good migrant' and therefore 'good Latino/a' is intrinsic to the description of its protagonists. Laura and her husband are well-educated members of the Mexican middle-high class, living in "a nice neighborhood" (Cummins 2020, 7), whose child is described as a genius, and whose life—despite some graceful admission to the modest revenue of her bookstore (Cummins 2020, chapter 4)—is definitely privileged considering the Mexican context, in particular that of the state of Guerrero where they live. Laura's considerations on the increased levels of insecurity and crime are purely observational: despite her husband's job as investigative journalist specializing on narcotraffic issues, quite unrealistically they have never had security issues prior to his assassination.

Cummins insists on the idea that select immigrants deserve being legalized and must not live under constant threat of being deported—which,

per se, is clearly not an issue—but, for example, describes one of them as "a middle-class woman with perfect English who came here legally, a homeowner, a medical professional" (Cummins 2020, 312), quite like she herself would be. Laura imagines her life in the United States in a "little white house in the desert" of Arizona, where her son would go to school with "a clean backpack and a haircut" (Cummins 2020, 214), the latter being an image reprised in the Epilogue. The need to repeatedly use the term 'clean,' though, might imply that the image Cummins naturally forms of immigrants is that of unclean people. When the protagonists eventually manage to cross and begin to build a new life in the United States, they correspond exactly to the kind of 'good' migrant deserving to be legalized. Laura now has to work as a cleaning lady, which she finds ironic as she has always been, once again, passionate about cleaning. She compensates the fact that her job is below her qualifications—and thus implicitly degrading—by venturing in bookstores even if in the United States they are not quite like her own (Cummins 2020, Epilogue), where she carefully selected much more prestigious books. Her son becomes quickly assimilated thanks to his diverse, extraordinary skills, whereas other migrant children struggle due to their trauma—although Laura stresses out that "their English is so minimal" and "their schooling at home was rudimentary" (Cummins 2020, 379). Luca's bilingualism is not an implicit compliment to the skills migrant children inevitably develop, but instead it comes across as an additional legitimation of the protagonists' own presence in the United States and of her being deserving of a better status. In fact, one of the pivotal topics in the construction of Laura and Luca as good migrants is their "unusual" command of English—expressed in several passages[10]—and Laura's love for Anglo literature and poetry, the reason why her bookstore kept books in English that no local customer could appreciate (Cummins 2020, 35). The protagonists' linguistic inclination is strengthened by the fact that her child's English is only slightly less "sophisticated" than hers (Cummins 2020, 271) and sets him apart from the other children, who did not have the same socioeconomic opportunities in their country of origin or in their migrant household. It is worth reminding that the US assimilationist discourse has been historically characterized by a focus on monoglossia and cultural

[10] For example, chapters 4, 5, 6, 9, 11, 25, 29, and the Epilogue.

uniformity.[11] The dogma of homogeneism (Blommaert and Verschueren 1998, 195) intrinsic to American nationalism has legitimized the implementation of educational policies, aimed at obliterating the rich linguistic diversity in favor of the English language and the related Anglo dominant culture.[12]

Cummins's novel is, thus, "a tale of wunder-migrants, fluently English-speaking and well-educated, from a 'nice neighborhood,' implicitly enamored with the US in any diegetically suitable way" (Marini 2020a). Its main characters correspond, in fact, to the kind of Latinx people Trump accepts as migrants and whose suitability he approves of. Cummins reprises numerous stereotypes and misrepresentations, stratifying images that already characterize the US public discourse on topics related to Mexicans, migrants, and Latino/as in general. Such discourse is primarily developed in media and political speech then reconfigured by the public in its hidden transcript,[13] becoming an integral part of the public imaginary and perception on the topics and the social subjects involved. Trump's discourse is rooted in such constructions that were already present and widely shared, and he further exploited them to overtly stress the fact that the 'good' Latino/as are necessarily hardworking, assimilated, and subordinated, with the exception of affluent segments of the Latinx population—such as "the rich Mexicans, they're great people, friends of [his]" who "buy [his] apartments" (2015b, Greenville SC). In this context, the thematic and discursive issues underlying *American Dirt*, the related marketing strategies, and the publicity of some details on Cummins's contract contributed to stir controversy, as it seemed unfeasible that her novel could achieve such success without being a carefully planned editorial and political stunt. Furthermore, the fact that she received a seven-figure advance at auction and that her book was the object of a patently expensive marketing campaign provoked even further the reaction of Latinx authors, a category often underrepresented, underpaid, and neglected by mainstream American publishers.

[11] See Reginald Horsman, *Race and Manifest Destiny: The Origins of American Racial Anglo-Saxonism* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1981).

[12] Among many, see Ofelia García, "Sociolinguistics and language planning in bilingual education for Hispanics in the United States," *International Journal of the Sociology of Language* 44 (1983): 43–54.

[13] See James C. Scott, *Domination and the Arts of Resistance* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1990), 1–16.

Writing My Latino Novel: Mocking the Stereotype Through *Twitterature*

One of the main discussions the novel raised has revolved around the discriminatory practices that characterize the editorial market, under which authors belonging to ethnic minorities rarely achieve publication and can rarely aspire to much support from the publisher. The statements by Cummins included in her Author's Note, in which she wishes someone "slightly browner" than her would have written the novel, ignited the debate as there are, in fact, many Latinx authors who have been writing about the same topics for decades. The novel actually includes several passages whose diegetic development is plagiarized from Mexican American author Luis Alberto Urrea's novels *Across the Wire* (1993) and *By the Lake of Sleeping Children* (1996), both based on real events that happened to him during his childhood and teenage years living on the border. Interviewed by María Hinojosa on the matter, Cummins defensively said she was "confused" and distressed by the claims and the fact that Urrea himself denounced the plagiarism (Hinojosa 2020). To try to construct herself as an unjustly accused subject, she employed discursive constructions characteristic of the speech act that victims of violence and abuse would employ (Marini 2020a). As the lifted passages do not provide enough grounds for legal action, Cummins has not admitted to getting any more than "inspired" by Urrea's work. She took so much inspiration from Mexican and Mexican American authors' writing that sometimes the descriptions of border measures that appear in *American Dirt*—which declaredly aim to convey a strict referentiality with timely real-life situations—no longer exist (Bowles 2020a).

The novel has been criticized for exercising cultural appropriation despite the author's legitimizing discourse, which bases her entitlement to bring the reality of the border to the public on the fact that no one else would, the latter a problematic claim in itself too. As Latinx author David Bowles underlines, the issue does not lie in the fact that she is not Mexican nor a migrant herself but rather in her patent exploitation of the dramatic reality of illegal immigration and her "erasing authentic voices to sell an inaccurate cultural appropriation for millions" (Bowles 2020b). Cummins's constructions of the Mexican context and Latinx characters come out as heavily exoticized for anyone with some knowledge of Mexican and Central American cultural heritages. Not only does she rely on common, overused stereotypes, but she also seems to misinterpret beliefs and judge

customs through the use of connotative descriptions of everyday life. As many Latinx authors highlighted,[14] the novel is riddled with errors in rendering Mexican culture and linguistically incorrect insertions of expressions in Spanish, and especially the Mexican varieties. Likewise, the rendition of the political conjuncture is absent (Sehgal 2020), as the geopolitical dynamics related to the war on narcotraffic and the relations between Mexico and the United States are reduced to superficial references. Despite Cummins's declared aims of factual realism, in the novel there is virtually no acknowledgement of political agency on the US part in the migratory flux from Central America, nor in the border activity of the organized crime.

Besides the corrosive reviews of the novel, written mostly by Latinx authors and critics, Latinx users took the controversy to Twitter—initially fueled in particular by Chicana writer Myriam Gurba's vitriolic pre-release review ("Pendeja, You Ain't Steinbeck," 2019)—and they began to write parodic versions of their own alleged "Latino novel," a gesture that exceeded the initial expectations one might have of a Twitter controversy. Literary writing posted on Twitter has been considered as a "form of interactive literary performance art" (Al Sharaqi and Abbasi 2016, 17) despite the general perception that tweeted content is volatile and mostly superficial, due to its intrinsic immediacy and the limited text length allowed. Since the launch of the platform in 2006, so-called Twitterature has represented a means to either increase established authors' visibility or to allow new writers to build an audience of potential readers (Rudin 2011). In some cases, it has facilitated the opportunity to produce crowd-sourced narrative, by allowing users to add content to an initial diegetic pitch and thus to participate in the shaping of the final story.[15] Furthermore, some authors have been engaging in writing whole experimental literary novels one tweet at a time, such as Nicholas Belardes's *Small Places*, which was conceived as a result of posts that spanned two years, from 2008 to

[14] Among many, see for example the aforementioned Bowles, "Cummins' Non-Mexican Crap"; David J. Schmidt, "A Poor Imitation: American Dirt and Misrepresentations of Mexico," *The Blue Nib Literary Magazine*, published January 23, 2020; Myriam Gurba, "Pendeja, You Ain't Steinbeck: My Bronca with Fake-Ass Social Justice Literature." *Tropics of Meta*, published December 12, 2019; Esmeralda Bermudez, "Commentary: American Dirt Is What Happens When Latinos Are Shut Out of the Book Industry," *LA Times*, published January 24, 2020c.

[15] See for example BBC Audiobooks America's creation of interactive, crowd-sourced Twitter stories initiated by authors Neil Gaiman and Meg Cabot.

2010.[16] The platform has also been widely used for humorous, sarcastic, and parodic commentary, dealing in particular with political crises and sociopolitical issues such as discriminatory practices.[17] In the case at hand, the possibilities offered by Twitter in terms of visibility, virality, and corrosive parodic commentary were exploited by the Latinx community—led by a variety of Latinx authors, journalists, editors, and activists—in order to evidence the absurdity of *American Dirt*'s cultural misinterpretation and commodification. When analyzing some of the tropes and themes employed in "writing my Latino novel" tweets, the Latinx community insider's point of view results evident as opposed to Cummins's choices, whose superficiality stands out even further in comparison, and especially so given her purported claim to representing the 'truth' of the border.

Author John Paul Brammer first used the collocation "writing my Latino novel" on January 21, when he wrote a mock-blurb describing his imaginary escape from criminals: "writing my Latino novel. We fled late in the night, or /la noche/ as Mami calls it. I'm always embarrassed when Mami says shit like that, but I forgive her because she's one of eleven kids and is from /el barrio./ Anyway it was late at night, and Yolanda Saldivar was chasing us-."[18] In his tweet, Brammer references the novel directly by using the term "Mami," with which Laura's son refers to his mother throughout *American Dirt* and reprises Cummins's random insertion of words in Spanish. He also refers to Tejano singer Selena Quintanilla's murder, a specific detail that mostly Latinx readers would understand. Brammer's parody raised immediate attention and fostered participation, as Latinx users were quick to respond, inventing their own blurb of an imagined Latino novel, collecting stereotypes and ludicrous constructions of the Latinx reality. Hundreds of users followed by writing their own blurbs, retweeting and replying to the examples that multiplicated over a handful of days. Among them, Chicano cartoonist Lalo Alcaraz gave further visibility to the trending play, feeding on Chicanx iconographies often misrepresented and commodified in US mainstream culture: "I joined The Los Locos gang when I was a fetus. Later that day I sold heroin

[16] Small Places (powered by Nicholas Belardes), Twitter account, https://twitter.com/smallplaces.

[17] Among many, see Todd L. Belt, "Can We at Least All Laugh Together Now? Twitter and Online Political Humor During the 2016 Election," in *The Role of Twitter in the 2016 US Election*, eds. Christopher J. Galdieri et al. (London: Palgrave Pivot, 2018): 98–117.

[18] John Paul Brammer, Twitter post, January 21, 2020, 10:17 p.m., https://twitter.com/jpbrammer.

Chiclets at the border. My mother Frida Kahlo was a hitman for the cartels. Our home was a pyramid. I've never seen the beach. The Virgin of Guadalupe stole my lowrider. Again."[19] Alcaraz juxtaposes the exaggeration of common stereotypes, the main Mexican religious icon ("The Virgin of Guadalupe"), the widely known and commodified Mexican painter Frida Kahlo, and the *cholo* imaginary ("my lowrider") playing on the usage of "los locos" as a generic reference to gangs.

In her contribution, Salvadorean writer Esmeralda Bermudez, an immigrant herself and a reporter of migration experiences for the *Los Angeles Times*, expressed her stance on *American Dirt* repeatedly on Twitter. Besides her critique,[20] she also took part in the game: "Vamos al El Noa Noa, Noa Noa /Aaaay Papi, you are so guapo y happy / I brought a box of conchas / Conchas? Greasy conchas?/ Si, Mami. Brown conchas, brown like our tanned immigrant childhood Remember? / ¡que Delicioso rico!"[21] Bermudez's tweet makes reference to a passage in the novel in which Javier brings Laura some *conchas*—a common type of Mexican sweet bread—as a gift and Cummins insistently describes them rather incorrectly as negatively "greasy" (Cummins 2020, 42)—one of the misrepresented details pointed out by most Latinx readers. Bermudez also openly refers to the novel's colorist descriptions. In this case, the reference directed to mostly Latinx readers is represented by the insertion of "El Noa-Noa," a song by renowned Mexican singer and composer Juan Gabriel that is very well-known among Mexican and Latinx audiences, but generally unknown to the Anglo public.

For her part, Latina poet Melissa Lozada-Oliva's contribution focuses on common stereotypes related to bureaucratic aspects of immigrant life: "My mother rubs vix on every surface of the house. ¡Empanada! I am 16 & already have a full ride scholarship to Princeton because immigrants: We get the job done. My abuela was undocumented but then got citizenship THE RIGHT WAY. ¡She se puede!"[22] Lozada-Oliva mocks the fact that Affirmative Action policies have been at times negatively depicted as

[19] Lalo Alcaraz, Twitter post, January 22, 2020, 08:25 a.m., https://twitter.com/laloalcaraz.

[20] For example, Esmeralda Bermudez, Twitter thread, January 20, 2020a, https://twitter.com/BermudezWrites.

[21] Esmeralda Bermudez, Twitter post, January 22, 2020b, 04:32 p.m., https://twitter.com/BermudezWrites.

[22] Melissa Lozada-Oliva, Twitter post, January 22, 2020, 02:19 p.m., https://twitter.com/ellomelissa.

facilitations that allow members of minority groups to access education and employment 'unjustly,' to the detriment of allegedly more deserving white applicants. At the same time, she parodically reproduces two clichés connected to Trumpian discursive constructions of 'good' migrants: the hardworking, subordinate nature (immigrants "get the job done") and the "right way" to become legalized citizens. The latter is a very common catchphrase, especially among Trump's supporters and employees of the border enforcement agencies,[23] regardless of the complexity and arbitrariness of the US immigration bureaucratic system. Lozada-Oliva also inserts a cultural reference directed to Latinx readers by describing the commonplace trope about Latinx mothers' inclination to use Vicks VapoRub as a remedy for all kinds of ailments.

Critic and journalist Yolanda Machado connects her parody to the stereotype that depicts Latina women as prone to be single mothers and, implicitly, sexually promiscuous: "Pero now, I had to choose. Get jumped into the gang or join my mami cleaning rich white peoples houses. I couldn't tell her I had a baby to think about, to protect. Then I heard the yelling, 'LA MIGRA!!' and I got my chanclas, and ran."[24] Likewise, she builds on the stereotype based on the belief that Latinx immigrants' children will either join a criminal gang or work as cleaning personnel in private houses. Her reference directed to the Latinx audience is the use of the word *chanclas* [flipflops], a play on a very well-known internal stereotype: aside from commonly wearing them, Latinx parents (and mothers in particular) are popularly known within the Latinx community for performing corporeal punishment by means of throwing a flipflop at their children or hitting them with it. Despite being the object of internet memes in recent years, this use of the *chanclas* is not something ever depicted in US mainstream popular culture and thus its knowledge remains mostly circumscribed to the Latinx community.

Overall, the employment of a few common strategies emerges from the analysis of the selected tweets, which can be said to be representative of the "writing my Latino novel" Twitter parodies: the references to Cummins's novel, the insertion of Spanish terms, the exploitation of common stereotypes, and the references to shared knowledge internal to the

[23] See, for example, the testimonies given in the documentary series *Immigration Nation*, Netflix, 2020.

[24] Yolanda Machado, Twitter post, January 22, 2020, 05:05 a.m., https://twitter.com/SassyMamainLA.

Latinx community. The clear references to critical passages and mishaps contained in *American Dirt* do not presuppose an actual reading of the novel, as they rely on widely shared critiques of the text. Likewise, the mocking insertion of Spanish terms targets the awkward use of the language in the novel, which often has a stiff, automated translation feel that does not correspond to any realistic code-switching. In particular, users made fun of Cummins's overuse of the affectionate nickname "Mami" and sometimes introduced words that the Anglo audience can recognize and even use, linked to popular culture representations, stereotypes, and commodification—such as *taco*, *empanada*, *narco*, *papi*. Clearly, there is a parodic reprisal and exaggeration of the novel's exploitation of stereotypes related to border violence and narcotraffic, as well as the stereotyped sexualization of the Latinx subject. The recreation of *cholo* and *barrio*-related images was also a recurrent device, as the Anglo and mainstream popular culture imaginary often exploits the *barrio* as a Latinx locus of violence and low levels of education, as well as sites for exoticized commodification in contexts of gentrification. The most interesting strategy employed by "writing my Latino novel" authors is, however, the insertion of cultural references that can be easily recognized only by readers with a good knowledge of Chicanx and Latinx popular culture and heritage. Sometimes accompanied by terms in Spanish, the referred tropes, customs, popular culture products, and objects of shared popular knowledge are recognizable for most Latinx readers and yet, rarely or never represented in the mainstream public sphere. Conversely, Cummins's repeated mistaken references to popular customs and heritage—either describing contextual elements erroneously or failing at rendering widespread beliefs and tropes[25]—can go unnoticed by most non-Latinx readers.

In short, the Latinx creators' parodic reaction to the discourses underlying *American Dirt* focused on the fact that the novel is riddled with narrative clichés and harmful stereotypes regarding Latinx heritage and migrant realities. As Cummins employed them as strategic devices to construct an underlying ideological discourse, the mock blurbs for the Latinx Twitter users' imaginary "Latino novel" played on stereotypes as well; their strategy, though, was quite the opposite and had a subversive, and

[25] For example, the novel's protagonist finds Javier's nickname *La Lechuza* [the owl] funny because "owls aren't scary" (Cummins 2020, 45), whereas in Mexican folklore the owl is widely related to malignant shapeshifter beings. Likewise, Cummins uses the term bogeyman in lieu of *El Cucuy*, the corresponding Latinx folktale trope.

even denunciatory, intent: Latinx users employed stereotypes to either publicly expose them or to insert references that only readers familiar with the Latinx community and its popular culture would understand. The discrimination intrinsic to the novel's colorist misrepresentation was thus reversed and directed toward all the members of the US public who couldn't understand the parody and—at the same time—could be deceived by Cummins's ludicrous exoticization. The stunt went relatively viral for just a few days and mostly within the Latinx community on Twitter, but it contributed to raise awareness on Latinx representation and editorial discrimination, fueling the debate on a rather Trumpian novel indeed.

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CHAPTER 11

Writing as Antidote: Muslim Writers Resist in *Don't Panic, I'm Islamic* and *Banthology*

Maria Mothes

Abstract In January 2017, the Trump administration issued executive order 13769, banning seven Muslim-majority countries from entering the US Two literary responses emerged within months: the anthologies *Don't Panic, I'm Islamic*, featuring international writers and artists, and *Banthology*, presenting authors of the banned nations. While resistance against Donald Trump's policies was exercised in various ways by lawyers, human rights organizations, and public figures, this chapter focuses on voices outside the mainstream. It explores restrictions of/on movement symptomatic of the travel ban and the depiction of freedom of mobility (or the lack thereof) in the stories collected in *Banthology*. To contextualize the 'Muslim ban' as part of the larger issue of othering, this essay furthermore incorporates 'slice-of-life' stories of *Don't Panic, I'm Islamic*. These accounts matter, because they portray the stories of affected people, thereby providing nuanced portrayals of the Muslim (American) community. I claim that both anthologies invite readers to reassess their stance on

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political decisions, and work against a closing of the mind by appealing to imagination and humor. Valuing the craft and the political significance of these literary works, this chapter positions itself to counter essentializing and stereotyping of Muslims, demonstrating how kaleidoscopic narratives are a powerful medium of resistance.

In times of crisis, people have always turned to literature in search of answers and meaning. The Trump presidency—undoubtedly a time of turmoil—was defined by disinformation, uncertainty, and drama. The constant flip-flopping of the administration resulted in hourly changing news and statements that burst into our screens, but comprehension is a long time coming. Yesterday's announcements were already obsolete the next day. The speed of the information flow became almost impossible to grasp, and the immediacy with which it forced itself into our minds, almost unbearable. Each newly released piece of information added another layer of absurdity to an already grotesque reality, which rendered the very term 'crisis' ubiquitous, not only as an already-existing, permanent condition, but as a result of unexpected events, such as the Covid-19 pandemic, that caught us off-guard and only added to the sense of uprootedness and confusion. In the midst of all this chaos, reality increasingly seemed the product of fiction, even scripted at times, and many wondered about how this would impact the role and need for fictional representation. What do we as readers ask of fiction, and what role does literature have in the era of Trump, in times of utter uncertainty?

This chapter focuses on two anthologies that were published in 2017 as a direct response to one of Donald Trump's first and most controversial executive actions: the so-called Muslim travel ban. This policy put the racism and xenophobia that were to come fully on display. It caused profound angst in the United States and abroad, and foreshadowed the demeanor and mindset of an administration that was to build its legacy on confusion, chaos, and lies. The collections can be read as a reaction to the looming danger, that also gave momentum to their publication. They articulate a response to the political climate, from the perspective of those more directly targeted by the ban, and are also framed and curated under this banner. It is my claim that they are, at the same time, proactive in coming to terms with the new reality and thereby underline the importance of the role of literature as reverberation and—potentially—an antidote to crisis. I will argue, moreover, that in order to negotiate the danger of timely

fiction turning into dated accounts, these works should be read as literary art in their own right by considering how the craft *and* their political significance render these anthologies insightful representations of Muslim voices with the potential to upend predominant narratives. This approach entails recognizing such works as significant and stable parts of their respective genre and their contribution to the canon of contemporary American fiction. The present chapter traces these two selected anthologies by contextualizing the medium, evaluating their proclaimed purpose, and analyzing one short story from each collection, focusing particularly on their use of humor. I will then return to what role literature may play in times of turmoil and how said anthologies could be received in this context.

On January 27, 2017, the newly inaugurated Trump administration issued executive order 13769, denying most people from the seven Muslim-majority countries Sudan, Syria, Iran, Iraq, Libya, Somalia, and Yemen entry into the United States for 90 days. Entry permissions for Syrian refugees were suspended indefinitely and halted for 120 days for new refugees from other nations. The decisions were officially justified as denying entry to citizens from certain "countries of concern" and as "detecting individuals with terrorist ties and stopping them from entering the United States" (Kenneally 2017). After a tremendous backlash from civil rights organizations and the ruling by a New York judge granting emergency stays for those facing immediate deportation, and after a public outcry from activists, protesters, international leaders, and religious organizations, several federal judges ruled against the president's order. In response to the criticism that the order was unequivocally targeting Muslims, the Trump administration eased restrictions shortly after, removing Iraq from the list and exempting from the ban permanent residents and those whose visas had been already previously issued. However, blatant Islamophobia and anti-immigrant sentiment were still apparent in the travel ban and could be easily traced to the order's architect, the outspoken white supremacist Stephen Miller, at that time senior advisor and speechwriter to Donald Trump. Throughout his tenure, Miller solidified his standing in the administration by propagating an aggressive anti-immigration agenda. Separating children from their families at the US border with Mexico marked only one grim milestone in his political career. In January 2021, after four years of chaos and panic, newly inaugurated President Biden repealed the order on his first day in office.

The anthologies *Don't Panic, I'm Islamic* (SaqiBooks, 2017) and *Banthology: Stories from Unwanted Nations* (Comma Books, 2018) set out with the shared intention of standing up against immigration politics that were creating division, but they remain fundamentally different in their approach and their final presentation. Both volumes answer to the darkening political climate and an urgent reality in which certain people were deemed undesirable, potential terrorists, or considered a threat to US national security. And while the collections were both commissioned directly after the travel ban, the featured short stories in *Banthology* and the stories, poems, and accompanying artworks in *Don't Panic* discuss a diversity of topics in unique ways. They encompass various genres and provide distinct aesthetic experiences. Through this variety, they resist being appropriated by one specific ethnic or cultural tradition.

"Stories from Unwanted Nations"

Banthology: Stories from Unwanted Nations is a collaborative project by Comma Press in the United Kingdom and Deep Vellum Press in the United States, edited by Sarah Cleave. It gathers short stories in translation by authors of the seven banned nations. The framing theme of the stories addresses the restriction of mobility and movement. Some of the stories directly engage with this theme, such as Zaher Omareen's "The Beginner's Guide to Smuggling" or Najwa Binshatwan's "Return Ticket." Others discuss surprising, unexpected issues, like Fereshteh Molavi's invisible connection between a mother and her son in "Phantom Limb" or the end-time story "The Slow Man" by Wajdi al-Ahdal. Readers find a thought-provoking, nuanced mix of fantasy, science fiction, and folklore. The collection does not display the typical characteristics of the classic anthology: it is neither representative of one literary genre nor of a group of writers, except for the fact that each one of them represents one of the countries villainized by the executive order. Some authors, like Anoud, write from exile, unable to leave the United States for fear of not being allowed to return under the ban. It is noteworthy that only two of the short stories included were originally written in English (from Iraq, Anoud's "Storyteller," and from Iran, Fereshteh Molavi's "Phantom Limb"), the other five being works in translation from Arabic and Italian. The collection provides short bios of the authors and the respective translators, acknowledging and integrating both sides' effort and craft. Consequently, readers who are so inclined can easily find additional,

intriguing projects, such as translator Basma Ghalayini's edited volume *Palestine +100: Stories from a Century after the Nakba* (2019).

Banthology is profoundly shaped by its initial impetus for publication, its curation, and its presentation. As previously noted, mobility or a restriction of movement is the common theme of this anthology. The majority of the short stories engage with this in the form or from the viewpoint of migration, refuge, or exile, which is also represented in the book covers. Bearing in mind the diverse approaches by the authors, the decisions behind the cover design can be challenged. The UK edition features an eye-catching, oversized prohibition stamp; in the same vein, the American cover showcases birds arising from barbed wire. Both convey a problematic notion regarding restriction, mobility, and borders, and one may ask what does such marketing/design strategy suggest to the reader, other than the 'guilty pleasure' of picking up forbidden literature? This undertone is also evident when considering the curation of the anthology. The collection comes to the attention of Western audiences through a series of political decisions that end up giving momentum to its publication. This may convey the highly questionable impression that it is only as a result of yet another heinous and unreasonable Trump policy that readers will pick up such a book. In other words, it is problematic that the attention given to such works in translation would depend on political events, essentially burdening the literary works with a negative connotation. When this is the case, the literary merit of these works may be lost on an audience that—(un)knowingly or triggered by said covers—expects the 'cookie-cutter narrative' of an immigrant's struggle. The range of existing stories waiting to be told or read, then, runs the risk of being perceived solely through the lens of politics and short-lived urgency. Instead, the artistic merit of the literary works should be considered and discussed, especially so in the case of Muslim writers or writers of color, as Laila Lalami strikingly states in a conversation with fellow writer Ayad Akhtar:

> it's impossible for me as a writer not to come across questions about being Muslim, or at the very least questions about politics. That is the lens that is applied because of accidents of birth: the fact that I'm a woman, the fact that I'm brown, the fact that I'm a naturalized citizen. I sometimes feel envious of writers who get to go to literary festivals and talk about craft. (Akhtar and Lalami 2020)

In relating Lalami's words to the analysis of one short story from *Banthology* that is representative of the type of work under discussion, my aim is to show how the combination of cover design, curation motif, and theme stands in opposition to the stereotypes the authors in the collection seek to subvert with their literary art.

"Words and Pictures on How to Stop Worrying and Learn to Love the Alien Next Door"

Hailed as "the first big anti-Trump book" by the online travel magazine *Culture Trip* (Leser 2017) and picked by the *Sunday Times* as one of their books of the year, *Don't Panic, I'm Islamic. Words and Pictures on How to Stop Worrying and Learn to Love the Alien Next Door* is, similarly, a direct response to the 2017 travel ban but achieves its goal by different means. Travel is not a central topic. Instead, various award-winning, widely published, or otherwise renowned artists (among them graphic designers, dancers, authors, activists, and comedians) claim the space created in this collection to give expression to an array of issues, mindsets, and emotions. *Don't Panic* is a colorful collage of short stories, poems, photographs, instructional pieces, and graphic accounts. Some of the contributions, like Arwa Mahdawi's "A Personal Guide to Extreme Vetting" or Aisha Mirza's "Yesterday I Stepped on a White Woman's Yoga Mat," anticipate what the reader may expect. Others, such as "Are Nazi Anthologies Kosher Today?" by Eli Valley or "The Muslim: A Cautionary Tale" by Sjón, remain enigmatic. All of the stories are honest, self-reflective, and strong accounts that speak from and about experience. The authors and artists manage to translate political realities such as racism, sexism, or Islamophobia into graspable yet artistic terms. The contributions play with stereotypes or subvert and appropriate them. Further, they denounce the repression of individuality and personal freedom by highlighting experiences, expressions, and affects beyond mainstream portrayals of Muslims. The writers share the (religious or cultural) Muslim background, but their craftsmanship could not be more diverse. The volume leaves its mark like a visual, readable poetry slam, inviting the reader to indulge in essays, poems, and various artworks. The diversity of works in the collection affects the reader on multiple levels. They trigger our critical thinking and appeal to our sense of empathy. They make us laugh out loud and capture our imagination by their authenticity, welcoming us to rummage around, eager to turn the

page. Simultaneously, the volume manages to represent the varieties of Muslim identities in great nuance. Some works tackle religion and belief heads on; others challenge readers to discover more subtle connections. Still others show that matters seemingly unrelated to our preconceived ideas of Muslimness are no less relevant, precisely because they remind us that Muslims share the same problems that the—one would assume—Western readership does. Moreover, the authors and artists make clear that Muslimness should not be considered their sole identifying factor. Thus, *Don't Panic*'s strength lies in *not* giving us what we think we want or what many might expect (veiling, terrorism, and the like) and, to the contrary, in depicting nuances of everyday reality and identity negotiation. The collection stands firmly on its own as a literary artwork and is not overshadowed by the political tipping point that sparked its *raison d'être*.

Testimonies of a Political Moment

An immediate response to crisis demands two aspects commonly referred to as central characteristics of the short story: brevity to transpose matters in an outright manner and the density that allows writers to convey the sense of urgency in their texts. In this vein, Marcia Lynx Qualey points out the short story's potential for "high-speed invention" (Lynx Qualey 2019) and Sarah Hardy speaks of the "poetics of immediacy" (Hardy 1993, 352). In times when Twitter has become a widely agreed-upon medium of information dissemination—and even a legitimate tool of political communication—the short story seems to be a suitable medium to intervene in urgent matters, public discourse, or emotional overload. Besides this characteristic of timely and spatial reduction (miniaturization, even), it is noteworthy that elements of oral storytelling often enrich the short story: folklore elements, allegories, tales, or anecdotes; a dialogue between individual and community. Mary Louise Pratt highlights the particular role of orality in the short stories of non-literate cultures or those subjected to a dominating or oppressive force (Pratt 1981, 190), while Sarah Hardy emphasizes the (isolated) thematic core of a short story that in turn demands the reader's deep engagement with it, without relying on the longer chain of plot points filling in the gaps that a novel usually offers (Hardy 1993, 366). Whether comparing the short story format to that of the novel is a helpful discussion or not, it is undeniable that the elements the short story brings to the table are a fertile ground for narrating stories of crisis. And especially so in the twenty-first century, when we are faced

with an ever-changing, often skittish reality, with the fast-paced, ever-present stream of news that leaves us with an inescapable impression of the fickle nature of things all around us. The novel form is perhaps more suited to provide the bigger picture, a larger coherent narrative. Contrarily, and as Paul March-Russell suggests, the short story builds narratives out of the bits and pieces and from the fragments of our lives (March-Russell 2009, 258), and depends on the readers' active engagement to a larger degree.

The act of assembling a collection, through the work of editors and publishers, is always also a political decision, as Emma Bond points out (Bond 2019, 160). Curation or editing resembles what March-Russell terms a "[mediation of] the likes and dislikes of its editors" (March-Russell 2009, 57): Through the choices they make, both compendiums accentuate individual authors, styles, or—in the case of *Banthology*—nationalities. In the latter case, this creates a tight-knit assemblage as a result of its clearly stated umbrella topic, while *Don't Panic* presents itself as a looser, collage-esque collection. Accordingly, both volumes claim to pursue different goals: *Banthology*'s editor Sarah Cleave of Comma Press describes the collection as a "testament to the importance of creative resistance in turbulent times," hoping it will "enrich, enlighten, and entertain" (Cleave 2018). The blurb for Saqi Books' *Don't Panic* features most prominently Reza Aslan's praise: "Thoughtful and entertaining … this subversive romp into the nuanced world of Muslims is exactly what we need in today's increasingly polarised climate" (Aslan in Gaspard, ed. 2017, book blurb). His lines aptly summarize the nature of the collection. Contrary to what the subtitle suggests ("learn to love the alien next door"), the book promotes nuances instead of binaries. Even though the travel ban works along religious lines and the title of *Don't Panic* plays with religious terminology, Islam is not a trope in the collections that forces itself onto the reader. Some of the works engage with Islam in one way or another; yet, the writers refuse to treat religion as a monolith and as an essential core that defines their being.

Nevertheless, the merit of the short story form that I have touched upon can also be part of a potentially problematic perception. As March-Russell suggests, echoing an argument by Charles May, the short story may be perceived as always remaining fragmented due to "its enigmatic quality and resistance to closure" (March-Russell 2009, 78), an assessment about the difficulty of the form that, as March-Russell argues, is mostly the product of academic debate, which has also shaped what gets published and how it is received. And yet, it is undeniable that the power

that lies within a collection of short stories, such as *Banthology* or a multimodal assemblage of art like *Don't Panic*, may be lost on a readership that does not have the patience, profound interest, or time (despite the medium's brevity) to discover more subtle interconnections. If consumed superficially, what remains with readers may merely be a pretty coffee table book. It undoubtedly sparks interest but may fail to make the reader grapple with the underlying aim: a challenge to critically engage with race, the roots and remnants of the Western legacy of othering, and the reader's own bias.

Whether or not the authors in *Banthology* and *Don't Panic* can be generally subsumed as transcultural writers (some undoubtedly are), their stories show crucial characteristics of transcultural writing or the literature of mobility, namely the negotiation and subversion of borders and boundaries (Dagnino 2013b, 8). The themes of mobility and (border) crossing in *Banthology* (motivated by the restriction of global movement and travel, namely by the non-issuing of visas) and *Don't Panic's* deconstruction of frontiers of the mind highlight another characteristic of transcultural literary works: refusing a categorization of the nationality, ethnicity, or (cultural) group to which the author or the characters belong (Dagnino 2013a, 135). The short story as an art form mirrors this notion of blurred lines of association: thriving in both high and low culture (and thereby, subverting the very distinction between the two that is so often used as a basis for critical judgment), a part of mass culture but also, for instance, of postcolonial writing (Awadalla and March-Russell 2013, 4–5). In this context, it remains debatable to what extent *Banthology*'s arrangement of the stories according to the explicitly stated banned countries is contradictory. In a direct comparison, *Don't Panic* seems to draw the reader's attention more successfully to its art and to the unique voices of the artists, instead of compartmentalizing them according to pre-established, fixed categories.

The discrepancy between the potential strengths and weaknesses of the short story as a form can be rendered productive by giving the genre a stronger position in Western reading lists and university syllabi, and by openly acknowledging its negotiation through literary criticism, which deeply influences its representation in the canon. After all, Bond pointedly reminds us that "the genre of the anthology in all its forms conceals a wide potential for meaning-making across various areas of interest" (Bond 2019, 161), for which readers need to make use of specific literacy skills to contextualize, analyze, and interpret short stories and the genre of the

anthology itself. *Banthology* and *Don't Panic* are a case in point: they provide textual and visual artifacts that can be subject to scholarly interpretation or criticism, help to further theorize the anthology as a genre, and add to the already existing yet equally underrepresented field of Muslim (American) Literature (Price 2000, 2). Moja Kahf speaks of a positive gain in considering texts dealing with topics related to Muslim identity under one rubric (Kahf 2010, 163), and Lisa Suhair Majaj calls for a "move beyond […] the reactiveness generated by political pressures" (Majaj 2006, 129). However, if immediate political reality is the basis for thematic collections, there needs to be a greater effort in reading these volumes in a wider context and not just through a political lens, and this should not foreclose a recognition of their art and craft in particular. Majaj further states: "To move away from defensive nostalgia and stereotypical 'ethnic' themes, however, toward more intellectually and thematically daring material, arguably requires an expansion not just of the theme but also of literary style and genre" (Majaj 2006, 129). Thus, it is not enough to look for this potential whenever political events bring them to the forefront; their reception needs to continue beyond the particular, albeit alarming moment they were born from.

Humor and the Speculative in Najwa Binshatwan's "Return Ticket"

Turning to two representative short stories in these two collections, I will discuss in the following sections how the authors object to the reality their stories narrate. Representing Libya (one of the banned nations under the 2017 Trump order), Najwa Binshatwan—whose novel *The Slave Pens* was shortlisted for the 2017 International Prize for Arabic Fiction—tells a story of borders, travel, and personal freedom in her contribution to *Banthology*. The allegorical tale, framed by a woman's letter to her unborn grandson, serves as a reminder and a call to cherish the exceptional place that is their home: a city named Schrödinger. Reminiscent of Erwin Schrödinger's cat—a thought experiment in quantum mechanics—the city lingers in a paradoxical, hybrid state of existence and non-existence. Affirming its own presence by naming itself, it displays extraordinary powers, autonomously moving through time and space; a "cosmic anomaly" (Binshatwan 2018, 29). The reading experience is shaped by several elements, among them a speculative mood and the gradual defamiliarization

of the familiar—for instance, the defiance of physics—which prompts the question of whether general rules simply do not apply or whether the notion of 'normal' has been illusory in the first place (Hemon 2017). American immigrants searching for refuge die in Schrödinger, unable to return to their country that is closed off by rising walls. Like the city's existence, the bodies of the dead Americans are simultaneously reality and illusion. The story treats the dead as hypothetical, yet they are still vocal in their political opinions: "As the purslane vine continue to grow on the grave opposite him, the eldest tourist said, 'It's good that we died before America's prison warden came to power'" (Binshatwan 2018, 31). Binshatwan blurs the boundaries between fantasy and science fiction, yet within the parameters of the fictional universe that the text has constructed, the tropes and overall setting seem startlingly plausible. Through the theme of travel and the movement of the protagonist and the city, the story traverses physical borders, but also metaphysical ones between the living and the dead. The city provides a safe haven for its inhabitants, who are continually reminded of the shortcomings of other countries they visit from time to time. The author's country of birth, Libya, is one of them. There, rules are entirely made by men who have elevated themselves to the level of gods.

In "Return Ticket," Binshatwan depicts the intersection of the spatial particularity of airports as thresholds and the presence of people in them. In doing so, the story contrasts the utopian realm of Schrödinger with a dystopia in which airports are turned into a place of confinement while still mimicking ordinariness. The protagonist's journey encompasses three different yet equally disturbing places of transit, where she encounters security personnel whose behavior is reminiscent of the United States' TSA (Transportation Security Administration). She is left to deal with the staff's absurd demands, which stand in even greater contrast to her desperate pleading for rationality. The hopeless, paradoxical situation is further amplified by the lack of common sense and refusal by the officials to interact with her in a dignified manner. As she is stripped of the things that identify her (clothes, passport), she is rendered anonymous but simultaneously made hyper-visible as she is dragged into the spotlight, all eyes fixed on her potential misdemeanor. This paradox mirrors the situation of Muslims in Western or non-Muslim countries: defined mainly by their religious affiliation and visual markers thereof, they are often forced into the contradictory position between marginalization and the center of (negative) attention.

Binshatwan's story plays with three concepts that could not express more aptly our current zeitgeist: immediacy, fluidity, and volatileness, which ultimately entails "a recognition of the uncertainty of all knowledge" (Ravenscroft 2010, 210). In times of post-truth and alternative facts, this latter notion imposes itself quicker than ever before. As "Return Ticket" progresses, this also gains significance in the fictional universe of the story. Traveling through more airports that outdo each other in absurdity, misogyny, and bigotry, the protagonist is trapped in a threshold, and bereaved of any sense of past or future. Eventually, she manages to return to Schrödinger after years in limbo, a prisoner of the non-space. Undeniably, airports can be considered liminal spaces (transitional ones, even) (Kociatkiewicz and Kostera 2011, 7), and they also bring to mind Michel Foucault's notion of 'heterotopia' as a self-contained space that mirrors and at the same time distorts or unsettles the logic of the space outside (Foucault 1986). Contradicting the dominant characteristic of airports as spaces of transition (in the sense of 'transit'), in the short story time is experienced (by the character and the reader) as distorted, seemingly never-ending, and repetitive, in which the similarity of scenarios further reshapes time into a loop cycle. The protagonist is doomed to repeatedly live through similar scenarios without being given a chance to see any advancement in her situation. Interestingly, the speculative elements in the story are not separated from or juxtaposed with the realist ones; rather, the story indicates how they can be parts of a whole: mutually beneficial in adding value to one another. Understanding the short story in this way can enable a different interpretation, avoiding what Ravenscroft calls "the white Western critics' reality becom[ing] the only one" (Ravenscroft 2010, 200). What one group of readers discounts or dramatizes as fantastic is part of the everyday reality for another. Thus, through this aesthetic choice, the story presents truth as based on experience—not misconception or illusion—which becomes all the more valuable if we are willing to learn from it.

The actuality of said events/scenarios and the fictionality of the representation is not a paradox. Contrarily, fantastical elements are grounded in the absurdity of reality. As Charles A. Knight contends, often times "the fantasy itself enacts deeper truths than history does" (Knight 2009, 111). Locating the story within the modes of fantasy and science fiction, therefore, does not make it escapist reading. In combination with the subtle hints of satire, this choice seems to render it more evocative; satire, according to Knight, works as a connector, a "mediat[ion] between the abstract

truth of fantasy and the specific experience of history" (Knight 2009, 111). However, the underlying experience portrayed in "Return Ticket" is not one that we all recognize equally. The story depicts this by engaging with the extensive checks, heightened anxiety, and the paralyzing anticipation of potential and imputed misdemeanor that might subsequently attract attention. The need for recognition of experience on the readers' part should be regarded, thus, in relation to the *Banthology* collection in its entirety. Otherwise, the goal of mutual understanding between audience and text is potentially not brought full circle, and the danger of lacking a more profound commitment and empathy-building remains present. An American or European readership might receive and interpret the stories merely as victimized accounts, precisely because the gap between experiences is too wide and a recognition of the traumatic experiences does not take place. In his review of the collection, André Naffis-Sahely speaks of a "reduc[tion] to mere displacement and loss," lamenting a waste of the authors' emotional and thematic potential (Naffis-Sahely 2018, 51). This critique can be applied to Binshatwan's story as well. The tropes of religious fundamentalism and veiling (even if satirized by the author) and the status accorded to women feed into what Naffis-Sahely calls "failing to offer a viable alternative to old stereotypes" and, ultimately, "encourage the book's readers to consider the region exclusively through the lens of Western politics" (Naffis-Sahely 2018, 51). Consequently, the relevance of other identity-shaping aspects, like religious sociality or the importance of intergenerational ties, may be lost in the collection's narrow and predetermined focus on exile, displacement, and immobility, which places restrictions on the authors and potentially overshadows the subversive capacities of the writing.

However, if we engage with the literary and aesthetic dimension, "Return Ticket" fulfills the promise of offering an alternative space, being neither a dystopia with endlessly rising walls nor a utopian universe devoid of all borders. In this vein, it demonstrates the challenges in dealing with ambiguous or conflicting notions of reality. Likewise, Binshatwan's often enigmatic allusions mirror the confusion caused by a political discourse that is nearly impossible to comprehend. In other instances, the matter-of-fact tone of the writing entices the reader's willingness to suspend disbelief and offers a glimpse of potential perspective. After all, if the various airports in the story, with their incomprehensible and absurd rules, are the protagonist's reality, the safe haven of Schrödinger might as well be imaginable. Readers are not just asked to believe the fantastical, but they are

challenged to see what is depicted *as if it were* absolutely likely to be true, negotiating the incomprehensible and the unthinkable. Binshatwan's references to Donald Trump—"America's prison warden"—and her direct allusions to heavily loaded terms like walls, airports, or election results ease the way for readers to recognize reality in the fictional setting. The publication of *Banthology* plays well into this, as it prepares readers' attentiveness for certain tropes that are likely to be framed in humorous or satirical ways.

Through the story's use of satire, Binshatwan points to the absurdities of the world she writes in, showing that narrating experience sometimes needs satirizing and caricaturing to get it across. Irony announces itself by letting the reader know that an adequate representation seems impossible, and therefore, resorting to irony is a necessary mechanism of expression, even parodying our society might be necessary. It reveals the absurdity through which we as readers can, in turn, recognize the familiar. The use of ironic and satirical elements—contrary to what a superficial reading experience might suggest—does not render the story a mere distraction or escape from reality (although there is nothing wrong with escapist reading). Binshatwan's choice of the fantastic or science fiction genre underlines the effort of reconciling the overwhelming facets of reality. Examining and exploring situations within a fantastical setting enables a coming to terms with identity and personal experiences that an imitation of reality could not provide. It is a way of stepping back and appreciating the power of distance to recontextualize and negotiate reality in a fictional account, yet be fully immersed in it at the same time. The realm of the speculative allows for the writer's and reader's mind to imagine beyond the confinement of borders, all the while contemplating issues of distress and trauma.

Such fictional framing of political events is arguably not the kind of resistance that can change the world in a day, but it has the power to gradually spill over into the readers' world, transgressing borders in the imagination. In this way, "Return Ticket" expresses and stirs the constant tension many of us feel between embracing and rejecting this world and the constant, oxymoronic pull to and from making sense of our existence and being lost in its incomprehensible absurdity. The genre choice of this short story underlines that: it engages with plausible, timely scenarios framed within the fantastic to push the borders of speculation a little further, to open the imagination a little wider. The impact and need for this critical exercise become particularly apparent when the bending of engrained ways of knowing (and imagining) becomes necessary to

understand reality. The potential then lies in the realm where borders are blurred, and the use of irony and satire sharpens the perception instead of dismissing the story as mere make-believe. There grows a space for questioning, challenging, and renegotiating.

Humor, Vulnerability, and the Luxury of Astonishment in Karl Sharro's "The Joys of Applying for a US Visa"

Leaving behind the realm of Binshatwan's airports, an equally disturbing scenario follows in satirist Karl Sharro's contribution to the anthology *Don't Panic, I'm Islamic*: applying for a US visa. The story does not mince matters: "The interview is the high point of the process and requires you to be at your sharpest mentally, nimbly avoiding the verbal traps that the highly-trained embassy official will set up for you" (Sharro 2017, 15). Like "Return Ticket," this story, too, plays with readers' expectations and perceptions. The words chosen in these lines introducing the reader to the interviewee's experience read more like the description of a military training scenario and are—at the very least—irritating. For the applicant in the narrative, however, it is the unadorned reality. He is neither exaggerating, nor is he caught up in his subjective, emotional perception. He makes clear that this is the absurd yet real nature of his experience. Depicting an ordinary (to some even insignificant) situation in an intimidating, authoritative language that seems unsuited, initially creates the immediate feeling of being under surveillance or even subject to threat or harm. Although Sharro's sarcasm is palpable in every line, he does not apply humor casually. For those who never had to experience such a humiliating and draining treatment, the fictional reality seems unreal, almost made-up to serve the suspense curve of the narrative. Readers might be surprised by the outrageous demands and the position the applicant finds himself in. He, however, is not entitled to the luxury of this astonishment. His reality does not allow him to pause and think in order to process the situation adequately, or to reject it. Readers, on the other hand, can observe the immediacy and urgency of his reality from a comfortable distance.

As the interview is about to start, the mere anticipation of the conversation with the officers that is to come creates a tension that Sharro then subverts with a dose of sarcasm:

> Try to get tips from the people who have already been interviewed, they will give you instant reviews of the different officials. '*Number 5 is tough. He will ask a lot of questions about your finances.' 'Number 3 hasn't approved a single visa today!' 'Number 4 looks like my cousin's dog!*' (Sharro 2017, 15; italics in the original)

The depiction at the beginning of the story of a situation that requires heightened senses, alertness, and sharpness of the mind is now framed with a different kind of humor: from less severe, tongue-in-cheek jokes to outright ridicule. Another applicant would perhaps feel seen in this humor, an embassy official offended by it. Whether or not one kind of humor is more subversive here remains debatable. It is undeniable, though, that Sharro's writing caters to what the respective scenario requires and, ultimately, what kind of humorous support his character needs in telling his story. Towards the end of the officer's inquiry that is nothing short of an investigation, the applicant is asked to present his grandparents' birth certificates (the relevance of said papers for the applicant's visa process remains unclear to the reader and the applicant):

> —*Where and when were your grandparents born?*
> —Sometime, somewhere in the Ottoman Empire.
> —*Their birth certificates?*
> —I don't have them.
> —*Why not?*
> —Well, the Ottoman Empire doesn't exist anymore. It's not like I can just pop into its consulate.
> —*Are you trying to be funny?*
> —No, sir. (Sharro 2017, 17; italics in the original)

Again, this dialogue introduces yet another shade of humor, which is infused with a tragic element. Undoubtedly, any logic or—God forbid—reason for demanding those documents is nowhere to be found here, and the questions reek of systematic harassment and intimidation. The applicant's profoundly innocent yet cheeky comment on the sheer impossibility of the request is utterly relatable in its simple wish to not only loosen the situation but subtly pointing to the absurdity of it all, that is more obvious than the proverbial elephant in the room. However, in this scenario, the innocent remark is enough of an affront to the visa officer that it is instantly twisted, turned, and used against the applicant. The officer remains

oblivious (read: ignorant) to the simple fact that obtaining said papers would literally require magic on the applicant's part.

The protagonist's verdict leaves no doubt: completing the interrogation to the officer's satisfaction is not humanly possible, and this sobering insight is a fact grounded in senselessness. Passing through the visa process and learning this lesson comes at its own cost: "You are not a real person anymore; the usual rules do not apply here" (Sharro 2017, 19); logic, common sense, and basic decency are nowhere to be found. In this vein of hypotheticals and wishful thinking, Sharro concludes his story recounting the few lucky ones who manage to obtain a visa and reach celebrity status, like the man in the applicant's city of Lebanon. Children gather around him as he tells his tale, sipping on a can of Coke, a symbol of the red, white, and blue. Of course, this man never existed. Nobody ever actually met the guy. But this is not of relevance here. His tale lives on, continuing to turn the heads of trusting youngsters dreaming of a better life in the land of (in)finite opportunities.

In the context of Sharro's story, the truth needs an amplification so that even those readers who came for simple entertainment cannot miss it. In an interview with PRX's *The World*, Sharro emphasizes the innocence of humor as a simple "source of relief," despite the heaviness and depression that accompany the humorized, often political events he narrates (The World 2014). The generally snappy and sharp nature of satire, however, also has a softer side in Sharro's short story: a subtle yet undeniable sense of vulnerability shining through its jokes. It reminds us that the reality of the applicant cannot be dismissed; the treatment he endures at the hand of the officials and the use of irony in telling the story speak of a disparity that needs to be denounced; a reality we cannot accept because even if it is not ours by experience, it is nonetheless true. Albeit relief through humor can be a way to help the reader gain access to the issues discussed in the story, it also has a cathartic function for the narrator: denouncing despotism and upholding sanity amidst absurdity.

Concluding Thoughts

Walls, airports, visa interviews: The scenarios and allusions we encounter in the short stories analyzed in this chapter have become symbolic, almost archetypal in the public discourse, pointing to a larger, recognizable ill. At a time when information dissemination flows faster than our minds can process, one wonders how literary representations can catch up with

reality and negotiate it aptly. Similar discussions about the role of fiction after great crisis—most prominently post-9/11 fiction, climate fiction, or even crisis fiction (Horton 2014)—have shown that it can and it does more than just keep up with the pace. Literature holds the means to lead the way through insanity and ill to teach us how to surrender to life without losing ourselves. The question, then, might have to be phrased differently: How can we tap into the endless well of potential and possibilities that fiction offers? After all, it holds an alternative space and countless alternative realities that enable imagining, reimagining, predicting, assuring, or warning. Fiction does not only have access to the realm of the imaginary and the (im-)possible; it actualizes this realm. A woman stuck between worlds, a city that names itself, and a man scrutinized in a visa interview, left with nothing but his humor: This is the fabric of two stories in the collections examined in this chapter. As I have emphasized by looking at the use of humor and the role of the speculative, we need to consider the literary and the genre (short story/anthology) *in interaction with* the political motivation behind the anthologies' publication. Considering only the latter, we risk reducing them to reactive writing with limited temporal validity, seen through a predetermined lens. In including the former, however, we allow for a much more holistic view of these stories and a broader discussion of them by critics, scholars, and students of literature alike.

This approach, however, does not come unchallenged: Donald J. Trump's rise to power and the popularity of similar symptoms of division and moral decline continues to confront educators, scholars, and writers with an urgency to embrace critical perspectives on 'tried and tested' methods, or to consider new ones altogether. Nativist ideologies and xenophobic attitudes do not exist and thrive in a vacuum, nor do the people who represent such movements; they ride the wave of cultural momentum, history, and zeitgeist. If Trump is not the cause, then fiction should not stop searching and calling out what is. At such fraught times, the urgency of the moment requires literature to continue to bear witness. The anthology *The American Way. Stories of Invasion*, also featuring Najwa Binshatwan, marks such an example (2021).

If Donald Trump and his sympathizers resort to twisting facts beyond recognition, then fiction can intervene as it actualizes truths rather than facts (Lamarque 1990; Lewis 1978; Walton 1993). Furthermore, as Salman Rushdie points out, it nurtures an agreement on what we hold in common: our humanity (Rushdie 2018). Paradoxically, in the Trump era (as in many other fraught periods of history), it is reality and not fiction

that forces us to suspend disbelief. The events on the news push our imagination to the limits. As a result, it is perhaps possible to argue that fiction and reality function in a system of balance. If one changes direction, the other can level this shift. This counterbalance helps us to use one to make sense of the other. Let me be clear: I do not suggest that fiction should adjust to the tone of reality. On the contrary: The nastier reality gets, the louder the rants and the lashing out, the more subtle and nuanced fiction can respond. It can fill in the gaps of what is missing in a polarized society that feeds on division, that demands black-and-white certainties, and that compels allegiances. If anything, we need more stories and a more open-minded discussion. We need more diverse stories, more diverse voices that represent the complexities of our selves. We need shades and varieties that all of us can see ourselves in. We need stories that remind us of our similarities and stories that let us reflect on idiosyncrasies. Stories that heal and those that provoke. The ones that are quick to reveal meaning, but also those that stubbornly remain enigmatic. Those that teach us the value of distance in order to see. We need the stories that lead us and the ones that resist; stories that connect the past to the present and the future, revealing the bigger picture, and stories that cherish fragments and slices of life. If what remains from four years of Trump in the White House is the realization that reality has, in fact, become more speculative than fiction, then fiction needs to become more real: I am not talking about a return to nineteenth-century Western realism or to naturalistic depictions of reality, but to the recognition of fiction as an actual means for guidance, to ground us through times of upheaval or global uprootedness, to help us grasp, contextualize and to find ourselves again. Fiction that is more than an authoritative, moral pointing finger and more than a pragmatic how-to-guide can turn into a space for experimentation and reflection on what it means to be fallible; a field of possibilities that already carries every possibility of interpretation within it. After all, fiction and art are testimony to the ephemerality of our humanity.

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CHAPTER 12

Coda: Empathy in the Age of Trump: Or, Using Our Weird Cultural Moment to Reassess How Fiction Works

Robert Anthony Siegel

Abstract Politics in the Trump era has become tangled up with an argument on the social value of empathy, which has led an unusual mix of cognitive scientists, literary scholars, and writers to begin discussing the role of empathy in reading fiction. The conversation is driven by new research in the psychology of empathy and the act of reading fiction, assisted by advances in neuroscience and brain scanning technology, and has organized itself around a series of basic questions: Does fiction require empathy in order to work as a meaningful reading experience? Does reading fiction build empathy in the reader? If so, does empathy lead to prosocial behavior, that is, kindness? And is political action a possible or desirable outcome of fiction's ability to stimulate empathy? Or do we read fiction for other reasons? To some extent, these questions recall arguments from previous eras about the social role of literature, as well as the artistic risks of political art, from Kant to Rousseau to Adam Smith and George Eliot,

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but with a twist: recent scientific evidence that points to limitations on empathy's ability to generate prosocial behavior. Recent work by Ben Lerner and current thinkers like Namwali Serpell suggest that we look beyond empathy to a more intellectual and less emotional model of how fiction might engage with the reader.

Politics in the Trump era has become tangled up with an ongoing argument about the nature and value of empathy. Is empathy a source of moral action or a form of sentimental self-delusion? A product of strength, or weakness? Should it be limited to an inner circle of family and friends, to an ethnic, racial, or geographic group, or should it be extended outward to include the stranger—the migrant, the refugee? Should it serve as a guide for the way we seek to shape society—play a role, for example, in creating government policy? Or is that just a form of political decadence, a sign of American decline?

As expected when a country of 330 million people argues with itself, the conversation is more often articulated through gesture and metaphor than ideas. During his term in office, Trump played a central role in the back-and-forth, reigniting the debate whenever there was a lull, usually by saying or doing something startlingly cruel. People who found him repulsive were nevertheless obsessed with him, following his every tweet, parsing the meaning of his odd Rat Pack patter. In a culture that makes little distinction between positive and negative attention, his ability to hold the spotlight sent a message—in effect, making the case for heartlessness as a form of power. There is every reason to believe that he will continue to make that argument now that he is out of office, even at a somewhat diminished scale.

How did we get into this mess? Before we address that question, it might be helpful to step back for a moment and ask what exactly we mean by the word 'empathy.' Usually described as the act of feeling what another person is feeling (one thinks of Bill Clinton's famous formulation, "I feel your pain"), empathy overlaps with a constellation of other terms that in everyday life are often used almost interchangeably: compassion, sympathy, understanding, insight, pity, even kindness and caring. In fact, it is a late entrant to the mix, a twentieth-century neologism created to translate *Einfühlung*, or 'feeling into,' a word used in German aesthetic theory to help describe the psychological mechanism by which a viewer projects emotion into a work of art. As the English word 'empathy,' it has remained

central to the Anglophone discussion around the arts, particularly literature, while also gaining a social or interpersonal application: the act of 'feeling into' or reproducing in oneself the affective states of other people. Those affective states are typically negative, involving pain or suffering (for some reason, we do not empathize with another person's joy) and they usually imply an obligation to act in order to help the sufferer. What this means is that, when we talk about empathy, the ethical realm, with its questions of justice and fairness, is never far away.

This association between empathy and ethics is central to the long-standing American belief that our feelings can serve as our moral guide—that an emotionally driven politics can be a force for good. Affect theorist and literary scholar Lauren Berlant describes the linkage in her 2004 essay "Compassion (and Withholding):"

> The word compassion carries the weight of ongoing debates about the ethics of privilege—in particular about the state as an economic, military, and moral actor that represents and establishes collective norms of obligation, and about individual and collective obligations to read a scene of distress not as a judgment against the distressed but as a claim on the spectator to become an ameliorative actor.
>
> This national dispute about compassion is as old as the United States and has been organized mainly by the gap between its democratic promise and its historic class hierarchies, racial and sexual penalties, and handling of immigrant populations. The current debate takes its particular shape from the popular memory of the welfare state, whose avatar is Lyndon Johnson's Great Society, with its focus on redressing those legal, civic, and economic inequities that acted, effectively, like disenfranchisement. (Berlant 2004, 1)

Whose suffering is worthy of our compassion? How can we make our fellow citizens feel the pain that we feel, or that we recognize in others? What does it take to harness sympathy to political action? For better or worse, these questions continue to be fundamental to the American conversation, even as our relationship to empathy grows more complicated and more troubled.

A number of technological changes are driving this complication. The most important are cable news and the Internet, visual media that both intensify and confuse our relationship to the suffering around us. The increasing flow of powerful but contextless images across our screens leaves us in a state of anxious uncertainty as to our proper ethical position relative to the events we are witnessing. Can we find enough empathy to

meet the world's insatiable needs? Even assuming that we do, how are we to respond to so many problems, often times so far away? And if no response is possible, why are we watching? Is this really news, or just a strange new form of entertainment, a kind of ongoing horror show? Berlant describes the problem well:

> Members of mass society witness suffering not just in concretely local spaces but in the elsewheres brought home and made intimate by sensationalist media, where documentary realness about the pain of strangers is increasingly at the center of both fictional and nonfictional events. The Freudian notion of *Schadenfreude*, the pleasure one takes in the pain of another, only begins to tell the unfinished story of the modern incitement to feel compassionately—even while being entertained. (Berlant 2004, 5)

But the problem is not just the world's many distant "elsewheres." America itself is increasingly segmented into a number of domestic elsewheres, separated by demographics and ideology. Narrowcasting on cable television and, more recently, social media, exacerbates those differences, creating inwardly directed conversations that fail to overlap. The algorithmic nature of the newsfeed means that American elsewheres don't even share a common body of facts, a basis for *detente*. Not surprisingly, political parties have become increasingly partisan from the 1990s onwards, reaching a new level of intensity in the Trump era. The struggle between political opponents often feels unrestrained by common bonds of sympathy or shared experience.

Writers have responded to this cultural moment by turning empathy and its political ramifications into a subject matter for fiction, something to be circled and examined. There are many interesting examples, but all three of Ben Lerner's novels, *Leaving the Atocha Station* (2011), *10.04* (2014), and *The Topeka School* (2019), Johannes Lichtman's *Such Good Work* (2019), and Karen E. Bender's latest story collection *The New Order* (2018) come right to mind. These books are about many things—climate change, income inequality, the migrant crisis, drug addiction, terrorism—but at heart they are comedies of anxiety, inhabited by characters who struggle to put their idealism into practice—struggle with their own internal reluctance, their ambivalent self-questioning, their lack of trust in their ability to truly know or help other people. One could argue that all five books are political fiction about the difficulty of writing political fiction in a culture where empathy looks like a fraught and uncertain proposition.

This literary shift is interesting in part because the development of empathy in readers used to be one of the primary arguments for the value of fiction. George Eliot articulated the idea in her much-quoted aesthetic statement of 1856, "The Natural History of German Life," using the Victorian vocabulary of moral sentiment:

> The greatest benefit we owe to the artist, whether painter, poet, or novelist, is the extension of our sympathies. Appeals founded on generalizations and statistics require a sympathy ready-made, a moral sentiment already in activity; but a picture of human life such as a great artist can give, surprises even the trivial and the selfish into that attention to what is apart from themselves, which may be called the raw material of moral sentiment. (Eliot 1856, 145)

Despite 163 years of immense social change, Eliot's view is still the default position in literary circles, the familiar, intuitive model that most writers want to hold on to if they can, even if it requires translation into a more contemporary idiom. In recent years, that task of translation has often involved the cognitive sciences, drawing on research into the psychology of empathy and the neuroscience of reading facilitated by new technologies, such as fMRI scanning, which allow investigators to map brain activity in real time. It has benefitted from a parallel surge of interest in the subject of empathy among cognitive scientists, who have their own reasons to look more closely at the emotion. The psychologist Simon Baron-Cohen's contributions to the topic are an outgrowth of his study of autism, documented in many books, beginning with *Mindblindness: An Essay on Autism and Theory of Mind* (1995). The neuroscientist Jean Decety, who studies moral decision-making, has edited a number of volumes on empathy, including *The Social Neuroscience of Empathy* (2011) and *The Moral Brain: A Multidisciplinary Perspective* (2015). The psychologist Keith Oatley's research on empathy and fiction (*Emotion: A Brief History*, 2008) is inspired in part by his sideline as a novelist. Raymond A. Mar and Dan R. Johnson have also published significant papers on the neuropsychology of narrative and its connection to empathy and prosocial behavior. The British novelist and critic David Lodge was an early entrant in the effort to give George Eliot's model a scientific context. In his 2002 volume *Consciousness and the Novel*, he sets out to reframe Eliot's position in terms of what psychologists call Theory of Mind:

> One might suggest that the ability novelists have to create characters, characters often very different from themselves, and to give a plausible account of their consciousnesses, is a special application of Theory of Mind. It is one that helps us develop powers of sympathy and empathy in real life. (Lodge 2004, 42)

Theory of Mind refers to a complex of cognitive processes that enables us to attribute mental states to other people—to intuit an interiority for them based on clues available in the physical world. Since we have to be able to imagine someone's feelings before we can share in them, it is the necessary precondition for empathy. Fiction in Lodge's model is thus a kind of virtual reality simulator on which we hone our ability to understand the thoughts and feelings of others. The more adept we become at this task, he tells us, the more our powers of empathy expand, and the more we engage in what psychologists call prosocial behavior—kindness.

In fact, there is a growing body of research in experimental psychology indicating that Lodge, Eliot, and other proponents of the empathy model might well be right about how literature works, or at least partially right. Studies with children have directly connected reading fiction with the development of empathy, and a number of studies have gone farther, demonstrating that the more fiction a child reads, the better she will score on an empathy test in which she has to infer mental states from subtle physical cues. Other studies have shown that higher levels of what psychologists call 'transport' in a piece of writing—essentially, a more absorbing reading experience, often provided through compelling physical detail—lead to greater empathy for the characters in the story and more prosocial behavior afterward.

One more point here: many researchers have come to believe that empathy, like Theory of Mind, is better understood as a number of related but distinct processes. The way these processes are divided up and named can vary among researchers and disciplines, but there seem to be two basic types: *cognitive* empathy, or the ability to understand the world from another person's point of view; and *affective* empathy, or the capacity to share somebody else's feelings as if they were your own. Empathy of the head and empathy of the heart.

Eliot's model of how fiction works focuses on affective empathy, empathy of the heart, and her modern interpreters follow suit, no matter how they translate the rest of her. I've already touched on Lodge in this respect, but I'd like to mention one more example, the Norwegian novelist Karl

Ove Knausgaard, whose monumental six-volume autobiographical novel *My Struggle* is shot through with an anxious concern over the connection between art and empathy. Though the novel runs over 3,500 pages, Knausgaard addresses the topic directly in a short essay published in *The New Yorker* in 2015 as "The Vanishing Point." He begins on a note of dramatic urgency: the visual saturation caused by cable TV news and the Internet has left us numb to the emotional reality of human beings outside our immediate contact, and only fiction can reverse that process:

> There is a vanishing point in our humanity, a point at which *the other* goes from being definite to indefinite. But this point is also the locus for the opposite movement, in which the other goes from indefinite to definite—and if there is an ethics of the novel, then it is here, in the zone that lies between the *one* and the *all*, that it comes into force and takes its basis. The instant a novel is opened and a reader begins to read, the remoteness between writer and reader dissolves. The *other* that thereby emerges does so in the reader's imagination, assimilating at once into his or her mind. This establishing of proximity to another self is characteristic of the novel. (Knausgaard 2015; emphasis in the original)

The freshness of Knausgaard's account comes from his language; he avoids the word empathy, and more generally, the entire terminology of sentiment, substituting instead a vocabulary of imaginative spaces and psychic distances—a vocabulary suitable to an age dominated by photography and video. At its core, however, his picture of how fiction works remains true to Eliot's, with its faith in the power of art to overcome the deadening effects of "generalizations and statistics." To my mind, it is a genuinely moving restatement of that credo, presenting reading and writing as a heroic reclamation of our connection to others—exactly what we hunger for at a time when art feels under siege.

The only problem is that research in the cognitive sciences indicates that empathy is a lot more complicated than the picture presented by Knausgaard. In their 2014 paper "The Complex Relation Between Morality and Empathy," Jean Decety and Jason M. Cowell point out that empathy need not always lead to moral action, that in certain situations it can actually hinder it:

> Given that empathy has evolved in the context of parental care and group living, it has some unfortunate features that can be seen very early during development. Children do not display empathic concern toward all people

> equally. Instead, they show bias toward individuals and members of groups with which they identify. For instance, young children of 2 years of age display more concern-related behaviors toward their mother than toward unfamiliar people [4]. Moreover, children (aged 3–9 years) view social categories as marking patterns of interpersonal obligations. They view people as responsible only to their own group members, and consider within-group harm as wrong regardless of explicit rules, but they view the wrongness of between-group harm as contingent on the presence of such rules [5]. Additionally, neuroimaging studies revealed that the neural network implicated in empathy for the distress and the pain of others can be either strengthened or weakened by interpersonal variables, implicit attitudes, and group preferences. (Decety and Cowell 2014, 338)

Empathy, it turns out, can simply mean feeling for those most like yourself, and ignoring everyone else. Why then would we want more of that in the world? Yale psychologist Paul Bloom has been exploring this question for a number of years. His highly influential 2016 volume, *Against Empathy: The Case for Rational Compassion*, is a compelling summary of all the ways that empathy can lead to faulty moral choices, and all the ways we would be better served by a rational, principled, evidence-based approach to moral action. Bloom's argument isn't just about the distortions caused by empathy's pull toward the in-group, and the way that pull secretly encodes all our deepest racial, cultural, and social prejudices; it's also about the way empathy misreads the relative severity of different types of need in the world, privileging near over far, visible over invisible, familiar over unfamiliar. Perhaps just as important, it points up empathy's tendency to devolve into a form of solipsistic emotionality unconnected to any sort of moral action at all.

Given the contentious nature of public life during the Trump presidency, researchers like Decety and Bloom have placed us in a confusing situation: we've been using all our energy to defend the value of empathy from the depredations of our cultural moment, but empathy itself turns out to be imperfect, idiosyncratic, maybe even counterproductive, a secret tool of our worst tribal tendencies—exactly what we thought we were fighting against. Suddenly, writers must begin worrying about a whole new set of questions: Who are we empathizing with in our fiction, and who are we leaving out? Can literature extend a reader's empathy beyond the limits of his or her in-group? Is there something dishonest about our desire to feel the pain of others? Will it really lead to moral action? Or is it

just a sentimental entertainment, one that gives the reader the comfortable illusion of being on the right side? If so, might it turn out to be an even more insidious form of othering?

The answers to those questions have become increasingly skeptical. In *Regarding the Pain of Others* (2003), Susan Sontag sees the sympathetic reaction elicited by documentary photographs of third-world suffering as a way of avoiding uncomfortable thoughts about our own systemic complicity:

> So far as we feel sympathy, we feel we are not accomplices to what caused the suffering. Our sympathy proclaims our innocence as well as our impotence. To that extent, it can be (for all our good intentions) an impertinent—if not inappropriate—response. To set aside the sympathy we extend to others beset by war and murderous politics for a reflection on how our privileges are located on the same map as their suffering, and may—in ways we might prefer not to imagine—be linked to their suffering, as the wealth of some may imply the destitution of others, is a task for which the painful, stirring images supply only an initial spark. (Sontag 2004, 102)

Over the last two decades, a significant number of critics have gone further. The literary scholar Suzanne Keen, in her 2010 book *Empathy and the Novel*, gives a quick summary of the positions out there now:

> For these critics, empathy is amoral, a weak form of appeal to humanity in the face of organized hatred, an obstacle to agitation for racial justice, a waste of sentiment and encouragement for withdrawal, and even a pornographic indulgence of sensation acquired at the expense of suffering others. To some feminist and post-colonial critics, empathy loses credence the moment it appears to depend on a notion of universal human emotions, a cost too great to bear even if basic human rights depend on it. […] "Empathy" becomes yet another example of the Western imagination's imposition of its own values on cultures and peoples that it scarcely knows, but presumes to "feel with," in a cultural imperialism of the emotions. (Keen 2010, 147–148)

The Zambian novelist and scholar Namwali Serpell touches on all of these points in a recent essay titled "The Banality of Empathy," on the *New York Review Daily*. "If witnessing suffering firsthand doesn't necessarily spark good deeds, why do we think art about suffering will?" she asks, and then goes on to answer her own question: "Narrative art is indeed an incredible

vehicle for virtual experience—we think *and* feel with characters. It simulates empathy, so we believe it stimulates it." In fact, she believes that it can end up doing quite the opposite, devolving into a kind of vicarious entertainment, "with its familiar blend of propaganda, pornography, and paternalism." Worse still, it "perpetuates an assumed imbalance in the world: there are those who suffer, and those who do not and thus have the leisure to be convinced—via novels and films that produce empathy—that the sufferers matter" (Serpell 2019).

If the empathic novel actually enshrines the power dynamics it supposedly seeks to overcome, what then is the alternative? That question turns out to be difficult. Serpell mentions with approval the distancing techniques of Brecht and the way they interrupt the act of identification between audience and characters (methods that also call to mind the strategies of postmodernist fiction writers such as Donald Barthelme and John Barth). But instead of settling on a literary model, she quickly jumps outside the realm of art to philosophy, drawing on Hannah Arendt's idea of "representative thinking" for guidance. The problem, Serpell states, is how to feel with the other without *colonizing* the other:

> Rather than virtually *becoming* another, she asks you to imagine using your own mind but from their position. It's a matter of keeping your distance, maintaining integrity, in both senses. It has some affinity with Bloom's emphasis on cognition rather than feeling. This need not be cold, just less … voracious. I find that the best way to grasp the distinction between "representative thinking" and emotional empathy is Arendt's lovely phrase, "one trains one's imagination to go visiting." This way of relating to others is not just tourism. Nor is it total occupation—there is no "assimilation" of self and other. Rather, you make an active, imaginative effort to travel outside of your circumstances and to stay a while, where you're welcome. (Serpell 2019; emphasis in the original)

As Serpell explains it, representative thinking sounds a bit like the other form of empathy we touched on earlier, cognitive empathy, empathy of the head, or what psychologists often call "perspective taking," which seeks emotional understanding rather than emotional union. It is an intriguing approach to the dilemma, but her use of Arendt's theory has a somewhat abstract quality, and it's hard to tell what this "less voracious" kind of fiction might look like on the page—especially since Serpell's one concrete suggestion is about content rather than construction or method:

> What would this model of art as "representative thinking" entail? Well, for one thing, literally more *representation*. One can only bring the experiences of others to mind if they are made imaginatively available to us. Perhaps, instead of the current distribution—portrayals of "default humans" (that is, straight white men, good and evil) vs. empathy vehicles (that is, everybody else)—we could simply have greater variety of experience represented in our art. The part of the hero has been dominated for so long by what is actually a world minority that this kind of change is almost hard to picture. (Serpell 2019; emphasis in the original)

Serpell's point about wider representation is of course important, but can wider representation, plus whatever else might go into "representative thinking," really save us from the pitfalls of empathy? Or make us more likely to act morally when we close the book and return to the real world? Paul Bloom makes it clear that the case for rational compassion rests on the idea that we are thinking animals, equipped to reason our way through complex moral problems. Arendt believes the same, seeing thought as a check on the sentimentality or false emotion that can lead us astray from first principles. But I'm not entirely convinced that reason can save us, or that it can save literature, either. This may be because I am a novelist, and one of fiction's great topics is the way that thought is covertly shaped by feeling, which stays hidden in the shadows but nevertheless determines our choices. Indeed, one of the interesting things about the age of Trump is how maddeningly novelistic daily life has come to feel, as if we ourselves have become characters in a novel we are simultaneously living and reading. Fake news and alternative facts, Pizzagate and QAnon, birthers, anti-vaxxers, Proud Boys, and climate-deniers: our pseudo-rationality and our dark emotionality cavort together out in the open, locked arm in arm. Is there no way forward for us then, as readers and writers? Are we stuck with the kind of fiction that we've always consumed, despite our doubts about its role in the world? The short answer is that I'm not really sure; the limits of empathy turn out to be the limits of my predictive horizon. The long answer, however, is that asking these questions is in itself highly productive, because fiction is at its most persuasive when it is at its most anti-Trumpian, meaning when it interrogates its own assumptions and examines its own biases—when self-doubt becomes a form of faith.

Luckily, a growing number of fiction writers are interested in this self-questioning process. They approach empathy as a subject in its own right, one from which a series of related problems radiates outward: How do

people connect across racial and other differences? How does fiction really work? Can fiction be political without falling into didacticism or otherwise losing the openness required of art? As a rule, the concern with empathy in this kind of fiction turns the narrative focus inward, toward the personal and the psychological; the sprawling backdrops and elaborate plotting of the traditional political novel are replaced by a small domestic scale and the meandering sideways motion of ordinary life; big actions are replaced by little ones, and by much anxious self-questioning, often of a comic turn. Sometimes, the characters are writers, which allows the story to ask in an overt way how we might more effectively imagine or depict our emotional connection to others. The short stories in Karen E. Bender's 2018 collection, *The New Order*, are miniature gems of this type. Johannes Lichtman's 2019 debut novel, *Such Good Work*, is also a standout. So are the three interlinked novels of the poet and critic Ben Lerner, *Leaving the Atocha Station* (2011); *10:04* (2015); and *The Topeka School* (2019), on which I will focus in what follows.

Lerner's work, which covers fifteen or so years in the life of a single character, offers the kind of sweep that makes it a particularly good example for our purposes here. *Leaving the Atocha Station* (2011), introduces Adam Gordon, a young poet on a fellowship in Madrid who is supposed to be researching the literary legacy of the Spanish Civil War in order to write a long poem on the subject. The story's central problem is Adam's imposter syndrome: he fears that his research project, with its gesture toward engagé politics, is a fake, that his own poetry is a con, that art itself might well be a fraud. Behind these anxieties hides a profound sense of personal unworthiness that leads him to impulsively lie to the people around him—a way of drawing them closer while at the same time holding them at arms' distance. Truth and lie, connection and disconnection, belonging and isolation are thus the binaries at the novel's core, a neurotic comedy that intersects with the political realm when Adam is swept up in the protests after the 2004 terrorist bombings in Madrid. Afloat in the crowd in the street, aware of the symbolic importance of the moment, he realizes that he finally has a chance to join a cause bigger than himself, to be a part of something—but instead turns back and goes home. This internal struggle with the emotional risks of connection is an ongoing theme in all three novels, framed as part of the maturation process. The scene in *Atocha* thus contrasts effectively with the end of Lerner's third and most

recent novel, *The Topeka School*, in which a thirty-something version of Adam, now named Ben, is married with small children and attends a protest outside the Immigration and Customs Enforcement Agency offices in New York City. He is still self-conscious, but not so badly that it prevents him from joining in. He has made progress.

In between these two points in time, we get the Ben of 2015 in *10:04: A Novel*, who is thinking about his connection to other people but is not yet sure what it will require of him. Ben has arranged via *Craig's List* to allow an Occupy Wall Street protester, a complete stranger, to come over to his apartment for a hot shower and dinner—an act of support for the movement. Their conversation turns to the way that Occupy has, almost incidentally, changed the protester's perspective on the armored quality of American masculinity:

> Instead of assuming that every male past puberty was a physical and psychosocial threat, he was now open to the possibility of their decency. For as long as I can remember, he said, whenever I walk past a guy on the street or see a guy in another car or in the halls of a building, what I'm thinking to myself, consciously or not, is: Can I take him, who would win the fight? Almost every man thinks that way, the protestor said, and I agreed, even if my awareness of that line of thought had decreased steadily if incrementally since I was a teen (Lerner 2015, 48)

While the protester is in the bathroom, Ben chops vegetables; he approves of the idea of connection and trust replacing hostility and suspicion. His thoughts turn to his friend Alex and his promise to donate the sperm that she needs to get pregnant. He is suddenly full of the desire to be a father, a feeling which, in typical fashion, he then questions:

> So this is how it works, I said to myself, as if I'd caught an ideological mechanism in flagrante delicto: you let a young man committed to anti-capitalist struggle shower in the overpriced apartment that you rent and, while making a meal you prepare to eat in common, your thoughts lead you inexorably to the desire to reproduce your own genetic material within some version of a bourgeois household, that almost caricatural transvaluation of values lubricated by wine and song. (Lerner 2015, 47)

Wouldn't it be more meaningful, he wonders, to channel that urge toward nurturance in a political direction, like the protester?

> What you need to do is harness the self-love you are hypostasizing as offspring, as the next generation of you, and let it branch out horizontally into the possibility of a transpersonal revolutionary subject in the present and co-construct a world in which moments can be something other than the elements of profit. (Lerner 2015, 47)

Ben can't quite convince himself of this line of reasoning. The allure of the personal is too strong, and he still sees it as the opposite of politics. After dinner, he rides the subway into Manhattan with the protester, who gets off at Wall Street, where the Occupy encampment is located. Instead of joining him, Ben rides on to meet Alex at Lincoln Center, where they watch Christian Markley's 24 hour-video installation *The Clock*. A few scenes later, the novel finds him in a fertility clinic, struggling to produce a sperm sample for testing. A little later, he is reading Whitman and pondering the way the poet's choice to make himself a representative of all America—a symbol—makes it impossible to include the individuating details that would also make him a real person on the page. Ultimately, Ben goes on to write the novel we are reading, a book full of the kind of individuating detail that Whitman elides, shaped by doubt and indecision, and yet somehow, because of the honesty with which it treats its own ambivalence, an affirmation of the importance of making common cause with others.

Is writing fiction about empathy, as Lerner does, an effective way to rethink traditional empathy-based fiction? Or does it simply trap us inside a tautology? Are critics like Suzanne Keene and Namwali Serpell right in saying that we need to move past our dependence on empathy as a dramatic tool? Can we use Arendtian representative thinking and Brechtian distancing techniques to finally escape the limits of empathic identification, as Serpell suggests? Hasn't that already been tried by Brecht himself, as well as a host of novelists from the late 1960s through the early 1980s, when metafiction became, more or less, a part of the literary mainstream? It is impossible not to think of writers such as John Barth, William Gass, and Robert Coover, among others, and how their use of metafictional devices seemed to reach, in time, a point of diminishing returns. As contemporary American fiction rushes to catch up with the argument about empathy that is playing out in the social and political realms, my sense is

that we need to remain open to possibilities. I can't wait to read the world's first representative-thinking novel, if such a thing can ever be written. But if it can't be written, I'd love to read a book about a writer trying and failing to write such a novel. That story will be full of beauty and sorrow, because the real subject, of course, is our need to love one another, set against our awareness that the biggest obstacle to that goal is ourselves.

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