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# Competing Fantasies and Alternative Realities: Salman Rushdie's *The Golden House*

DOLORES RESANO 

This article examines one of the earliest novels of the Trump era, Salman Rushdie's *The Golden House* (2017), as part of a literary corpus that felt compelled to respond to the derealization of political culture by producing fictions commensurate to the new "American reality." Spanning the years from the first inauguration of Obama to the election of Trump, the novel depicts a nation that has "left reality behind and entered the comic-book universe," a turn to fantasy that precedes the final irruption of a wealthy vulgarian who calls himself the Joker, and who subverts any previous sense of identity and of what is "real." Drawing from the notion of national fantasy as argued by Lauren Berlant (1991), Jacqueline Rose (1996), and Donald Pease (2009), the article suggests that Rushdie's novel performs and invites a rare self-examination in the context of early literary responses to the rise of Trumpism.

Soon after the election of Donald Trump as President of the United States in November 2016, and beyond the initial calls by wide sectors of the population to "resist" and to seek understanding of the moment in the classics of dystopian fiction, cultural critics and commentators started to envision the emergence of a corpus of "Trump fiction" that would address the aftermath of what was for many a shocking event. The election of a reality-television star with no apparent respect for the norms and traditions of the office (or for any body of government, such as Congress, the Senate, and the judiciary, as it would turn out), who openly lied in public and exhibited racist, xenophobic and misogynistic tendencies with no remorse, had to be accommodated with the unforeseen defeat of a female candidate who, they had been told, was the most qualified a candidate could be. Although the catchy label seems to have lost some traction

Clinton Institute for American Studies, University College Dublin. Email: [dolores.resano@ucd.ie](mailto:dolores.resano@ucd.ie).

in the public sphere—and Trump’s one-term presidency may deliver its death blow—its mere suggestion belies, besides unsurprising commercial opportunism, that the event was so confounding that there was a felt sense of urgency to make sense, which also led to the expectation that an emerging corpus of literary works would engage with this derealized and “new” American reality.<sup>1</sup> Moreover, the struggle to make sense of Trump went well beyond an initial sense of shock and posed deeper, even ontological, questions about the nature and trajectory of “America,” questions that fiction was expected to be able to answer in nuanced and complex ways.

Whether the election of Trump was a bizarre occurrence or a logical outcome—a debate that seems to have been firmly resolved in favor of the latter—there seems to be a consensus, however, that the rise of Trump and Trumpism can be accurately portrayed as symptomatic of a paradigm shift in Western politics, with the resurgence of ethno-nationalist populisms in the West, extreme polarization across the political spectrum, and an increased investment in performative politics, an otherwise long tradition. In cultural terms, this shift—which does not happen overnight and has been brewing for at least a decade, and that has been explained from a variety of interpretive paradigms in the mushrooming industry of books about the Trump era—can be characterized as the sudden realization that “American reality” has ceased to be a shared notion, if it ever was. While the feeling of shock and estrangement in itself suggests a certain ideological positionality—probably more left of center—or, rather, the normalization of American liberal democracy as the “natural” state of things, one would be remiss not to acknowledge that the rise of Trump and Trumpism has kindled urgent and necessary debates in the United States and across the Western world: the state and futures of liberal democracy, the notion of “America” itself, and the possibility of living up to the nation’s foundational ideals, all of which would come into

<sup>1</sup> Discussions of “Trump fiction” were recurrent in the early days of the Trump presidency but they gradually waned as the United States came to grips with the new political reality. However, the term retains its currency in American cultural studies, with the publication of works such as Stephen Hock, ed., *Trump Fiction: Essays on Donald Trump in Literature, Film, and Television* (Lanham, MD and London: Lexington Books, 2020); and related titles such as Barbara Brodman and James E. Doan, eds., *Utopia and Dystopia in the Age of Trump: Images from Literature and Visual Arts* (Vancouver and Madison, NJ: Fairleigh Dickinson University Press, 2019); Thomas Fensch, *Foreshadowing Trump: Trump Characters, Ethics, Morality and Fascism in Classic Literature* (N. Chesterfield, VA: New Century Books, 2017); and the forthcoming Dolores Resano, ed., *American Literature in the Era of Trump: Alternative Realities* (Cham: Palgrave-Macmillan, 2022), all of which suggests a sustained interest in the relation between fiction and Trumpism.

sharp relief in the summer of 2020, with nationwide marches and protests during the nation's most profound racial reckoning since the 1960s.

As part of these larger debates, it is still early to assess what the still-emerging corpus of "Trump fiction" may yield in years to come, yet some of the early works offer interesting snapshots of this particular moment in time. In this respect, this article is interested in examining Rushdie's novel *The Golden House* (2017) as a text that both prefigures and responds to the rise of Trumpism in American politics and culture. As Stephen Hock notes in his introduction to the edited volume *Trump Fiction*, it would be inaccurate to define the contours of this corpus as strictly post-2016, as "novelists, screenwriters, cartoonists, and other writers ... had been writing about Donald Trump for years before he became the forty-fifth president of the United States,"<sup>2</sup> with Trump having taken pains to craft a public persona that, incidentally, could also be considered a work of fiction. As a result, Hock suggests that the category "Trump fiction" would include not only the "Trump novels" that emerged in the wake of Trump's election but also those earlier works in which Trump—whether explicitly or even implicitly—figures as a signifier.<sup>3</sup> Moreover, within the nascent field of "Trump cultural studies" we could also think about how certain works are being reread through the lens of "the age of Trump." In short, I want to suggest that Rushdie's novel stands at the crossroads of these two first coordinates: a novel that reads the present moment as ripe for Trumpism before Trump becomes President (or even a candidate) and that is also able to anticipate the shocked reactions his entry into politics would cause. As Rushdie has often shared in the many interviews that accompanied the book launch, *The Golden House* was written in the buildup to Trump's presidential campaign and completed well before his electoral win of November 2016; the manuscript was slightly revised after the election to give the main character "some Trumpy echoes,"<sup>4</sup> but no major changes were made to the novel's original premise as a result. As Rushdie noted tongue-in-cheek, "all of this I had made up before I was ever thinking of Donald Trump. I invented him before he came up."<sup>5</sup> In this sense, the timing of writing, revising, and publishing

<sup>2</sup> Stephen Hock, "Introduction: Reading Trump," in Hock, *Trump Fiction*, 1–17, 1.

<sup>3</sup> Hock, "Introduction," 4.

<sup>4</sup> Salman Rushdie in T. J. Raphael, "Salman Rushdie Abandons Fantasy in His New Novel," *The Takeaway*, WNYC Studios, 6 Sep. 2017, at [www.wnycstudios.org/podcasts/takeaway/segments/salman-rushdie-abandons-fantasy-his-new-novel](http://www.wnycstudios.org/podcasts/takeaway/segments/salman-rushdie-abandons-fantasy-his-new-novel).

<sup>5</sup> Salman Rushdie in India Today Web Desk, "I Am Responsible for Donald Trump: Salman Rushdie," *India Today*, 4 June 2018, at [www.indiatoday.in/fyi/story/salman-rushdie-says-he-is-responsible-for-donald-trump-1250201-2018-06-04](http://www.indiatoday.in/fyi/story/salman-rushdie-says-he-is-responsible-for-donald-trump-1250201-2018-06-04).

the text supports the novel's main argument that the election of Trump, rather than an exceptional occurrence – even if at first impossible to rationalize for some – is a symptom of larger processes that were already in operation well before 2016; that, as Rushdie notes, “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.”<sup>6</sup> And this entails not only the derealization of American politics, but also social, cultural, and economic shifts that were and are transforming, sometimes in unsettling ways, the very fabric of what it means to be “American” and of what is “America,” an argument that various cultural critics and theorists have forcefully made within their different interpretive frameworks from the disciplines of cultural studies, history, economics, political science, media studies, and sociology, to list but a few.

Drawing from this heightened sense of living in a moment of transition that cannot be fully apprehended as it unfolds, or, in Hamlet's famous lines, the awareness that “the time is out of joint” well before Trump bursts onto the scene, I will suggest that, despite its lukewarm critical reception, the novel succeeds in conveying Rushdie's stated aim of writing “right up against the present moment” in the hopes of capturing it.<sup>7</sup> The novel aptly resorts to the theme of collapse – as do other novels in the corpus, as I argue elsewhere<sup>8</sup> – as the titular gilded house comes burning down in flames after a presidential election in the closing pages of the novel, signifying in unambiguous terms the end of an era but also, as I will suggest throughout this text, the end of an illusion. I will argue that Rushdie's text, as an early “Trump novel” published in 2017, addresses what was then a pervasive sense that Trump's irruption onto the political scene was a bizarre and unreal occurrence that shattered the assumptions about what constituted American “reality” – a sense that came full circle in the last days of the Trump administration with a motley mob storming the US Capitol in defense of “alternative” electoral results and the widespread appeal of conspiracy theories like QAnon, espoused by a number of elected members of the House of Representatives. After the numbing effects of four years of

<sup>6</sup> Salman Rushdie in Emma Brockes, “Salman Rushdie: ‘A Lot of What Trump Unleashed Was There Anyway,’” *The Guardian*, 2 Sep. 2017, at [www.theguardian.com/books/2017/sep/02/salman-rushdie-interview](http://www.theguardian.com/books/2017/sep/02/salman-rushdie-interview).

<sup>7</sup> Salman Rushdie in Mark Medley, “Salman Rushdie on His Urgent New Novel, *The Golden House*, and Donald Trump,” *Globe and Mail*, 1 Sept. 2017, at [www.theglobeandmail.com/arts/books-and-media/salman-rushdie-on-donald-trump-and-his-urgent-new-novel-the-golden-house/article36143175](http://www.theglobeandmail.com/arts/books-and-media/salman-rushdie-on-donald-trump-and-his-urgent-new-novel-the-golden-house/article36143175).

<sup>8</sup> See Dolores Resano, “‘A House at Odds with Itself’: Barbara Kingsolver's *Unsheltered*,” in Rodrigo Andrés and Cristina Alsina, eds., *American Houses: Literary Spaces of Resistance and Desire* (Leiden and Boston: Brill, 2021), 84–301.

cacophony and unconventional political leadership (to put it mildly), the parting performance of the Trump administration gave credence and validity to this initial sense of disbelief – with Rudy Giuliani leading a “Kraken” legal team to dispute the electoral results in courts around the nation and holding impromptu pressers at Four Seasons Total Landscaping next to a funeral home and a sex shop.<sup>9</sup>

As tempting as hindsight would be, one is deeply aware of the author having none at the time of writing. And this is why I sustain that Rushdie ably constructs a testimony to a specific moment in time when the viability of the American project is, once again, put into question, but in a manner so shocking and unexpected that the available narrative logic fails. The election of Trump, and his demeanor afterwards, represent, as Donald Pease has argued drawing on Pierre Bourdieu, a “crisis of symbolic investiture,”<sup>10</sup> a breach in those civic processes of socialization whereby individuals assume, and are expected to faithfully embody, a symbolic mandate. Therefore I will probe into the theme of collapse as a dual phenomenon, one that dramatizes the literal collapse of the physical and familial house (in the sense of lineage) vis-à-vis the perceived breakdown and subversion of the American narrative – or, more specifically, the collapse of a certain social fantasy for a certain sociopolitical and economic milieu that is deeply invested in the teleological narrative of progress and “audacious hope” of the Obama years.

In this sense, the text is pertinent to ongoing discussions about the demise of what had been, until very recently, accepted narratives about the unproblematic coexistence of progressive values with a neoliberal and market-driven logic (what Nancy Fraser termed “progressive neoliberalism”),<sup>11</sup> and its replacement by a new “illiberal hegemony,” to borrow Barry Posen’s term,<sup>12</sup> that also puts into question the assumed consensus about the United States as a liberal democracy, the dismantling of which is, as has been sufficiently argued by Pease and others, at the forefront of Trump’s political project. In doing so, my analysis seeks to show how the novel represents the characters’ inability to foresee the

<sup>9</sup> See BBC Monitoring and Reality Check Team, “The Kraken: What Is It and Why Has Trump’s Ex-lawyer Released It?”, *BBC News*, 28 Nov. 2020, at [www.bbc.com/news/election-us-2020-55090145](http://www.bbc.com/news/election-us-2020-55090145).

<sup>10</sup> Donald E. Pease, “Trumped-Up Charges: The First 100 Days” (keynote speech), Trump’s America conference, Clinton Institute for American Studies, University College Dublin, 5–6 May 2017, at [www.youtube.com/watch?v=MlcrAwaE\\_Og](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=MlcrAwaE_Og); see also Pease, “Trump: Populist Usurper President,” *REAL: Yearbook of Research in English and American Literature*, 34, 1 (Dec. 2018), 145–74, 145.

<sup>11</sup> Nancy Fraser, *The Old Is Dying and the New Cannot Be Born* (London: Verso, 2019).

<sup>12</sup> Barry Posen, “The Rise of Illiberal Hegemony: Trump’s Surprising Grand Strategy,” *Foreign Affairs*, March–April 2018, at [www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/2018-02-13/rise-illiberal-hegemony](http://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/2018-02-13/rise-illiberal-hegemony).

acceleration of changes in the social, cultural, and political arenas, a “failure of the imagination” that has become a common trope in mainstream media commentary, and that was also repeatedly argued after the terrorist attacks of 11 September 2001 – and that, incidentally, also led to the emergence of a large corpus of post-9/11 fiction. By critically reviewing this trope, I will engage with what writers like Aleksandar Hemon had already diagnosed in January 2017: the imaginative impossibility of “making sense” when we are, at the same time, beholden to nostalgic and exceptionalist visions of “who we are” that impede our capacity to “imagine the unimaginable.”<sup>13</sup> As Jan Clausen put it in a *Jacobin* article a few months later, American literary circles reacted in shock against the election of Trump but did it in “the language of American exceptionalism,” appealing to liberal–nationalist clichés that conveniently elided the most problematic aspects of the past and employing a rhetoric about the Obama presidency as a lost Arcadia, a language that, in Clausen’s view, constituted “literary nationalism” and could only help to spread “the dangerous idea that comforting falsehoods can become the foundation for effective resistance.”<sup>14</sup>

### Trump as an affront to the liberal imaginary

My reading of Rushdie’s novel focusses in particular on its unambiguous representation of a moment when, to borrow Carme Manuel’s words, “the Obama era has become a lost paradise that is contemplated from the present hell with aching longing,”<sup>15</sup> and when the reality of Trump’s win challenges the perceived advances of progressive ideals in the United States. As a novel that intervenes in this specific political moment – but without neglecting the wider socioeconomic and political context that preceded it – I will argue that the novel hints at an ontological correlation between this liberal narrative in crisis and the narrator’s own personal narrative, and that their breakdown is signified in the subversion of the narrative logic at the end of the novel. Based in part on Rushdie’s recurrent exploration throughout his *oeuvre* of social/political and personal identities as interlinked (*Midnight’s Children* (1981), one of his first novels, is a good case in point), I will explore this interrelation

<sup>13</sup> Aleksandar Hemon, “Writing the Unimaginable” (keynote speech), *Alternative Realities: New Challenges for American Literature in the Era of Trump* conference, Clinton Institute for American Studies, University College Dublin, 13 Dec. 2019, at [www.ucdclinton.ie/previous-events/alternative-realities-new-challenges-for-american-literature-in-the-era-of-trump](http://www.ucdclinton.ie/previous-events/alternative-realities-new-challenges-for-american-literature-in-the-era-of-trump).

<sup>14</sup> Jan Clausen, “Against Literary Nationalism,” *Jacobin*, 24 March 2017, at <https://jacobinmag.com/2017/03/pen-america-writers-resist-adrienne-rich-baldwin>.

<sup>15</sup> Carme Manuel, “Los escritores norteamericanos en la era de Trump: entre la metáfora moribunda y la hipérbole veraz,” *Pasajes*, 53 (2017), 48–72, 50, translation mine.

through the framework of the national fantasy as that aspirational and “officially sanctioned” collective identity that is also constitutive of an individual’s sense of self and place, and which has been expertly theorized by, among others, Lauren Berlant, Jacqueline Rose, and Donald Pease.

The notion of national fantasy owes much to Jacques Lacan’s theorization of the workings of the human psyche and its structuring in three orders: the Real (the material state of nature, the neo-natal stage, from which we are severed once we enter into language); the imaginary (the unattainable ideal we conjure up); and the symbolic (our entry into language, which implies the acceptance of law, norms, and community). As Lacan explains, in their continued interplay, these three orders enable the subject to produce fantasies – idealized versions of the self and others that can never be realized but that actually serve to articulate desire, as the subject strives to fill the void left by the severance from the Real. Importantly, and as Žižek points out in *The Sublime Object of Ideology* (1989), these fantasy constructions are not an escape from reality, but actually constitute “reality” itself, including the subject’s coming into being; as “the Real” as such cannot be retrieved, fantasies operate as the frameworks that enable us to desire and, in doing so, they structure not only external reality but the possibility of the subject itself. Social fantasies operate very much in the same way; thinking in terms of ideology, Žižek makes the point that ideology is not a phantasmatic illusion concocted to escape from reality, but rather the “support for our ‘reality’ itself: an ‘illusion’ which structures our effective, real social relations.”<sup>16</sup>

Translated into the arena of states and nations, and in particular the idea of the “national self,” Rose demonstrates in *States of Fantasy* how fantasy “plays a central, constitutive role” in both the formation and the legitimacy of states and nations in the modern era, and argues that, in fact, “there is no way of understanding political identities and destinies without letting fantasy into the frame.”<sup>17</sup> As Rose suggests, the national fantasy – the agreed national narrative that explains both the nation’s sanctioned historical account and the imagined ideal towards which it strives – is the precondition to the formation of the social reality, or, in Benedict Anderson’s terms, of the “imagined community” – fantasy is “where statehood takes hold and binds its subjects”;<sup>18</sup> it is the nation’s “psychic glue.”<sup>19</sup> Moreover, and as Berlant argues in *Cruel Optimism*, “a public’s binding to the political is best achieved neither by policy nor ideology but the *affect of feeling political together*, an effect of

<sup>16</sup> Slavoj Žižek, *The Sublime Object of Ideology* (London: Verso, 2008), 45.

<sup>17</sup> Jacqueline Rose, *States of Fantasy* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1996), 4.

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*, 14.

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*, 3.

having communicated true feeling without the distancing mediation of speech.”<sup>20</sup>

Added to its affective power, the national fantasy constitutes “a sphere of projected political experience and knowledge” that competes with and even sublates “the pressure of material political realities”;<sup>21</sup> much in the same vein as fictional narratives and genres, argues Berlant, the fantasy framework facilitates “the experience of the world as a wholly consistent and transparently meaningful order.”<sup>22</sup> Furthermore, and as Pease demonstrates, this fiction of meaning and consistency is always amnesiac by necessity because, being an ideological construction, it needs to keep inconsistencies and imperfections hidden or latent in order to effectively do its work of providing both psychic compensation and emotional reparations. In other words, the fantasy construction requires its own “structures of disavowal,” meaning the obfuscation and even the negation of the contradictions between the professed ideal it strives for and the actual, material reality it enacts. The functioning of these national fantasy frameworks is not exclusive to any one nation, as Rose has demonstrated in her study of the formation of the state of Israel, with Berlant and Pease both interrogating it within the field of American cultural studies.

The discourse of American national identity is, as Berlant argues, “the ‘*mise-en-scène* of desire’” within which subjects are politically socialized,<sup>23</sup> a constitutive framework that is “fundamental to the political and everyday life of all Americans, whose ‘Americanness’ is as central to their sense of entitlement and desire as any family name and tradition and sensation itself might be.”<sup>24</sup> But what is this “Americanness,” and who gets to define it? As cultural critics have abundantly demonstrated, the dominant discourse of “Americanness” for over two centuries has been a discourse constructed around a set of values, ideals, and myths that are best articulated through conceptual metaphors such as Manifest Destiny, Puritanism, the “City on the Hill,” the frontier, America as a “nation of immigrants,” and others, and that Pease calls “remnants of an ahistorical fantasy,”<sup>25</sup> which is none other than the myth of American exceptionalism. It is from this overarching mythical framework – the “dominant structure of desire” – that all these other

<sup>20</sup> Lauren Berlant, *Cruel Optimism* (Durham, NC and London: Duke University Press, 2011), 224, emphasis in the original.

<sup>21</sup> Lauren Berlant, *The Anatomy of National Fantasy* (Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press, 1991), 7.

<sup>22</sup> Žižek, 138. See also Donald E. Pease, “The Uncanny Return of American Exceptionalism: Barack Obama v. The Tea Party Movement,” *Dedalus: Revista Portuguesa de Literatura*, 19 (2015), 35–54, 46. <sup>23</sup> Berlant, *The Anatomy of National Fantasy*, 5. <sup>24</sup> *Ibid.*, 4.

<sup>25</sup> Pease, “The Uncanny Return,” 35.

conceptual metaphors hang, and “out of which US citizens imagin[e] their national identity.”<sup>26</sup> Just as the election of Obama could not be accommodated into the ethno-nationalist fantasy of would-be Trump supporters – a regressive fantasy of longing for an imagined past of American greatness that is by necessity white, and in which Obama represents a breach in the racial contract<sup>27</sup> – in the context of the 2016 presidential campaign the election of Trump cannot be accommodated into a virtuous, exceptionalist national imaginary that has been revitalized by the Obama presidency as the “American proposition” – a “creedal nationalism” that “depends on a narrative that US history has gradually tended toward liberty and equality for all,”<sup>28</sup> even as it calls for the transformation of the foundations and the reality of “America.”

Finally, it is also important to note that, as Berlant, Rose, Pease, and Žižek have shown, in the framework of fantasy the status of “truth” or factuality is irrelevant, as there is no underlying truth that the fantasy tries to hide; the fantasy *is* the truth itself. There is no “veil” hiding an alternate reality, as the fantasy is what brings reality into being. This is especially relevant in light of Rushdie’s repeated arguments – in book launch interviews – that his novel is about “truth” and “lies” and about how to restore a sense of reality in a post-truth world. Without contradicting these concerns which are indeed at the novel’s forefront, I will suggest that it makes a larger claim about the nature of narrative itself: when the fantasy – our narrative – collapses, so does our sense of reality.

#### An early novel to “restore reality”

Rushdie’s novel perceptively engages early on with the contested notion of the “real” and with the adequacy of literary realism to narrate a moment when the consensus over what constitutes “reality” has been shattered (or perceived as such) by the election of a President that has an “inventive relation to reality.”<sup>29</sup> As would soon become evident, in this administration the terms “fake news” and “post-truth” would become household names in the daily battle over the meaning of “fact,” and the distinction between objective

<sup>26</sup> Donald E. Pease, *The New American Exceptionalism* (Minneapolis and London: University of Minnesota Press, 2009), 1.

<sup>27</sup> Pease, “The Uncanny Return.” It is also interesting to think of the Tea Party movement as a precursor of Trumpism, especially because it emerges, as Pease argues, as a (reverse) mirror image to Obama’s grassroots campaign, redescribing “what Obama’s campaign had called audacious hope as the achievement of a terrifying reality.” *Ibid.*, 45.

<sup>28</sup> Clausen, “Against Literary Nationalism.”

<sup>29</sup> Claire Colebrook, “Slavery and the Trumpocene: It’s Not the End of the World,” *Oxford Literary Review*, 41, 1 (2019), 40–50, 40.

“truth” and falsehoods would soon be argued as a matter of degree (e.g. Kellyanne Conway’s “alternative facts” and Rudy Giuliani’s “truth isn’t truth” moments). In short, the inauguration of what many would later call a reality-television presidency is the confirmation that the idea of a “shared reality” has been effectively overhauled. In depicting the sense of shock and uprootedness that the election of a Trumpian figure elicits among the specific milieu that makes up the narrative universe of *The Golden House*, the novel goes further than its author’s stated aim and problematizes the teleological narrative of the Obama years as the achievement of a postracial and postfeminist America and, moreover, of the triumphant and assured expectations of a Hillary Clinton win which were so shockingly crushed.<sup>30</sup> As such, the novel constructs the narrator’s story as a carefully crafted fantasy – a structure of desire – that comes crashing down at the end of the novel with the election of a new President and that cannot thus be explained in narrative terms.

At the same time, the novel interrogates the role of fiction through the narrator’s effort to create a fiction so “real” that it cannot help but betray its own constructedness and artificiality. While the theme of narrative unreliability is a common preoccupation of Rushdie’s fiction, I will suggest that in *The Golden House* these augmented metafictional concerns are directly linked to the instauration of a “post-truth” presidency, as the story serves as a metafictional examination of the role that fiction may have at a time when the limits between fact and fiction are intentionally blurred.<sup>31</sup> In a way, this narrative effort responds to Rushdie’s own contention that “in these surreal times of Trump’s America, when there is so much fiction, so much fantasy, so much

<sup>30</sup> For an excellent analysis of how this expectation was both represented in and reinforced by television shows such as *The Good Wife*, and how its spinoff *The Good Fight* dealt with the disillusionment brought about by the electoral outcome, see Rachel Sykes, “Imagined Hillarys: Feminism, Fantasy, and Fictional Clintons in *The Good Wife* and *The Good Fight*,” *Journal of American Studies*, 55, 2 (2020), 1–24.

<sup>31</sup> In one of the few scholarly articles about the novel, Julia Hoydis analyzes *The Golden House* in tandem with Rushdie’s autobiographical text *Joseph Anton* (2012) through the lens of twenty-first-century realism, in order to explore contemporary debates about the blurred lines between factuality and fictionality, truth and lies, and the fictionality of autobiographical writing. See Julia Hoydis, “Realism for the Post-truth Era: Politics and Storytelling in Recent Fiction and Autobiography by Salman Rushdie,” *European Journal of English Studies*, 23, 2 (2019), 152–71. A second dedicated analysis is included in Hock’s edited volume *Trump Fiction*, where Jaclyn Partyka reads *The Golden House* through the lens of genre hybridity to argue for the suitability of fictionality to address the post-truth moment. See Jaclyn Partyka, “‘Be a Little *Genrequeer*’: Rushdie’s *The Golden House* in the Age of Post-truth,” in Hock, *Trump Fiction*, 239–53. A third essay, by Suzy Woltmann, analyzes a number of texts, including *The Golden House*, as offering more nuanced and inclusive portrayals of gender identity and the diasporic subject, that are so central to Rushdie’s novel. See Suzy Woltmann, “Third Gender Politics: Hijra Identity Construction in India and Beyond,” *South Asian Review*, 41, 1 (2020), 3–15.

distortion and untruth being propagated every day,” the work of the writer of fiction may have to turn, increasingly and paradoxically, into trying to reestablish a sense of reality and the truth.<sup>32</sup> In many ways, Rushdie’s claim to motive echoes the many manifestoes and open letters that were published immediately before or after the 2016 election, in which writers admitted to feeling challenged by the advent of this unconventional political leader and the need to reexamine their role as fiction writers (with titles such as “What It Means to Be a Writer in the Time of Trump” and “Aftermath: Sixteen Writers on Trump’s America,” both published barely two weeks after the election).<sup>33</sup> But, as the novel makes clear, for Rushdie this awareness also demands the examination of the currency of one’s own assumptions.

The debate about how fiction arrives at the “real” or at some sort of truth is, of course, not new and is perhaps as old as literature itself; in the American scene, its latest iteration has been ongoing since at least the 1990s with the realist turn, from the rise of New Journalism and David Foster Wallace’s New Sincerity to David Shields’s diagnosis of our “reality hunger” in the 2000s.<sup>34</sup> But it is still interesting to ask, at a time of digital technologies, performative politics, and targeted mis- and disinformation, whether there is a role for fiction in reestablishing the limits between factuality and fictionality. If Philip Roth already wondered, in his seminal 1961 essay, about how the rise of television and the aestheticization of politics would impact the writing of American literature,<sup>35</sup> it is only fair to note that twenty-first-century politics presents a renewed and added challenge to writers, with its heightened doses of spectacularization, the full embrace of the logic of reality television, and social media competing to become the new public sphere. Moreover, I suggest that Rushdie’s novel presciently anticipates, on the one hand, what Pease would later call Trump’s “project of reality distortion,”<sup>36</sup> a targeted effort to “deconstruct” our old agreements about liberal democracy that, at

<sup>32</sup> Salman Rushdie in *Real Time with Bill Maher*, season 15, episode 27, 15 Sept. 2017, at [www.hbo.com/real-time-with-bill-maher/2017/27-episode-437](http://www.hbo.com/real-time-with-bill-maher/2017/27-episode-437).

<sup>33</sup> These are just two among the myriad expressions of resistance and of a newfound sense of mission by American writers soon after the election. See Maddie Crum and Claire Fallon, “What It Means to Be a Writer in the Time of Trump,” *Huffington Post*, 17 Nov. 2016, at [www.huffpost.com/entry/what-it-means-to-be-a-writer-in-the-time-of-trump\\_n\\_58261e0e4b0c4b63b0c7f3f](http://www.huffpost.com/entry/what-it-means-to-be-a-writer-in-the-time-of-trump_n_58261e0e4b0c4b63b0c7f3f); 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,” *New Yorker*, 14 Nov. 2016, at [www.newyorker.com/magazine/2016/11/21/aftermath-sixteen-writers-on-trumps-america](http://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2016/11/21/aftermath-sixteen-writers-on-trumps-america). For a thorough overview of similar efforts, see Manuel, “Los escritores norteamericanos.”

<sup>34</sup> David Shields, *Reality Hunger: A Manifesto* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2010).

<sup>35</sup> Philip Roth, “Writing American Fiction,” *Commentary*, March 1961, at [www.commentarymagazine.com/articles/philip-roth/writing-american-fiction](http://www.commentarymagazine.com/articles/philip-roth/writing-american-fiction).

<sup>36</sup> Pease, “Trumped-Up Charges.”

least at the surface level, is most evident in the verbal excesses and the instauration of a post-truth and alternative-facts universe that obfuscate the task of engaging in critical interpretation.<sup>37</sup> On the other, I will argue that the text represents in narrative terms what may happen when events resist traditional narratorial frameworks, when our available narratives fail to account for what is taking place: as I have noted earlier, the trite trope of the “failure of the imagination” that was repeatedly invoked on 9/11 not only pointed at the limits of fiction to represent an unconscionable event but in many cases served to construct it as an unforeseeable fall from innocence, a watershed moment that was otherwise unthinkable. But more political and critical uses of the phrase, both on 9/11 and now, may point not just at an inability to imagine but to an unwillingness to shed the imaginaries in which we are so invested, a refusal that is evident in every protestation that “this is not who we are.”<sup>38</sup>

In this sense, the secluded bubble that the novel’s narrator inhabits and the total absence of the many different American realities that coexist beyond his own is part and parcel of this inability/unwillingness to imagine. As I will later argue, the characters that inhabit the novel’s universe belong to a very specific social milieu, one that could easily be tagged as “coastal, liberal elites” and which was, allegedly, the most shocked by and the most embattled against Trump’s win. Therefore, and in so far as the narrative is concerned with the preexisting conditions (and narratives) that constitute “the imaginative impossibility of Trump’s victory for many Democrats,”<sup>39</sup> the action is aptly located in the eight years of the Obama presidency and restricted to a very specific socioeconomic group, whose optimism about the unproblematic and teleological progress of the American story comes crashing down at the end of the novel and causes the house and the narrative logic to collapse.

Much in line with Fraser’s arguments in *The Old Is Dying and the New Cannot Be Born* (2019), the novel seems to suggest that the current state of American politics – and by extension, the Trumpian figure that irrupts at the end – can be understood as the logical outcome of a style of progressive neoliberal politics that has been in play since the 1990s, and that the presidency of Barack Obama, no matter how much it appealed to its progressive soul, has come to embody an oxymoronic politics that combines, “on the

<sup>37</sup> At a more practical level, the efforts by the Trump administration to dismantle the administrative state and its institutions are excellently explored in Michael Lewis’s *The Fifth Risk* (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 2018).

<sup>38</sup> See, for example, Biden’s remarks on the assault of the Capitol on 6 January 2021. Thomas Franck, “Biden Condemns Riots at Capitol, Calls on Trump to Demand End to Siege,” *CNBC*, 6 Jan. 2021, at [www.cnbc.com/2021/01/06/biden-condemns-riots-at-capitol-calls-on-trump-to-demand-end-to-siege.html](http://www.cnbc.com/2021/01/06/biden-condemns-riots-at-capitol-calls-on-trump-to-demand-end-to-siege.html).

<sup>39</sup> Sykes, 3.

one hand, mainstream liberal currents of the new social movements (feminism, antiracism, multiculturalism, environmentalism, and LGBTQ+ rights); on the other hand, the most dynamic, high-end, ‘symbolic,’ and financial sectors of the US economy (Wall Street, Silicon Valley, and Hollywood).<sup>40</sup> In a similar line of thought, Naomi Klein also argued in *No Is Not Enough* (2017) that for critics of the neoliberal left (i.e. the Democratic Party), Trump was simply the culmination, the logical end point, of a series of narratives that have sustained the discourse of the United States’ economic and political dominance in the world. Klein explores the meaning and accuracy of the word “shock” to describe this overwhelming reaction to Trump’s election when, in fact, writes Klein, “We should have been expecting him.”<sup>41</sup> Shock, she argues, is produced when a timeline or story is ruptured, broken, and if applied to Trump’s electoral win it implies that his election is felt like an odd, bizarre happening in an otherwise orderly world. But if we understand Trump not as a cause of rupture, but rather as a symptom, “the logical end point,” of other forces and narratives that have been in play and that we have embraced for years, then the correct term is not “shock” but “horror,” specifically the horror of recognition, which means also questioning “not only Trump but the stories and systems that ineluctably produced him.”<sup>42</sup>

In this sense, the narrative arc of *The Golden House* aptly opens with Obama’s first inauguration in January 2008, in the immediate aftermath of the financial crash, and ends with the 2016 presidential campaign and the election of a new President in November, when there is, according to the narrator, a great “apocalyptic” fire:

On the day of the new president’s inauguration, when we worried that he might be murdered as he walked hand in hand with his exceptional wife among the cheering crowds, and when so many of us were close to economic ruin in the aftermath of the bursting of the mortgage bubble, and when Isis was still an Egyptian mother-goddess, an uncrowned seventy-something king from a faraway country arrived in New York City with his three motherless sons to take possession of the palace of his exile, behaving as if nothing was wrong with the country or the world or his own story. He began to rule over his neighbourhood like a benevolent emperor, although in spite of his charming smile and his skill at playing his 1745 Guadagnini violin he exuded a heavy, cheap odour, the unmistakable smell of crass, despotic danger ...<sup>43</sup>

As becomes soon evident, the “us” that speaks with a certain bemused nostalgia when looking back on the Obama years is a very specific milieu – that of

<sup>40</sup> Fraser, *The Old Is Dying*, 14.

<sup>41</sup> Naomi Klein, “Daring to Dream in the Age of Trump,” *The Nation*, 13 June 2017, at [www.thenation.com/article/archive/daring-to-dream-in-the-age-of-trump](http://www.thenation.com/article/archive/daring-to-dream-in-the-age-of-trump).

<sup>42</sup> Ibid.

<sup>43</sup> Salman Rushdie, *The Golden House* (London: Jonathan Cape, 2017), 3.

wealthy, cosmopolitan, and liberal-minded Manhattanites. However, this one-sided and unapologetically biased story that the narrator sets out to tell will get undermined and challenged in the very process of narration, which is not only extremely unreliable – a theme that Rushdie’s *oeuvre* is well versed in, as I have noted above – but also constructed in such a way that it metafictionally insists on exposing its own artificiality. The story is technically and structurally complex, as it is the narrator’s account of another narrative process: how he, an aspiring filmmaker, came to write a script for a documentary about his mysterious new neighbors (the Goldenes), and how it ends up being a mockumentary once it becomes clear that objectivity and factuality are impossible to sustain.<sup>44</sup> The story-within-the-story conceit – insofar as it is a novel about the writing of a film script – is just the outer framework of a more complex structure of stories within the story – a sort of Russian-doll structure, if you will – and is further complicated by insertions of sections of the script within the chapters, an overall filmic approach to narrative (with filmic cues throughout, like *cut*, *dissolve*, *later*, *long silence*, and so on), the inclusion of diverse filmic media (for example, campaign ads and the narrator’s girlfriend’s documentary) and the narrator’s constant self-referential commentary on the very acts of filming and writing.<sup>45</sup> We could speak thus of the novel’s “inter-medial nature” that further stresses its metafictional concerns, confuses the already blurred lines between referentiality and fictionality, and serves thus as a reflection on the quasi-fictional quality of contemporary life, especially when there is a sense that reality is outpacing fiction and there is such a concerted effort to confuse truth and lies.

The narrator, René Unterlinden, is the son of two Belgian university professors who proudly describe themselves as liberals living in “the bubble” of the MacDougal-Sullivan Gardens Historic District in Greenwich Village – an exclusive block of twenty-two terraced houses built around a private garden in the intersection of MacDougal and Sullivan Streets with Houston and Bleeker in the heart of Manhattan. It is within the bounds of this sheltered inner garden that René, a sort of Nick Carraway in *The Great Gatsby*, gets to witness, chronicle, and get entangled with the doing and tragic undoing of his neighbor, Nero Golden. One may even suggest indirect

<sup>44</sup> Defined briefly, a mockumentary is a filmic representation of fictional events presented in the form of a documentary. Hoydis further notes that the novel makes explicit reference to “Orson Welles’ mockumentary *F for Fake* (1973), a filmic mediation of the nature of truth and lies” that “presents a mosaic investigation of the art of fake” but that “ultimately only rais[es] more questions than provid[e] answers.” Hoydis, “Realism for the Post-truth Era,” 159. A similar idea is in operation in *The Golden House*’s cinematic conceit.

<sup>45</sup> For analysis of the use and mix of genres in Rushdie’s novel, see both Hoydis and Partyka, “Be a Little *Genrequeer*.”

echoes via Joseph O'Neill's *Netherland* (2008); or, as Hoydis suggests, perhaps a more apt comparison, given the cinematic framework of the novel, is “the ever-observing neighbour” in Alfred Hitchcock's *Rear Window* (1954),<sup>46</sup> yet another genre – the realist thriller – that makes up *The Golden House*'s hybrid and highly metafictional narrative mode. As Hoydis argues, the fact that the narrative is “in-between modes” helps to drive the point that the narrative universe of the novel is in-between paradigms, a reality that is “in flux,”<sup>47</sup> and for which a new form of realism is allegedly needed.

In this sense, it is interesting to note that the novel was promoted as Rushdie's “return to realism” and as departure from his usual style,<sup>48</sup> an attempt to develop a different realism “for an era of ‘post-truth’,”<sup>49</sup> which both Rushdie and the narrator refer to as “Operatic Realism”: an opulent, over-the-top realism that is delivered with the tragic force of the opera, a nod to the Italian movement of *verismo*, as Partyka suggests, in its portrayal of excessive passions and emotions.<sup>50</sup> Without contradicting this assessment, I will suggest that this excessive *mise en scène*, rather than sharpening our perceptions of a reality outside the text, actually brings to the foreground its artificiality, which does not, as I have noted above, negate in any way its ontological status as “true.” Furthermore, I will suggest that it foregrounds how the era of “post-truth” has as much to do with the impossibility of distinguishing between fact and fiction as with the unavailability of interpretive paradigms to process new narratives when our “version” of reality – a reality constructed in the *mise en scène* of fantasy – becomes upended.

Nero Golden is an Indian real-estate mogul who has relocated to the United States with his three adult and “motherless” sons, fleeing a secret – and, at the same time, very public – tragedy back home: the Mumbai terrorist attacks of 2008. Determined to start a new life as “make-believe people, frauds, reinventions, shapeshifters, which is to say, Americans,”<sup>51</sup> father and sons take on new names when they settle in the United States, names that hark back to the days of classical Rome and Greece: Nero, the mad last emperor of the Julio-Claudian dynasty who lived in a *domus aurea* (literally, a golden house) and “who played the lyre while Rome burned,” Petronius (Nero's courtier and author of the *Satyricon*), Apuleius (author of *The Golden Ass*), and Dionysus (the Greek god of wine and everything pleasurable). In their

<sup>46</sup> Hoydis, 159.

<sup>47</sup> Ibid.

<sup>48</sup> Monica Ali, “In Salman Rushdie's New Novel, the Backdrop Is the Obama Years,” *New York Times*, 15 Sept. 2017, at [www.nytimes.com/2017/09/15/books/review/the-golden-house-salman-rushdie.html](http://www.nytimes.com/2017/09/15/books/review/the-golden-house-salman-rushdie.html); Leo Robson, “The Golden House Is Salman Rushdie's Not-So-Great American Novel,” *New Statesman*, 10 Sept. 2017, at [www.newstatesman.com/culture/books/2017/09/golden-house-salman-rushdies-not-so-great-american-novel](http://www.newstatesman.com/culture/books/2017/09/golden-house-salman-rushdies-not-so-great-american-novel). <sup>49</sup> Hoydis, 153. <sup>50</sup> Partyka, 244. <sup>51</sup> Rushdie, *The Golden House*, 8.

modern American reincarnations, Nero's sons go by the names of Petya, Apu, and D. The intertextual and referential potentiality of these names is just one instance that illustrates the type of fictional universe that Rushdie's novel constructs, and that shoots in many different directions at once, contributing also to a rich patchwork of diverse cultural traditions. In true Rushdie style, the text is full of playful polysemy, constant referential cues to a very specific time and place, and a narrative style that interweaves the rhythms of storytelling, oral fables, mythology, and folklore with classics of world literature, American filmography, and popular culture, and myriad intertextual and intercultural references that it would be beyond the bounds of this essay to fully account for, and which have been excellently explored by scholars as constitutive of Rushdie's characteristic narrative style.<sup>52</sup>

As René starts to unweave his tale, what follows is a somewhat convoluted plot that at times reads like an Indian family saga and at others like a crime family tale – both highly stylized forms with their own generic conventions in literature and in film – although the narrative never abandons a naturalistic, highly referential, and realist style. In true Rushdie style, the novel draws from different genres to create a hybrid narrative mode, but it is also, at its heart, Rushdie's declared attempt to write a "big social novel" of contemporary New York.<sup>53</sup> As such, the novel is firmly grounded on identifiable referential cues that, on the other hand and inevitably, also hark to a whole cultural, historical and mythical universe (that of "New York" as a literary or filmic construct). Furthermore, if by "social novel of New York" we understand the type of social satires of the late 1980s (for example, Jay McInerney's *Bright Lights, Big City* (1984) and Tom Wolfe's *The Bonfire of Vanities* (1987), and even later post-9/11 novels like McInerney's *The Good Life* (2006) and Claire Messud's *The Emperor's Children* (2006)), then the lack of a more comprehensive and inclusive social lens to talk about New York fits within a generic tradition: in many ways, Rushdie's novel can be read as a social satire about a group of cosmopolitan, well-off, and artistically inclined Manhattanites whose lives are lived far and apart from those of the racialized, immigrant, and working-class people who, despite being a crucial part of the

<sup>52</sup> See, for example, Madelena Gonzalez, *Fiction after Fatwa: Salman Rushdie and the Charm of Catastrophe* (Amsterdam and New York: Rodopi, 2005); Stephen Morton, *Salman Rushdie: Fictions of Postcolonial Modernity* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2008); Ana Cristina Mendes, *Salman Rushdie and Visual Culture: Celebrating Impurity, Disrupting Borders* (New York: Routledge, 2012); Jan Alber, "Ideological Ambivalence: A Reading of Rushdie's *Midnight's Children*," in Divya Dwivedi, Henrik Skov Nielsen and Richard Walsh, eds., *Narratology and Ideology: Negotiating Context, Form, and Theory in Postcolonial Narratives* (Columbus: Ohio State University Press, 2018), 120–38.

<sup>53</sup> Rushdie in Medley, "Salman Rushdie on His Urgent New Novel."

makeup and heartbeat of New York City, are hardly represented at all. As the narrator's mother acknowledges, the Unterlindens proudly live in a bubble "[a]nd not even the whole city is in the bubble, because the bubble is made of money and the money isn't evenly spread."<sup>54</sup>

As noted above, the partial and admittedly biased narratorial voice is essential to the novel's premise, which purports to represent the shocked reactions of a particular social and ideological milieu enamored with the fact that America has elected its first African American president and convinced that, as a result, a postracial and more progressive and fair society is possible, without abandoning the exploitative tenets of neoliberal, free-market capitalism. With this narratorial voice in mind, I focus in what follows on how the novel problematizes the narrator's sudden awareness of the phantasmatic elements behind his benign liberal fantasy and on Rushdie's willingness to subvert the valences of realism to question the possibilities of representation. My reading is triggered by a specific moment towards the end of the text, which is when the until-then-realist narrative is abruptly subverted by the irruption of the Joker, Batwoman, and the Suicide Squad, who have unambiguous real-world counterparts in Donald Trump, Hillary Clinton, and the Republican Party respectively. The fact that the narrator abandons the naturalistic logic employed until then to turn to the superhero logic of the comic-book universe in the second half of the novel points to the difficulty of making sense of, or to the unwillingness to describe with traditional narrative tools, a world where people "are ruled by cartoons."<sup>55</sup>

If Rushdie wrote this novel as a way of reconstructing "a sense of reality and the truth" through fiction,<sup>56</sup> why would he have his narrator, an unapologetic liberal who admits to living in a bubble, construct a story that is a convulsion of lies, corruption, blindness, and (self-)deceit? Why would he write a novel in the realist style (and "operatic," at that) and yet transgress this very same logic with the sudden and fleeting introduction of comic-book characters? The discrepancy between the novel's two narrative logics, I will suggest, goes beyond the usual devices of the magical realist style often attributed to Rushdie, and against which he says he wrote in "persona revolt."<sup>57</sup> Briefly defined, magical realism is a mode that "generates a scrupulous equivalence" between

<sup>54</sup> Rushdie, *The Golden House*, 24.

<sup>55</sup> Salman Rushdie in Mike Doherty, "Salman Rushdie Says Donald Trump Is 'Demolishing Reality'," *McLean's*, 2 Sept. 2017, at [www.macleans.ca/culture/books/salman-rushdie-says-donald-trump-is-demolishing-reality](http://www.macleans.ca/culture/books/salman-rushdie-says-donald-trump-is-demolishing-reality).

<sup>56</sup> Rushdie, *Real Time with Bill Maher*.

<sup>57</sup> Salman Rushdie in Kate Tuttle, "Salman Rushdie on the Opulent Realism of His New Novel, 'The Golden House,'" *Los Angeles Times*, 14 Sept. 2017, at [www.latimes.com/books/jacketcopy/la-ca-jc-salman-rushdie-20170914-story.html](http://www.latimes.com/books/jacketcopy/la-ca-jc-salman-rushdie-20170914-story.html).

the domains of the real and the fantastic, as Quayson suggests.<sup>58</sup> Rushdie is often described as one of the front-runners of magical realism in postcolonial writing, and his narrative fictions tend to be characterized by a style where two layers of reality – the real and the fantastic – are blended and coexist unproblematically to form a single, bi-dimensional reality. To illustrate this point, we can refer again to *Midnight's Children*, where Saleem Sinai's telepathic powers to connect with the multitude are more than a conceit for the multiplicity of voices in the narrative, and where his ability to “smell emotions” is an integral part of a world that is deeply steeped in referentiality and history but where, at the same time, drops of blood turn into rubies and tears into diamonds, literally and unproblematically. Unlike this conflation of the real and the fantastic, I argue that in *The Golden House* the irruption of the villains and the superheroes, rather than coexisting, actually upends the balance of the narrative itself, as the realist world of Manhattan in late 2016 is not blended with, but *taken over* and disjointed by, the supervillainous universe of Gotham.

That an “opulent, theatrical realist style” is the chosen style to “return to realism” is then extremely relevant to the story itself,<sup>59</sup> because *The Golden House* of the title denotes not just the physical mansion where Nero and his sons live, but also the self-narratives that they construct and those that their neighbors build around them; as Hoydis contends, the novel is as much about deceiving others as about deceiving ourselves. The title – which is also the title of René's script – is explicitly associated in the novel with a figure of speech in classical Latin literature, “a golden story,” that denotes, as the narrator admits, “a tall tale, a wild conceit, something that was obviously untrue. A fairy tale. A lie.”<sup>60</sup> It is this narrative that, together with Nero's golden house, finally comes crashing down in a great apocalyptic fire at the end of the novel. I argue that this collapse seems also connected to another kind of social collapse, which is the extreme division and disagreement over what constitutes even the most basic, objective fact and is exacerbated by the election of the Joker at the end of the novel. In other words, the novel seems to be arguing that it is the self-deception during the Obama years that “has given us the age of Trump.”<sup>61</sup>

But the novel also willfully misleads readers about the identities of the Joker and Nero Golden, as we are led to believe at the beginning that Nero *is* the “Trumpian” character, with countless ironic and unironic references to his real-life counterpart throughout the text. For example, that “[h]e has been a

<sup>58</sup> Ato Quayson, “Fecundities of the Unexpected: Magical Realism, Narrative, and History,” in Franco Moretti, ed., *The Novel*, Volume I, *History, Geography, and Culture* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2006), 726–56.

<sup>59</sup> Hoydis, “Realism for the Post-truth Era,” 153. <sup>60</sup> Rushdie, *The Golden House*, 41.

<sup>61</sup> Adam Kirsch, “Lie to Me: Fiction in the Post-truth Era,” *New York Times*, 15 Jan. 2017, at [www.nytimes.com/2017/01/15/books/lie-to-me-fiction-in-the-post-truth-era.html](https://www.nytimes.com/2017/01/15/books/lie-to-me-fiction-in-the-post-truth-era.html).

deal-maker all his life,” and that Nero’s “name was everywhere in those days, on everything from hot dogs to for-profit universities,” “the word GOLDEN, a golden word, coloured gold, in brightly illuminated gold neon, and all in capital letters of gold,” even if “the whole mega-business of his name was a flim-flam game and bankruptcy was the shadow that went with his name.”<sup>62</sup> And yet it is the Joker who speaks Trump’s words almost verbatim (“*The fools! I could shoot someone dead in Times Square and I wouldn’t lose any votes!*”<sup>63</sup>). In trying to discern the relation between the two, Partyka suggests that both are “Trumpian avatars,” where the Joker embodies the “dialectic between the horrific and the comedic.”<sup>64</sup> I will suggest, however, that the Joker can be read as Nero Golden’s phantasmatic underside, the traumatic kernel of the Real that the fantasy needs to conceal. In other words, I suggest that Nero Golden’s story is a “golden story” (i.e. a fantasy) that we have been telling ourselves, a particular and specific narration of both the nation and the self against which the energies of Trumpism reacted so forcefully. Trump becomes, then, as Obama’s former speechwriter Jon Favreau called him, this “national psychic wound,”<sup>65</sup> the figure that negates and contradicts the optimistic and virtuous liberal narrative.

In my estimation, this reading of the national and the personal narratives as correlated is suggested by the text itself, where the narrator’s story of Nero Golden and his sons is constructed as an epic story that runs parallel to the national narrative, the one that posits the United States as the place where these newcomers can “move beyond memory and roots and language and race into the land of the self-made self, which is another way of saying, America.”<sup>66</sup> The text invites this pan-historical and mythological reading with several references not only to the mythmaking discourse of American exceptionalism, but to a whole cultural imaginary – in film, literature, and the arts – of what makes “America” that is contained in the novel’s rich intertextuality. In René’s reading of the nation, it is inseparable from the virtuous national narrative that enshrines the liberal values of liberty, equality, tolerance, multiculturalism, diversity, and identity politics and that, as the narrator admits, “feels good about doing it.”<sup>67</sup> At the same time these values are merged with the most palatable business sectors of Wall Street and Silicon Valley, the politics of individualism and corporate feminism, with its mantras of meritocracy, postracial identity, “leaning in” (following Sheryl Sandberg’s

<sup>62</sup> Rushdie, *The Golden House*, 83, 139, 159.

<sup>63</sup> *Ibid.*, 257, original emphasis.

<sup>64</sup> Partyka, “Be a Little *Genrequeer*,” 250.

<sup>65</sup> Jon Favreau, “The Gettable Voter with Jon Favreau,” *Why Is This Happening? With Chris Hayes* (podcast), 16 March 2020, at [www.nbcnews.com/think/opinion/scouting-gettable-voter-jon-favreau-podcast-transcript-ncna1142721](http://www.nbcnews.com/think/opinion/scouting-gettable-voter-jon-favreau-podcast-transcript-ncna1142721).

<sup>66</sup> Rushdie, *The Golden House*, 20.

<sup>67</sup> *Ibid.*, 37.

proposition),<sup>68</sup> and the inevitability of Hillary Clinton “breaking the glass ceiling” of national politics. The moment of reckoning about this narrative comes at the end of the novel as the narrator contemplates the Joker hanging from the Empire State Building “with his greedy eye on the White House” and wonders whether the Joker is “the consequence of an extraordinary concatenation of unpredictable mischances, or the product of eight years and more of public shamelessness of which he was the embodiment and the apogee?”<sup>69</sup>

The tragic undoing of Nero Golden is therefore of a double nature – familial and national – as the golden legacy he has constructed, with all its structures of disavowal – the flaws, grievances, and contradictions – comes violently to the surface, sublimated in the cathartic figure of the Joker. The narrator watches in horror, from the once sheltered bubble of the Gardens,

the schismatic convulsion that had gripped America following the triumph of the cackling cartoon narcissist, America torn in half, its defining myth of a city-on-a-hill exceptionalism lying trampled in the gutters of bigotry and racial and male supremacism, Americans’ masks ripped off to reveal the Joker faces beneath. Sixty million. Sixty million. And ninety million more too uncaring to vote.<sup>70</sup>

This moment of shattered reality, and the realization of the existence of two separate realities (those “sixty million”), puts representation qua narrative at the center of both Rushdie’s and the narrator’s projects, as the shakeup of the national narrative tears the formerly meaningful order to shreds, revealing “the delusion of ontological, psychological, and moral continuity,” as Hemon denounced.<sup>71</sup>

Moreover, as Nero tells René before his demise, it is an “age of bitterly contested realities, [in which] it is not easy to agree upon what is actually happening or has happened, or *what is the case*, let alone upon the moral or meaning of this or any other tale.”<sup>72</sup> The narrator is acutely aware that, with the irruption of the Joker, “The meanings of words would change,”<sup>73</sup> which points at so much more than *doublespeak*: meanings become unmoored and thus transitory. In this world ruled by cartoons, reality is no longer functional, as a new set of rules and a new playing field will be established, and it is the Joker who possesses the power to set the rules and, at the same time, to violate them. The irruption of the comic-book figures, with its change of narrative logic, signals, then, to a change of paradigm in the real world, the breakdown in our “old agreements about reality” that Rushdie has sought to

<sup>68</sup> Sheryl Sandberg, *Lean In: Women, Work, and the Will to Lead* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2013). <sup>69</sup> Rushdie, *The Golden House*, 270. <sup>70</sup> *Ibid.*, 353.

<sup>71</sup> Aleksandar Hemon, “Stop Making Sense, or How to Write in the Age of Trump,” *Village Voice*, 17 Jan. 2017, at [www.villagevoice.com/2017/01/17/stop-making-sense-or-how-to-write-in-the-age-of-trump](http://www.villagevoice.com/2017/01/17/stop-making-sense-or-how-to-write-in-the-age-of-trump).

<sup>72</sup> Rushdie, *The Golden House*, 38–39, emphasis in the original.

<sup>73</sup> *Ibid.*, 244.

capture.<sup>74</sup> Translated onto the notion of the United States as a liberal democracy, this is what Pease refers to as a shift in “the already positioned field,” a change of paradigm that brings “an entirely different field into view” that at the same time makes the possibility of critique and the terms of argument impracticable, at least with the old tools.<sup>75</sup> If that basic consensus is removed, if the battleground is removed from under our feet, it is not even possible to disagree.

Faced with this disjointed reality, the narrator is left wondering, in a moment that is, yet again, reminiscent of narratives of nostalgia and loss such as Fitzgerald’s *The Great Gatsby* and O’Neill’s *Netherland*, “What would my story mean, my life, my work, the stories of Americans old and new, *Mayflower* families and Americans proudly sworn in just in time to share in the unmasking—the unmaking—of America?”<sup>76</sup> Scrambling for what Hemon calls the “ontological blankie of reality inertia,”<sup>77</sup> René holds on to the figure of the sheltered gardens, that “sacred space of my childhood, the one place in the whole world in which I had always felt safe, always comforted, never threatened,”<sup>78</sup> as the golden house collapses and exposes, to borrow Kennedy’s words in a different context, the fragility and precariousness of the edifice of reality.<sup>79</sup> Eventually, René comes to accept that “the building would have to be demolished and a new structure would be raised in its place”;<sup>80</sup> nothing was what it used to be and “nothing had ever been the way it used to be.”<sup>81</sup> In the new reality—that Real that the Joker brings in—

there was no safe space ... the monster was always at the gates, and a little of the monster was within us too, we were the monsters we had always feared, and no matter what beauty enfolded us, no matter how lucky we were in life or money or family or talent or love, at the end of the road the fire was burning, and it would consume us all.<sup>82</sup>

### Fiction for an era of post-truth

René’s horrified witnessing of “the unmasking—the unmaking—of America” and its descent into “Bizarro-America” is as exuberant, “operatic,” ironic, and

<sup>74</sup> Salman Rushdie, “Truth, Lies, and Literature,” *New Yorker*, 31 May 2018, at [www.newyorker.com/culture/cultural-comment/truth-lies-and-literature](http://www.newyorker.com/culture/cultural-comment/truth-lies-and-literature).

<sup>75</sup> Donald E. Pease, “Barack Obama’s Orphic Mysteries,” in Laura Bieger, Ramon Saldivar, and Johannes Voelz, eds., *The Imaginary and Its Worlds: American Studies after the Transnational Turn* (Hanover: Dartmouth College Press, 2013), 215–36, 222.

<sup>76</sup> Rushdie, *The Golden House*, 337.

<sup>77</sup> Hemon, “Stop Making Sense.”

<sup>78</sup> Rushdie, *The Golden House*, 364.

<sup>79</sup> Liam Kennedy, “American Realities: A European Perspective on Trump’s America,” in Nina Morgan, Alfred Hornung, and Takayuki Tatsumi, eds., *The Routledge Companion to Transnational American Studies* (London: Routledge, 2019), 297–304, 299.

<sup>80</sup> Rushdie, *The Golden House*, 365–66.

<sup>81</sup> Aleksandar Hemon, “Stop Making Sense.”

<sup>82</sup> Rushdie, *The Golden House*, 364.

playful as any Rushdie narrative can be, yet it also carries implicit its own critique.<sup>83</sup> The novel's insistence on "truth" and "lies," while it does point at a post-truth universe that is "full of lies and [in which] the business of the truth was broken,"<sup>84</sup> is equally critical of its own desire for self-delusion. The novel aptly captures how, for eight years, American liberals "have built a legendary archive, almost hagiographic in nature, around the figure of Obama" – to put it in Carme Manuel's words – and how this pre-Trumpian liberal utopia is conveniently shattered by the inexplicable irruption of a bunch of retrograde, racist, and nativist Trump supporters.<sup>85</sup> As Manuel contends, both arguments serve as smoke screens that actually falsify the history of the past and the present.<sup>86</sup> I have suggested the notion of fantasy as an apt framework for reading the novel, and as such I argue that the novel's insistence on "truth" and "lies" should not distract us from the fact that, in the fantasy framework, the factuality of the case is irrelevant: there is no underlying "truth" that the fantasy tries to hide, the fantasy *is* the truth itself; as such, when the fantasy collapses, so does reality. It is, as Žižek would have it, "the return of the Real." In this sense, I will further suggest that Rushdie's insistent and recurrent reflections on the notions of "truth," "lies," and "reality" actually hint at the need to resignify their semantic valences: it is not just that "we live in surfaces, in presentations and falsifications of ourselves," but that, as René reflects, sometimes "lies reveal those truths in ways impossible to foretell."<sup>87</sup>

It remains to be seen whether, as Kennedy asks, "Trump's presidency represents an irreparable tear in the fabric of American liberal reality,"<sup>88</sup> and it is also interesting to ask how American literature will engage with this apparently irreparable tear. As Hemon argues, "literature can become, as it were, ontological propaganda, catering to the bourgeois addiction to stability, the palliative machinery for making reality appear unalterable, as that which is and always shall be."<sup>89</sup> In that kind of effort, the Trump era would be constructed as a bizarre, unreal occurrence, or, in hindsight, as a laughable blip in an otherwise teleological construction of "America," further contributing to that "literary nationalism" that Clausen so forcefully questioned. This is not to say that contemporary American literary circles are necessarily militant or political; in fact, Pulitzer Prize winner Viet Thanh Nguyen decries precisely the opposite, the apolitical tendencies of the mainstream literary establishment in recent years – which is usually white, privileged, well-educated.<sup>90</sup> As

<sup>83</sup> *Ibid.*, 354.

<sup>85</sup> Manuel, "Los escritores norteamericanos," 52, translation mine.

<sup>87</sup> Rushdie, *The Golden House*, 35.

<sup>89</sup> Hemon, "Writing the Unimaginable."

<sup>90</sup> As Nguyen notes, the American publishing industry's staff is "85 percent white" and its "fiction list is 95 percent white." Viet Tahn Nguyen, "The Post-Trump Future of

<sup>84</sup> *Ibid.*, 348.

<sup>86</sup> *Ibid.*, 53.

<sup>88</sup> Kennedy, 299.

Nguyen notes in “The Post-Trump Future of Literature,” “that much of the literary world was willing to give Mr. Obama’s drone strike and deportation policies a pass, partly because he was such a literary, empathetic president, indicates some of the hollowness of liberalism and multiculturalism.”<sup>91</sup> In this nostalgic view, Obama becomes the living center of “a rhetorical inertia of sublimation and acquiescence,”<sup>92</sup> the object cause that, to use Pease’s words, “embodies or gives positive existence to the void which animates desire,”<sup>93</sup> and so to the fantasy onto which such desires can be projected.

The initial shocked reactions to Trump’s victory in 2016 from the literary world suggest that such ontological inertia was in operation, an aspirational and lofty fantasy that enabled us to perceive the world as a perfectly ordered and coherent reality. And, as Pease explains, in this psychosocial structure of desire and fantasy, there always needs to be a symptom figure, an element that “stitches up the inconsistencies of an ideological system.”<sup>94</sup> It is onto this symptom figure that all imperfections and contradictions are projected, becoming the element that closes the gap between the fantasy and the actual experience of reality, the designated cause that explains the disturbance of the alleged order. After the attacks of 11 September, “the terrorist” became the symptom figure that sustained George W. Bush’s narrative of the state of exception; years later, the rise of the first African American President was perceived as a breach of the racial contract by a Tea Party movement that construed Obama as “the most visible symptom of the loss of the American way of life.”<sup>95</sup>

In the context of the widespread shocked reactions to Trump’s win in 2016 – reactions that came mostly, as I have noted, from the political center of liberalism – would it be too far-fetched to suggest that antagonism to Trump functioned as a mechanism that – without dismissing the very real fears he elicited and that were later confirmed during his truly damaging presidency – served to amnesiacally maintain belief in the long-standing fantasy of “America,” a kernel of the Real that came back to haunt the aspirational visions of the nation with added doses of white supremacy, settler colonialism, and racism? Reading *The Golden House* in the context of the 2016 campaign and of the first months of the Trump presidency, doesn’t the irruption of the Joker into the political scene have all the potentiality to become the symptom figure that negates and at the same time sustains the fantasy framework of liberal America, its aspirational and teleological progress towards an equal and postracial society, in the face of ongoing racial violence and inequality?

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Literature,” *New York Times*, 22 Dec. 2020, at [www.nytimes.com/2020/12/22/opinion/fiction-poetry-trump.html](http://www.nytimes.com/2020/12/22/opinion/fiction-poetry-trump.html).

<sup>91</sup> Ibid.

<sup>92</sup> Manuel, 70, translation mine.

<sup>93</sup> Pease, “The Uncanny Return,” 42–43.

<sup>94</sup> Ibid., 47.

<sup>95</sup> Ibid., 48.

Or can we read Trump, as Kennedy suggests, as “the superman unleashed as celebrity phantasm, a figure of libidinal *jouissance* who leeringly embodies the obscene underside of liberal democracy”<sup>96</sup>?

As the cacophony and the most shocking memories of the Trump administration gradually recede into the background—even in the face of the Republican Party’s delusional drift—one wonders whether there isn’t yet another amnesiac operation in place, whether we are falling into traps similar to those that gave us Trump in the first place. Triumphant declarations that “America Is Back” and expressions of relief at “the return of decency” only serve to write down Trump as an oddity, as a blip in history. But we should be asking, as Nguyen does, what are the lessons of this era? “What will writers do when the outrage is over? Will they go back to writing about flowers and moons?”<sup>97</sup> Opinions vary as to the futures of American literature in a continued era of Trumpism; while Nguyen is ready to grant Trump the achievement of having destroyed “the ability of of white writers to dwell in the apolitical,”<sup>98</sup> in “The Disappointing Trump Novel” Gareth Watkins still laments the corpus’s lack of engagement with issues of class and race, and argues that writers of this first wave of Trump fiction are “not asking difficult questions about why authoritarianism is on the rise, and how their own class might be complicit with it.”<sup>99</sup> In this respect, I suggest that *The Golden House* possesses a political depth that may not have been appreciated in first reviews and that it is a good point of departure for considering the need to reexamine complacent and exceptionalist assumptions, and why they were perceived as so shockingly shattered. In stating “that we had been asking ourselves the wrong questions,”<sup>100</sup> the novel invites, in my estimation, a reexamination of Americans’ understanding of their own history and of their own complicity with discourses that eschew class, gender, and race as mere identity politics. As John Carlos Rowe argued in an opinion piece after Trump’s first hundred days, resisting also entails looking at the “fictions ... sustained by complex ideological and cultural narratives that invent and reinvent America and Americans.”<sup>101</sup>

<sup>96</sup> Kennedy, 301.

<sup>97</sup> Nguyen.

<sup>98</sup> *Ibid.* Nguyen’s criticism is directed mostly at white writers not only because they dominate the publishing industry and fiction lists, but because, he argues, writers of color or belonging to minorities, as well as writers of so-called genre literature, have always had more skin in the game.

<sup>99</sup> Gareth Watkins, “The Disappointing Trump Novel,” *Commune*, 29 March 2019, at <https://communemag.com/the-disappointing-trump-novel>.

<sup>100</sup> Rushdie, *The Golden House*, 11.

<sup>101</sup> John Carlos Rowe, “Trump Today,” *Comparative American Studies: An International Journal*, 15, 1–2 (2017), 16–20, 19.

## AUTHOR BIOGRAPHY

Dolores Resano is a Marie Skłodowska-Curie Postdoctoral Fellow at the Clinton Institute for American Studies, University College Dublin, and Visiting Scholar at the Department of English and Creative Writing at Dartmouth College. Her current research is focussed on contemporary American and European literary fiction from a transatlantic perspective, with a special interest in the intersections of literature, politics, affect, and public discourse. An edited collection, *American Literature in the Era of Trump*, is forthcoming from Palgrave in 2022. This work has received funding from the European Union's Horizon 2020 research and innovation programme under the Marie Skłodowska-Curie grant agreement No. 894396, and is part of the Project PID2020-115172GB-I00 "(Un)Housing: Dwellings, Materiality, and the Self in American Literature" funded by MCIN/AEI/ 10.13039/501100011033.