CHAPTER 1

Introduction: On the Meanings of 'American Reality'

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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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