

Reality in America, Redux: On Trump Panic Fiction

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Abstract

This essay explains why the election of Donald Trump in 2016 marks a literary historical event. In particular, I show how the liberal response to Trump, as well as Trump's own persona, foregrounded an unsettling confusion between fiction and reality that led novelists to question the value of their craft. Focusing on a subset of what I call "Trump panic fiction"—novels that dramatize Trump's election in the key of ontological alarm—I argue that literary depictions of Trump double as meditations on the relation between the evocative powers of art and the explanatory power of facts. To make sense of these meditations, I situate Trump panic fictions by Hari Kunzru, Ben Lerner, Lauren Oyler, Patricia Lockwood, and Ayad Akhtar within a longer history of US writers puzzling over the relation between writing and the real, a history that gained a new inflection when the critical acclaim of autofiction coincided with Trump's "post-truth" presidency. Looking back to Lionel Trilling's essay "Reality in America," I claim that novelistic portrayals of Trump struggle to reinvent the liberal aesthetic for our current political moment.

On or about November 2016, American reality cracked. Or at least that's how it felt to millions of liberal Americans watching in disbelief as one state after another turned red on the electoral maps until finally, shockingly, presidential candidate Donald Trump declared victory. The anxious atmosphere of the preceding months intensified, and,

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as winter set in and the think-pieces piled up, the worry assumed a distinctive shape. Alongside the disappointment, anger, and resentment that always accompany political defeat, Trump's election stirred a deeper, metaphysical confusion. It was as if the two sides of the electorate not only held opposed opinions but also lived in divergent worlds. Journalist Brooke Gladstone, in a 2017 pamphlet tellingly titled *The Trouble with Reality: A Ruminant on Moral Panic in Our Time*, captured the moment in an address to her liberal reader: "Having watched history unspool in a direction you never believed it could go," she consoles, "now you question reality, and it's likely you always will" (1).

So unsettling and supremely weird were the years of Trump's first candidacy and early presidency that novelists, in their role as a culture's in-house anthropologists, inevitably took note. Trump entered contemporary fiction with impressive speed. Of course, as a celebrity, he'd appeared in fictions before—cameos in films and the occasional novel, not to mention his starring role in *The Apprentice* (2004–2017)—but, after 2016 and its attendant ontological confusions, the tenor and purpose of those invocations changed. When Ali Smith references Trump in *Winter* (2017), or when Olivia Laing folds his tweets into *Crudo* (2018), or when Mark Doten imagines an apocalyptic outcome of his presidency in *Trump Sky Alpha* (2019), Trump functions as an emblem for the seemingly unreal, yet utterly too real, times. He provides a shorthand for the frenzied anxiety, ceaseless scrolling, and total disbelief that defined that microhistorical moment. "She missed Obama," Laing writes, after her protagonist checks Trump's Twitter feed: "Everyone missed Obama. She missed the sense of time as something serious and diminishing, she didn't like living in the permanent present of the id" (43). She missed the old reality—you know, the *real* one.

Here's where things got complicated for fiction writers: just as surely as the election set the ontological compasses of liberals spinning, so too, because of Trump's shameless lying, did it focus attention on the dangers of telling tales. Part of the reason liberals felt blindsided was that Trump had effectively fabricated a different world, one of "alternative facts" and "fake news" that took the infamous dismissal of the "reality-based community" usually attributed to Karl Rove and raised it, with the help of the internet, to the *nth* power (qtd. in Suskind). He had become, in the words of one commentator, "our first novelist in chief": a politician whose pathological "inability to distinguish fiction from reality" twisted the writer's work of creating "emotionally compelling" worlds into a political strategy (Patterson). Surely, in such conditions, facts eclipsed fictions as political tools. The writer and former novelist Kurt Andersen, in the September 2017 issue of the *Atlantic*, insisted on this point when he called for people "in reality-based America" to take a stand against "the dangerously untrue

and unreal” (91) by returning to reason, the sole bulwark against an id-fueled slide into “alternative realities” (78).¹

Note how this widely shared sentiment put fiction writers in an awkward spot. The British novelist Sarah Moss summed up the predicament in a 2020 interview: “I had been doing a very lofty post-structuralist thing, you know, there’s no such thing as reality and all of that stuff,” but “after Trump’s election I thought, bloody hell . . . I think it’s really important that everyone’s absolutely clear that there is truth and there are lies, and they’re different.” Pause. “Which is an odd thing to say as a novelist, because obviously I make my living by telling lies . . . and I think that’s just one of those difficult things to think about” (Rosefield 12). That Moss has grossly oversimplified the actual work of novel-writing—collapsing the history of fictionality into “lies”—only speaks to the powerful pressures exerted on writers in these years by the pointed equation of political and literary fictions.² There’s a reason, after all, that Andersen is a *former* novelist; like Richard North Patterson, who made the “novelist in chief” quip, he thought that “Trump rendered fiction redundant” and quit literature for a more direct means of addressing politics (Patterson). Even novelists who stuck with their craft—including George Saunders, Junot Díaz, Margaret Atwood, Salman Rushdie, Toni Morrison, and many others—felt obliged to take to the editorial pages to speak frankly about Trump.³ In reckoning with the degradation of American reality, fiction seemed a compromised device.

Without a doubt, then, Trump’s election counts as a literary historical event, not only for the thousands of pages it provoked but for the distinctive tangle of fiction and reality it foregrounded. After 2016, the conflict between the imaginative practices of literature and the felt imperative to retether discourse to some surer notion of reality left its mark on the plots, voices, and narrative styles of a whole range of novels that, taken collectively, we might call Trump panic fiction. Examples are myriad, spanning genres and registers, as no corner of the literary field was immune to the air of alarm, the sickening sense that *this can’t be happening*.⁴ But there are broad and important differences in how that sense is staged that bear on the argument that follows. I won’t concern myself with the satires, lampoons, and other forms of liberal self-soothing on display in, say, Howard Jacobson’s *Pussy* (2017) or Dave Eggers’s *The Captain and the Glory* (2019), or with the SF Domsday extrapolations of Doten’s *Trump Sky Alpha* or Tim Maughan’s *Infinite Detail* (2019)—not even with William Gibson’s *Agency* (2020), a novel that Gibson admits to rewriting in a state of Trump panic. (“I found myself” the day after the election, he recalled in an interview, “questioning the reality of what I was experiencing” [M. Schwartz].) Satire and science fiction, in their fabulous distortions and inventions, exhibit a faith in imaginative fiction to reveal a truth

about our muddled reality. But it's precisely the *loss* of this faith—and the question of how this loss paradoxically registers in fiction—that will concern me here.

Thus, I'll focus on a subgenre that, by the time Trump announced his candidacy, was already well-practiced in folding anxieties about reality and fiction into its form: the dwindling domain of literary fiction. Two features of this field make it especially revealing of literature's relation to Trump-induced moral panic. First, as Sean McCann has observed, twenty-first-century literary novels are written "by and for a highly advantaged fraction of society" ("Mound" 352). Their authors live and work within the educated, left-leaning publishing world that hosted the vast majority of Trump panic writing. A convulsion in that world was bound to send ripples through literary fiction. Second, the acclaim of autofiction in the 2010s had already made the formal confusion of art and life, of what an author invents and what actually occurred, a central site of literary and critical attention before Trump gave that confusion added urgency. Even novels that weren't technically autofiction nonetheless took their cues from, and were read in relation to, autofiction's preoccupations.⁵ For these reasons, literary novels produced the most searching investigations into post-Trump reality trouble and the possibilities of addressing it through fiction. I'll consider five such books: Ben Lerner's *The Topeka School* (2019), Hari Kunzru's *Red Pill* (2019), Ayad Akhtar's *Homeland Elegies* (2020), Lauren Oyler's *Fake Accounts* (2021), and Patricia Lockwood's *No One Is Talking about This* (2021)—all of which square up to Trump and, in the process, reflect on the relation between fiction and reality in contemporary life. Though different in their approach, they each engage in deep, often ambivalent ways with a pervasive liberal discourse that sought to stabilize American reality by countering fictions with facts, stories with explanations.

As we'll see, Trump's election gave liberal reflections on the relation between reality and fiction a distinctive spin, but the reflections themselves weren't new. I've taken my title from Lionel Trilling, who in "Reality in America," the lead essay in *The Liberal Imagination* (1950), charted the political and aesthetic dangers that follow from glorifying facts as an ontological bedrock. Writing against the "limited and essentially arrogant conception of reality" that he thought dominated life and letters in the United States (10), Trilling framed his famous brief for an aesthetic that favors variousness, contingency, and a clear-eyed acceptance of the dark recesses of human motivation in less well-remembered philosophical terms. The problem with what he called "the American metaphysic" was not only that it insisted on a reductive notion of the real (just the facts, understood as instances of "material reality, hard, resistant, unformed" [13]) or that this notion supported the hubristic programs of technocratic planning he associated with

Stalinism. The problem was also that it entailed a condemnation of any action that turned “away from reality”—including imaginative art—as a “deadly sin” (7).⁶ Much has changed since Trilling’s day. No one, for instance, would now join him in deeming liberalism “the sole intellectual tradition” operative in American political thought (xv). But his attention to the “chronic American belief” that in the battle between hard-nosed reality and imaginative fiction-making “one must enlist oneself in the party of reality” has gained a new relevance in light of literary responses to Trump (10). When novelists were once again called to pledge allegiance to the American metaphysic, how did they respond? And how, in responding, did they return to and repurpose the liberal aesthetic?

This essay is about the crisis in fiction that emerged in tandem with the perceived crisis of reality after Trump’s election. I’ll begin by setting the historical stage; even though Trump panic fiction is overwhelmingly of a moment, the strategies that Kunzru, Lerner, Oyler, Lockwood, and Akhtar employ, and the concerns they voice, take shape in relation to a longer tradition of writers and critics puzzling over the links between writing and the real, Trilling among them. I’ll then turn to how Trump’s election not only supercharged the significance of such concerns but focused them on a vexing issue: the connection between art and explanation. In short, a feeling of urgency pushed contemporary writers to participate in the wider effort within liberal journalism to account for how something as far-fetched as a President Trump could have happened and why liberals were so taken by surprise. But in the process of explaining—and there are explanations aplenty in Trump fiction—they reveal a deep uncertainty about the force and status of their explanations. Can art explain, in the way that facts or causal analyses explain? What kind of understanding of reality can literary fictions offer? Might the distinctive techniques of nonreality-based narratives, supposedly tarnished by post-Rove Republicans, nonetheless correct the overweening liberal trust in the redemptive power of facts? The answers these novels provide are rarely straightforward, but in that very indirection they find new uses for a Trilling-like ambition for art in a post-truth age. If, as Trilling proposed, the whole novel tradition constituted “a perpetual quest for reality” (212), then for several years Trump, whose persona as president embodied the contemporary confusion of rhetoric and reality, set the terms for the pursuit.

Reality as a Literary Problem, Especially in America

Americans had felt unreal before 2016. The recent panic about reality belongs to a longer history of writers characterizing real life as elusive, with literature given as a tool for the hunt. Why cast novels as a quest for reality unless reality itself needs finding, rather than being

exactly what we can't avoid? Here, reality poses not just an intellectual problem, as it has for philosophy since Socrates, but a social one: a feeling that the conditions that secure an individual's trust in a common world have been undermined. Throughout the twentieth century, and into the twenty-first, variations on this worry have motivated reflections on the promises and pitfalls of art, from optimistic assertions of literature's power to jolt us into reality to the suspicion that fiction fails to move beyond the magic circle of suspended disbelief. The story of modern US literature and criticism is rarely told in this way (no doubt because "reality" is a laughably big concept). Yet, if we look back over this history from the perspective of Trump panic, a basic narrative snaps into place. I'll give the outlines of that narrative here, in the hopes that the familiar touchpoints, recast in the key of reality, will illuminate the most recent round of handwringing about fiction's place in contemporary life.

In the late nineteenth century, well-off white Americans began to worry that their existence had become, in historian T. J. Jackson Lears's phrase, "curiously unreal" (5). This pervasive metaphysical dislocation, brought on by the spiritual weightlessness of progressivism and other desiderata of Weberian modernity, motivated a range of attempts "to experience 'real life' in all its intensity"—including, importantly, the valorization of art's formalizing techniques as a pathway to "life" (xx). When existence dimmed, the experience of poetry—or of painting or music—promised Paterian moments of gem-like radiance that popped one back into the stream of reality. This anti-modern apologia for the arts as intensifiers of reality-feelings proved immensely influential. It underwrites whole swathes of modernist self-commentary, from William Carlos Williams's attempt to break "the barrier between the reader and his consciousness of immediate contact with the world" (88) to Willa Cather's praise of "the inexplicable presence of the thing not named" over the merely stated detail (5–6). And it entered critical dogma through I. A. Richards and the New Critics, who defined literature as language that *constitutes* an experience, rather than—like so much other language—simply describing one. As Cleanth Brooks and Robert Penn Warren wrote in their once-ubiquitous textbook *Understanding Poetry* (1938; 1976), "the poem is an experience, not a mere source of information" (50). Literature, in this paradigm, doesn't so much report on reality as add to it.

At midcentury, historically minded critics such as Trilling and his colleague Richard Chase tweaked this general affiliation of poetry with heightened reality to recast literary styles as expressive of contrasting metaphysical assumptions. Rather than invoke general notions of the real, they read US fiction to grasp the nature of "Reality in America." Their ways of pursuing this project inevitably took on the political hues of the Cold War: when Trilling, for instance, denounced the "Yankee"

confidence on display in Theodore Dreiser and critic V. L. Parrington—a confidence that reality is essentially knowable and the future essentially plannable—he was taking indirect aim at Stalinism (8). Even the critical premise that aesthetic styles indexed competing realities could be viewed as a methodological transposition of political Manichaeism onto the terrain of literary interpretation. Dreiser and Henry James, to take Trilling’s examples, don’t simply write differently; they model alternative orientations to reality (and one is more freeing than the other). Chase expanded this approach in his vastly influential study, *The American Novel and Its Tradition* (1957), which distinguished US fiction from British fiction through “the way in which they view reality,” ways rooted in divergent social conditions (13). Writers like James Fenimore Cooper, Nathaniel Hawthorne, and Herman Melville gravitated to romance novels, Chase argued, because the conditions of life in a young democracy amid racial and religious conflict produced a reality unamenable to social realism. The strange forms of US fiction, he explained, arose out of the strange conditions of US reality.

So began a 50-year period of treating reality as a problem for US literature. Critics, writers, and theorists alike redirected Chase’s approach—of reading nineteenth-century novels to understand deep historical patterns in American configurations of the real—to face the present, a present that appeared to be getting weirder by the year. New social movements in the US, and global decolonization movements worldwide, exposed the narrow view of so much that had passed as American reality (Chase’s account included) to the point that it became common to frame the political problems of a pluralistic democracy as metaphysical battles over competing worlds.⁷ Add to this the distortions imposed by commercialized mass media and you have the social foundations for a newly reality-panicked literature. Philip Roth sounded the alarm in “Writing American Fiction” (1961), where he lamented that actual public life had become so far-fetched that “the American writer in the middle of the 20th century has his hands full in trying to understand, and then describe, and then make *credible* much of the American reality” (27). Variations on this worry abound in the postwar period. They include Hannah Arendt’s worries about the loss of the common world, Jack Kerouac’s pursuit of vitality in the jazz clubs, Ralph Ellison’s organization of *Invisible Man* (1952) around the dissolution of his narrator’s sense of reality, and, jumping ahead, Don DeLillo’s presentation of 1980s US culture as benumbed by pharmaceuticals, television, and the hyperreality that Jean Baudrillard pitched as an essentially American phenomenon. (The role of Disneyland, in Baudrillard’s widely anthologized account, is “to make us believe that the rest is real, whereas all of Los Angeles and the America that surrounds it are no longer real, but belong to the hyperreal order” [12].)

The examples are so numerous that the once-current shorthand for the era, postmodernism, has been defined as “a crisis in representation: a deeply felt loss of faith in our ability to represent the real” (Bertens qtd. in Heise 965). The writers once understood as central to that period—DeLillo, Thomas Pynchon, John Barth—had divergent preoccupations, but whether they had politics, drugs, information technology, or “lofty post-structuralist” theory in mind, they made the increasing confusion of reality and fiction in the United States their central concern, often in anxious tones.

Trump panic fiction grows out of this longstanding tradition of tugging at the knot that ties imaginative writing to an American social experience thought to be so mediated, medicated, ironized, or theorized that “reality” no longer seems the right word for it.⁸ Yet, by the time Trump announced his candidacy, one of the central threads of this tradition had started to fray. Roth, DeLillo, and Pynchon (like Tom Wolfe, David Foster Wallace, and Jennifer Egan) all believed that fiction could explain US reality, even if they acknowledged that the Trillingian quest to discern the real from the complex muddle of fantasy had gotten headspinningly difficult. In the early years of the twenty-first century, that faith began to waiver. “Our culture is obsessed with real events because we experience hardly any,” David Shields argued in *Reality Hunger* (2010) (82). A familiar sentiment, as we’ve seen, but, where earlier novelists took this sociological situation as a spur for imagination, Shields responded by dismissing novels as unable to quench our metaphysical thirst *by definition*, because fiction writers must bear the “burden of unreality, the nasty fact that *none of this really happened*” (26). The difference between antimodernism circa 1900 and circa 2000 is that, while both involve well-educated white people struggling to feel real, the former looked to imaginative art for the intensity of real life, while the latter denied that fiction can ever leap the confines of the fabricated.

This is Trilling’s American metaphysic, back with a vengeance. As before, the valorization of reality, understood reductively as “what really happened,” undercuts the value of the imagination, leaving novelists in a tight spot. Enter autofiction. Often aligned with the essay form beloved by Shields, the novels of Lerner, Rachel Cusk, Sheila Heti, and Karl Ove Knausgaard all fold the reader’s curiosity about whether the narrated events actually occurred into the aesthetic experience. What’s new about these novels isn’t their mixing of fact and fiction—that move is familiar from the New Journalism, nonfiction novels such as Truman Capote’s *In Cold Blood* (1965), and the memoir boom of the 1990s. What’s new is that they seem so unsure about why they’re doing it, other than to indicate a general exhaustion of the fictional mode of telling truths.⁹ Where Capote and Wolfe used novelistic devices to generate insights into actual happenings, and so kept the line

between fiction and reality relatively bright, and where memoir purports to tell the truth about a writer's life, and so minimizes the mediating work of narrative, autofiction maintains a resolute uncertainty about the role of literary techniques and their relation to the life experience of the author. The blur between reality and fiction stays blurry.

Trump's election, then, brought a century's worth of long-simmering concerns about the slipperiness of American reality and its relation to literary fiction to a boil. In 2017, the same year Andersen tried to pinpoint when Americans lost their grip on reality and Gladstone explained the new "civil war over reality itself" (60), the scholar and poet Kevin Young concluded *Bunk*, his history of the American love of humbug, by drawing a line from the dislocation of political speech from truth in the Sixties (when "reality . . . proved unreal" [432]) to the rallies of "seemingly unreal presidential candidates like Donald Trump" (433). The plain falsity of Trump's fabrications didn't seem to matter—and that cast a dark shadow on fictional utterances in general, especially those that hid their fictionality. From this vantage, the aloof refusal of autofiction to parse fact from fantasy seemed suddenly dangerous. Timothy Bewes certainly wasn't the only critic in these years to realize, aghast, that "Trump and the Republican political establishment were exploiting the same dissolution of the boundary between fiction and fact" prized in contemporary narrative (352).¹⁰ Post-truth politics made not just reality but also fictional attempts to address that reality more troublesome than ever.

The Trump panic novels I'll discuss emerge from this coincidence of political events with trends in literary fiction. They riff on the expectations set by autofiction—particularly about the fuzzy line between art and life—but they deploy these expectations alongside inherited strategies of modernist intensification, Cold War attention to genre, and postmodern reflexivity to test anew the efficacy of fiction in a moment desperate for facts. The result marks both a reckoning with the limits of autofiction and, because that reckoning comes in the person of Donald Trump, a decisive shift in literary figurations of the presidency. If, as Alexander Manshel has written, contemporary novelists gain the frisson of the real by folding contemporary history into their pages, the specific historical circumstances narrated in Trump panic fiction complicate that real-making gesture in generative ways. Unlike Hurricane Katrina or 9/11 (other topics for the "recent historical novel"), Trump's election comes already packaged as an emblem of fiction's prominent place in contemporary political life (Manshel 207–8).¹¹ Incorporating Trump into a narrative doesn't so much "wrest a novel out of the fictional world and into reality" as place the *problem* of reality front and center in the fiction (214). Similarly, Trump's outlandish persona and brazen speeches modify the literary significance of presidential oratory. As McCann argues in his comprehensive study of "the image of the

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redeemer president” in US culture (*Pinnacle* 196), twentieth-century novelists envied the executive’s ability to “embody the national will” through rhetorical performance (18). Authors depicting Trump, however, emphasize the world-making power of fictional speech over the persuasive powers of rhetoric, and they apprehend the affinity between their own work and what’s happening on the presidential Twitter feed in the mode of horrified confusion rather than jealous rivalry. When the reality-bending powers of narrative, image, and rhetoric align with a political figure regarded as both threatening and ridiculous, and when journalists and scholars step forward to explain how this alignment happened and what to do, how do novelists respond? How, in such a charged atmosphere, is fiction practiced and understood?

Trump Panic Fiction

Early in *Homeland Elegies*, Akhtar’s narrator, who shares a name and many biographical details with Akhtar himself, relates how Trump’s candidacy challenged his cherished maxims about art. Like Akhtar, the narrator (I’ll call him Ayad for clarity) earned fame with a Pulitzer-prize winning play in which a US-born Muslim confesses to an unexpected “blush of pride” when the Twin Towers fell. Ever since, Ayad explains, people have asked “how much of me is in it”—that is, they want to know if the play expresses his politics (24). Ayad evades. First, he insists that he had written a play, not an autobiography or political analysis, and “wasn’t that enough?” When that fails, he defends “the particular sort of truth that I believe art is after,” a truth that resides in indirection and metaphor and that sits so close to the unconscious tangle of images that forms our basic orientation to the world that it disintegrates when reduced to a simple “point.” He upholds, in short, a version of Trilling’s insistence that art operates at a crucial remove from the clarities of fact. Then Trump happens. Invoking Trump’s lie about “Muslims celebrating in Jersey City on the day of the attacks,” Ayad worries that his earlier “evasions” were “irresponsible” (25). He still doubts that a “more obvious rendition” of the play’s sentiment could clarify, but he forces himself to try, devoting the rest of the chapter to an essayistic mix of family and political history that moves through Partition, his parents’ immigration from Pakistan to the US, the Afghan-Soviet War, and the War on Terror (26). He tries to explain, in straight talk.

Akhtar’s chapter marks out the essential tension between art and explanation that predominates in Trump panic fiction. Calling Trump the “spiritual muse” of *Homeland Elegies* (“Why”), Akhtar dramatizes how the “terrifying lust for unreality” that enabled Trump’s political rise provoked writers to question the efficacy of art’s “particular sort of truth” (Akhtar 15). And he does so from within a fiction that aspires to

orient readers in a supremely confusing historical moment. The narrator feels an urgent need to act in response to Trump's election; he wants to explain how it happened. Yet, in the course of explaining, he is forced to reflect on the kind of understanding art provides, a reflection given a sharp edge by its proximity to a terrifying example of the political uses of manipulative fabulation. Though *Homeland Elegies* stands out for making this tangle of fact and fiction a principle of organization, all of the novels I'll discuss build these themes into the structure and style of their engagements with the Trump presidency. In the process, they engage readers in trying out and ultimately fine-tuning the meaning of fictions in an era of post-truth.

Kunzru's *Red Pill* depicts the unraveling of the liberal sense of reality associated with the teetering of the neoliberal order. Told retrospectively from election night 2016—a perspective we don't realize until the story catches up to the present in the final chapter—the novel begins as a conventional midlife crisis story laced with teasing hints of an autofictional narrator but gradually transforms, in both scope and genre, into a damning appraisal of liberal notions of art and selfhood worthy of Trilling. The narrator introduces himself through his allegiance to these notions: he is an author, and his books include an analysis of “taste” as “intrinsic to human identity,” a “definitive case for the revolutionary potential of the arts” (abandoned) (11), and a study of the “construction of the self in lyric poetry” that he is supposed to be working on during his fellowship at the fictional Deuter Center in Berlin, where much of the early action occurs (15). But he warns that these beliefs about the value of art and his inner life—beliefs he once took as the very “foundation for things”—now seem dangerously thin (7).

After successive confrontations with avatars of illiberalism, the narrator learns to regard subjective experience as resolutely porous and, for that reason, open to manipulation. Small challenges to his initial views—a neurophilosopher's dismissal of the self as a “folk notion” (Kunzru 44), the Deuter Center's refusal of his claims to privacy, the poetry of Heinrich von Kleist—build to a standalone section that drives the lesson home. Set in East Germany and devoted to an otherwise minor character named Monika, the chapter details how the political manipulation of the sense of reality works. The Stasi infiltrate Monika's life so thoroughly—sending agents to her friend group, rearranging objects on her shelves—that “the texture of her reality” becomes “soft, spongy,” until “she couldn't trust that it would take her weight” (143). This embedded narrative prepares us to follow the dissolution of the narrator's own sense of reality in his subsequent encounter with Anton, an alt-right troll and self-proclaimed “Magus of the North” (184). Anton gets inside the narrator's head, opening fire on the whole battery of liberal certainties, from the “sentimental wish to help . . . nice abstract refugees” (176) to the virtues of tolerance, cosmopolitanism,

and progress (“religion of the liberals,” Anton sneers [165]). He becomes a personification of all that threatens the values that define the narrator’s world. Like a harried social media user determined to shut down the opposition with a well-worded post, the narrator chases Anton around Europe, more and more obsessed with recentering his reality by showing Anton his errors, but he ends up arrested, hospitalized, and sent back to Brooklyn for therapy and medication. He no longer trusts reality to take his weight.

As the narrator loses his grip, the novel veers away from its generic course, setting the stage for election night. The chapters devoted to Anton abandon the initial midlife-crisis realism in favor of an adventure worthy of Chase’s romance-novel tradition, complete with unresolved contradictions and a preoccupation with the nature of Evil. When the narrator returns to Brooklyn, we seem to be back in the comfortably liberal space of the realist novel, only to have the whole generic clash repeated at an election night party. This time it’s the narrator’s wife, a human rights lawyer with a “faith in the democratic process, in the Democratic party, in the essential reasonableness of the world” (Kunzru 75), who is in for a shock; the narrator knows what’s coming. When Trump wins Florida and guest after guest expresses disbelief at what’s happening, the “party turns into the Masque of the Red Death,” and the Gothic darkness that the narrator faced in Berlin comes crashing into Brooklyn (280).

Here’s where the central narrative device of *Red Pill* doubles as an explanation of contemporary politics, tailored for a presumably panicked liberal reader. For Kunzru, Trumpism and liberalism constitute different generic ways of handling reality, and one genre inevitably looks unreal by the conventions of another. In other words, Trumpism, understood as part of the broader breakdown of the late twentieth-century neoliberal consensus, isn’t sheer fiction. It picks up on affects and tendencies that liberalism, because of its generic conventions, simply can’t see. The fact that the novel stages the genre clash *twice* shows how Kunzru wants readers to experience the election night scene with a sense that Trump’s success has been set within an explanatory context. The narrator’s wife might be shocked, but the narrator—and the reader who has followed his story—won’t be, not this time. If “part of the pleasure of recent historical fiction,” according to Manshel, is that it offers “something akin to posttraumatic exposure therapy”—an opportunity to relive the trauma “without the surprise” (231)—*Red Pill* delivers that pleasure through the novel’s air of explanation via genre. After all, what’s the point of all the invocations of dark Romanticism if not to place the Trump era in a longer history, one that brings liberals into touch with realities they’ve ignored? Kunzru offers readers a chance to gain an imaginative perspective on Trump-induced reality panic, not to mock it—it’s serious—nor to encourage tolerance—Anton and his ilk

must be resisted—but to reverse panic’s immobilizing effects. The problem with the isolated self the narrator once cherished is that it is helpless against widespread assaults on the collective sense of reality that constitute the grounds for action. So the novel ends with the family reunited in bed after the election, one final huddle against the “howling and scratching at the window” before, the next morning, they “will have no choice but to let it in” (Kunzru 284).

In *The Topeka School*, Lerner likewise spins a narrative about how we got to 2016, one that repeats *Red Pill*’s mix of confident explanation with a reluctance to get too concrete about how to proceed. But, unlike *Red Pill*, Lerner’s novel stages that reluctance as a consequence of its status as a novel. The novel begins with an almost embarrassingly straightforward layering of plot onto politics. Darren, a spurned, lower-class white boy, sits in police custody in the 1990s after breaking a girl’s jaw with a cue ball at a party. We wonder, why did he do it? By the end of the novel, when the narrator spots Darren wearing a MAGA hat, that narrative curiosity has been overlaid with wider concerns: Why did Darren vote for Trump? Why did *anyone* vote for Trump? What is it about culture that could allow such a thing to happen? Indeed, the narrative perspective, which is set in the winter of Trump’s election but looks back to the protagonist/narrator’s adolescence in the 1990s, invites readers to view the story as explanatory of contemporary US politics. Plot unfolds as explanation—an artistic decision all the more surprising given the celebrated lack of narrative momentum in Lerner’s first two novels.

Where Kunzru invokes the historical roots of contemporary illiberalism, Lerner places Trump within a historical narrative about the degradation of public discourse, including presidential speech. More than any other recent novelist, Lerner reckons with Trump *as a president*, as the latest occupant of a political office long-defined by its oratory, not simply as a reality-TV buffoon. He fits squarely within the symbolic patterns that McCann identifies as shaping the literary imagination of the presidency: a jealous fascination with the executive’s ability to shape the popular will through linguistic performance, linked, almost always, to the rhetoric of sacrifice. This dynamic is right on the surface in Lerner’s *10:04* (2014), when the Lerner-like narrator tells us that he decided to become a writer when he heard Ronald Reagan address the nation after the explosion of the *Challenger*. *The Topeka School* insists that this public-making power of political speech has been misused.

To accomplish this contextualizing work, Lerner recycles passages from his 2012 essay, “Contest of Words,” in which he argues that trends in high-school debate have mirrored the deterioration of public speech since the late 1970s. For instance, the rise of “the spread,” in which contestants overwhelm opponents with an avalanche of discrete

arguments too numerous to refute in the time permitted, matches the inhuman masses of language that stultify because of their sheer volume (think fine print or the internet). As Lerner states, in a sentence repurposed for the novel, “Americans are getting ‘spread’ in their daily lives” (“Contest”; see *Topeka School* 24). Meanwhile, the dumbing down of presidential speech exemplified by Reagan has a double in the creation of a new debate competition, in 1979, focused on moral questions. “The parallel isn’t perfect,” Lerner admits, “but it’s undeniable: the supposedly disinterested policy wonks debate the intricacies of health care or financial regulation in a jargon designed to be inaccessible to the uninitiated while the more presidential speakers test out plainspoken value claims on ‘lay judges,’ ie, civilians” (“Contest”; see *Topeka School* 136–37). Lerner threads these arguments into *The Topeka School*’s representation of protagonist Adam Gordon’s debating successes, framing them as insights Adam would “later” formulate as the adult narrating the book (136).

But given that “Contest of Words” was published the month before Obama’s reelection, Lerner has to show how his analysis still applies in the Trump era. Sometimes, he accomplishes this leap through retrospective glosses on the action, as when we’re told that Adam’s coach would become a “key architect” in a Kansas governorship that acted as “an important model for the Trump administration” (*Topeka School* 143), or when Bob Dole, who poses for a photo with Adam after a big debating win, is described as “the only former presidential candidate to attend the Republican convention in 2016” (27). But most of the work happens in the final chapter, when Darren dons the red cap and Trump’s own words are invoked as the latest expressions of the debasement of public speech and the ongoing violence caused by the “crisis in white masculinity” (127). The essay’s arguments—including its hopeful invocation of the “people’s mic” as evidence of “a public learning slowly how to speak again, in the middle of the spread” (*Topeka School* 282)—give explanatory punch to the narrative events.

Yet a second look at the last chapter muddles this apparent clarity and scrambles the novel’s object of explanation. The chapter is titled “Thematic Apperception” after the psychological tests that present patients with an image and ask them to narrate the events that preceded the scene. Lerner invokes these tests early on: when Adam poses with Dole, the narrative asks, “What are these people in this picture thinking? Feeling? Start by telling me what led up to this scene” (*Topeka School* 27). At this point, readers are likely to see *The Topeka School* as responding to these questions with the same kind of historical, causal explanation offered in “Contest of Words.” After all, the sentences are practically the same. But, by the last chapter, when the image of a Trump-supporting Darren provokes the same set of prompts (“Tell me what led up to this scene” [275]), we’ve learned that the point of

thematic apperception tests is not to investigate what really happened—the images are made up—but to reveal, through the patterns and tendencies of the patient's narration, the unconscious preoccupations of the interpreter. What seemed a call to explain Trump voters, to read Darren as a stand-in for the white Midwesterners thought to have cast the decisive votes, now puts the progressive on the couch. From this vantage, Adam's confident detailing of the "theaters and extremes" of right-wing speech (143) stands less as a straightforward explanation and more as material to be mined for oblique indications of how the "crisis in white masculinity" pervades even Adam's account, which is as full of assertions as a high school debate match (127).

In other words, Trump's election demanded explanation, but Lerner the literary writer places his final trust in poetry, which rides close to the unconscious. Jostling against the novel's political analyses are Lerner's reflections on poetry as a mode of language that operates outside and underneath the logic of either historical causation or discursive argument. Poetry is not alone in this regard: the novel also offers debate, rap battles, and the psychological experiments in language-processing conducted by Adam's father as illustrations of how linguistic practices can reveal a subterranean current of "grammar as pure possibility," a nonsensical matrix within which meaning is made (256). That "abstract" power is always present and available for manipulation. Reagan and Trump tap into it in their speeches. But only poetry, for Lerner, harnesses its utopian potential to refresh language as "the fundamental medium of sociality" ("Contest"; see *Topeka School* 256). As a child, Adam regarded poems as "spells," language that works its magic as "shaped sound unmaking and remaking sense" (*Topeka School* 126). As a narrator, he keeps allegiance with this view by flouting the same conventions of logical sense-making that the narrative at first seems to foreground. Time frames collapse, first- and third-person perspectives blur, fragments from disparate discourses jumble together. These poetic properties complicate the urge to unspool a causal explanation. In the end, we're left with a novel that wants desperately to clarify a vexing moment in US reality but that can't decide if doing so would mean giving up on the distinctive powers of art.

Oyler ostensibly cares little for the sorts of explanations that Kunzru, Lerner, and the larger liberal press produced with such urgency. Her metafictional novel *Fake Accounts* begins—in a chapter titled "Beginning" (other chapters are called "Middle," "Climax," etc)—by anatomizing the litany of worries besieging the narrator's mostly-white, urbanite cohort in the months after Trump's election. "Consensus was the world was ending," the unnamed narrator explains, whether from "environmental catastrophe" or "some combination of nuclear war, the American two-party system, patriarchy, white supremacy, gentrification, globalization, data breaches, and social media." All

of these disasters had been snowballing for some time, but, in the period “between the election of a new president and his holding up a hand to swear to serve the people’s interests,” they commanded fevered attention (5). The narrator, however, holds back. She regards apocalyptic thinking as ethically self-serving (not to mention historically mundane), and she maintains this detachment even when attending the Women’s March in Washington, DC, where she squeezes through the crowds, condescending to the participants. One of her characteristic quips: “[I]t was as if everyone had taken Introduction to Political Philosophy and wanted to impress the hot professor” (97). Through this posture, the narrator strives to position herself apart from the frenzied feel of the Trump panic moment, a cool commentator but one wracked by a constant awareness of the persona she’s performing, right down to her running commentary on the narrative itself (beginning, middle, end).

Even the plot functions as a wry twist on the explanatory impulse in Kunzru and Lerner. Where *Red Pill* and *The Topeka School* build narrative tension out of the urge to explain Trump voters, Oyler’s narrator struggles to understand someone who *pretends* to be a Trump voter. After the opening invocation of Trump panic, the narrator relates her discovery that Felix, her boyfriend, had been running a fake Instagram account that peddled right-wing conspiracy theories. To be clear, she doesn’t believe that he actually *is* a conspiracy theorist. Rather, the revelation is that he has surreptitiously been acting as one online. Much of the ensuing narrative puzzles over what this counterfeiting could mean. What did he think he was doing? Before the narrator can ask him directly, he dies in a bike accident, prompting her to leave for Berlin and conduct her own Felix-like experiments using a semifake profile on a dating website. Or at least she thinks he dies in the accident: in fact the whole thing was faked, another instance of what we learn is Felix’s performance art.

Despite the novel’s ironic commentary on the era’s overheated online politics, Oyler’s focus on Felix’s performances sets *Fake Accounts* squarely within the major concerns of Trump panic fiction. For what the narrator wants to understand, and what the Felix plot centers, is the power of fiction in a newly confusing reality. She updates the reality-panic tradition of Roth, DeLillo, and Baudrillard for the internet age, specifically for social media. The narrator, whom we witness spending hours toggling between tabs, questions how the now “obvious” postmodern points about performativity—that “reality requires some amount of acting, and authenticity requires some acknowledgement of pervasive fakeness”—take on added significance when so much of social life is mediated through platforms organized around self-consciously constructed “profiles” (Oyler 156). What once counted as a radical proposal about the loss of the real now feels

mundane: performance bleeds into reality, even when you don't mean it. You can't be an online conspiracy theorist in scare quotes; the reality-making effects of the fiction are out of your hands as soon as you hit "Post." Felix thinks that, by framing his actions as art, he can exempt himself from this cycle. And the narrator buys into this special privilege of artistic performance enough to feel stymied in her own reaction to Felix's deceptions. When an art website hails his faked death as a "brilliant critique" of the ubiquity of voluntary surveillance (325)—when the framing of the stunt "as a work" builds "a hermeneutic barrier" between Felix and the world—the narrator doesn't feel that she can simply be offended. She has to "think critically through the gesture" (332). She had already been stumped in her attempt to parse what was "real" in their relationship; by hiding under the banner of art, Felix makes the effort well-nigh impossible.

With Felix, then, *Fake Accounts* makes the power of fiction a problem for art, especially in the era of Trump's reckless lies. Oyler echoes the stunned apprehension, voiced earlier by Moss and Bewes, that trends in the novel had somehow converged with trends in politics, and she dusts off the techniques of metafiction to build that confusion into her novel. The title tips her hand, referring both to Felix's Instagram account and the made-up stories of literature. Both involve fictions, but are they the same? Is art, as Felix treats it, simply fiction that refuses to accept responsibility for itself? Oyler implicitly condemns such a view—if only by showing its wounding effects on the narrator—but her metafictional contortions suggest that the only response she can muster is to draw attention to the fiction itself. Indeed, given the narrator's squeamishness about the modes of political action most readily available to her (marching in a pink hat, posting online), this reflexivity might be the closest Oyler gets to a comment on the politics of art. When Trump's Twitter feed becomes the biggest fiction show in town, the best a novelist can do is admit to being implicated.

In *No One Is Talking about This*, Lockwood goes one step further: rather than throw her hands up at the troublesome tangle between Trump and fiction, she leans into the reality-making powers of art celebrated by the modernists. She's the only author I'll discuss who is truly immune to the demand to meet Trumpism with fictionalized explanations. The novel opens around the time of the inauguration, but the problem it foregrounds has nothing to do with the new president's actions or comments, nor does it involve the large-scale structural forces invoked by Oyler's narrator. The "problem," rather, is that Trump is "very funny" (*No One* 4). His halting, bizarre utterances, the narrator worries, contributed to his success on social media and paved his path to the White House. That would be bad enough, but Trump's facility in manipulating the discourse of the internet poses an added complication for the novel's protagonist, who prides herself on having

honed a brand of surrealist humor well-fitted to online success. She's funny, too. Is her style somehow equivalent to his? Does Trump's success cast hers in a lurid light? These are the kinds of questions that kept other writers awake at night in 2017. Lockwood feels the challenge but reacts differently. Rather than explain Trump, she tries to outdo him. "[T]he best you can do with Donald Trump," she wrote in 2022, "is to sound almost as weird as he does" ("Worm"). In *No One*, Lockwood pushes her own weird style to ask how a novel, as a particular kind of fiction, can distinguish itself from the glut of online performance and even, in the best Trilling style, attune readers to reality.

All of this is personal for Lockwood. For starters, she shares her protagonist's almost existential connection to the internet. She first earned fame for her absurdist tweets—especially a series of ironic "sexts"—then for her viral poem "Rape Joke" (2013), which led to her first major publishing deal. Even more, as she explains in *Priestdaddy* (2017), the memoir that established her literary persona, the chatrooms of Web 1.0 provided her with an escape route from the ultraconservative Catholicism of her childhood. If, as she puts it, she was "raised in an alternate reality"—if life under her hypermasculine, right-wing-radio-quoting father effectively meant that her "childhood sky was green"—then the internet, paradoxically, gave her a lifeline to consensual reality (*Priestdaddy* 121). When Trump brought green skies to the national stage in 2016, and did it through irreverent online performances of all things, Lockwood felt provoked. She couldn't *not* write about him.

The plot of *No One* draws on Lockwood's experience of switching between different political and online worlds to guide readers through the ontologically unstable waters of life led increasingly online. We begin, in Part One, with a protagonist recognizable as an exaggerated version of Lockwood herself: funny, in a random and shocking way, and very online. She goes viral with a nonsense tweet ("Can a dog be twins?" [*No One* 22]) and, on the strength of her new notoriety, flies around the globe giving talks on internet culture. All of these events are narrated in a fragmented, frenzied style closely aligned with that of the protagonist. These chapters describe a growing confusion about the location of consciousness (in the person or on the web?) and detail dangerous feedback loops whereby what feels funny online—laughing like a witch, turning everything into a sexualized joke—takes root in reality. "This did not feel like real life exactly," the protagonist reflects, "but nowadays what did?" (14). The effect is exhausting. In Part Two, the protagonist is called home after her sister's unborn baby is diagnosed with a deadly genetic disorder, and the family—composed much like Lockwood's own—huddles together for the baby's birth, short life, and death. The urgency of these months grounds the protagonist, who learns that "[t]here is still a real life to be lived, there are still

real things to be done” (69). But it also challenges her: “If *all she was was funny*, and *none of this was funny*, where did that leave her?” (125). Does getting real mean letting go of the weird humor?

We learn a lot about Lockwood’s notion of literature, and about how it distinguishes her response to Trump, by recognizing that the jokes don’t stop at Part One. They run all the way to the end, even infusing what should be the most sentimental moment of the story. At the baby’s deathbed, with all the family gathered in the NICU—when everything is so charged with meaning that “[t]here was nothing trivial left in the room”—the protagonist’s phone rests on the blanket, playing Enya’s “Orinoco Flow” on repeat (187). Despite first impressions, Lockwood has not set up a clumsy contrast between an ersatz reality online and an authentic reality IRL. How could she when all she has is her internet-adjacent style? Rather, she takes this style and weds it to a modernist project of using literature to quicken a vivid feeling of reality—not to sort reality from appearance but to make its own sense of the real. And, like the ideal of a modernist text, everything in *No One* belongs together; nothing is trivial because everything, including all of the “real life” elements that mark the book as autofiction, has been transformed through Lockwood’s overactive metaphorical imagination. Even the words for the novel’s most central themes are specific to Lockwood: the internet is not the internet but “the portal,” and Trump is “the dictator.” All the novel’s concerns about reality, including its juxtaposition of two styles of experience in Parts 1 and 2, are thus met through a literary technique that ratchets up the feeling of reality by weaving a dense texture of images and repeated phrases. Like Virginia Woolf and William Carlos Williams, whom she invokes alongside Gertrude Stein and James Joyce, Lockwood uses literature to intensify an awareness of the present moment, to impart a feeling of the *this* that no one is talking about, a *this* that, as a nondiscursive experience, perhaps no one *can* talk about, except through art.¹²

In short, then, literature’s distance from “real life,” its reliance on figurative language and a far more complicated mode of reference than everyday speech, is a virtue for Lockwood, no matter what Trump is up to. Like Lerner, she recognizes an affinity between the irrational force of poetic language and the manipulations of post-Rove Republican rhetoric, but, instead of reflecting on that power, she puts it to work. There are drawbacks to this approach: Lockwood’s metaphorical transposition of national politics onto her ideologically divided but still-loving family simplifies the challenge of Trumpism to the point of no longer addressing it. From a different perspective, however, Lockwood’s novel is well-tuned to the contemporary politics of US reality, because who still thinks that consensus comes in the public sorting of fiction from fact? The more pertinent task is learning to distinguish the conditions and

affordances of different realities, and that is just what Lockwood attempts.

Reality Panic as Literary Principle: *Homeland Elegies*

Akhtar's *Homeland Elegies* folds in all the attitudes and perplexities that we've surveyed so far, combining them into a kind of *ur*-Trump panic novel. Like *Red Pill*, it's a novel about dropping the "liberal humanist illusion" and confronting the "darker truths" about American life (Akhtar 248). And like *The Topeka School*, it incorporates large chunks of essayistic explanation about Trumpism, even as it sets them alongside dense patterns of imagery and allegorically loaded scenes worthy of *No One* and *Fake Accounts*. Like all these writers, Akhtar worries over the perilous condition of American reality and fiction's place within it, but he goes further than any of them in weaving these literary concerns of the Trump era into the narrative fabric of his novel. The consequent hall-of-mirrors quality of *Homeland Elegies*—in which explanations transform into art and fictions blend with reality—captures the paradoxes of imagination in a post-truth reality and, in the end, offers a revealingly *sotto voce* defense of literary thinking.

The plot makes the muddle of fact and fiction explicit: in lieu of traditional narrative action, Akhtar breaks his book into essayistic chapters that mix memoir, history, and political analysis to stage the narrator's efforts to grasp the significance of Trump's election. Narrative momentum comes in the quest to understand—explicitly so, without the indirect trappings of a Darren, Felix, or Anton. The opening chapter, titled "On the Anniversary of Trump's First Year in Office," focuses the big inquiry into "the American Self" proposed in the novel's "Overture" around the narrator Ayad's family, starting with this puzzling fact: his father Sikander, a Pakistani heart specialist who moved to the United States as a young man, voted for Trump. Even more, he felt a personal connection to the man, based on a stint in the 1990s when Trump was his patient. Over several trips to New York, where Trump paid for his dinners, suits, and prostitutes, Sikander fits his optimistic idea of American opportunity into Trump's tawdry mold. Ayad thus wagers that the story of Sikander's "enthralment with candidate Trump" can explain "something no one understands" (Akhtar 14): it can "show, and, in the process, through this unlikeliest of American Muslim lenses, . . . reveal the full extent of the terrifying lust for unreality that has engulfed us all" (14-15).

Akhtar's plot prompts a question that infuses the voice and style of *Homeland Elegies*: If the goal is to understand Trump's election, what kind of writing can do the trick? Art or explanation? Akhtar builds this quandary into the very conceit of a novel written in the style of an

essayistic memoir. As mentioned above, the narrator shares a name and crucial biographical details with Akhtar, so, when *Homeland Elegies* claims to reveal the meaning of America by telling the truth about Ayad's immigrant family, it inevitably courts the confusion between reality and fiction characteristic of autofiction. We can't help wondering if what we're reading is real. In this way, Akhtar has explained, the novel creates a literary analogue for "the decay of [Americans'] relationship with reality" (A. Schwartz). But just as the mask of memoir creates an ontological confusion comparable to the cognitive difficulties of the Trump era, so too do the novel's essayistic digressions pose the problem of art's ability to provide a perspective on reality decay. On the one hand, these digressions—into, for instance, US wars in Afghanistan or antitrust legislation in the 1980s—carry explanatory force: they are meant to help the reader understand the contemporary US where Akhtar actually lives. On the other, they appear within a fictional frame and, through the omnivorism of heteroglossia, become elements of a novel. Are explanations that are part of artworks effective as explanations or as art? How does *Homeland Elegies* itself want to be read?

Akhtar muddies the water even more by including extensive explanations of Ayad's artistic process and by overlaying his scenes with symbolic significance. He details Ayad's practice of taking notes on his experience, mining memories and dreams for vivid images to use in his writing. As a result, major events in *Homeland Elegies* are narrated twice: first, in the chronological mode of explanation, then with an eye to "the complex, often contradictory alchemy at work in translating experience into art" (Akhtar 25). Ayad may feel compelled to tell his story straight, but, as an artist, he "trust[s] the mess" (243), the tangle of scene and image that body forth the "primal perception of being" housed in the unconscious (102). He embraces what in Kunzru is the realm of romance and in Lerner "pure grammar," the arena of associative and visceral thinking in which Lockwood labors. And this explicitly poetic approach seeps from Ayad's explicit descriptions of his writing process into the seemingly direct stories he tells. Even as some chapters issue in confident morals (see the address to "we" Muslims in chapter III or the lessons about banking in chapter VII), others approach the plot's central questions obliquely, through scenes pregnant with meaning. For instance, when Ayad's car breaks down in Scranton and the racist local mechanics—backdropped by a "NEVER FORGET" 9/11 poster (114)—scam him, forcing him to take out credit card loans, it's impossible to read the scene straight. Such moments present not facts but fictions, and they aim at communicating the "vital, vivid stuff" of the unconscious (102). We know because Ayad has explained this aspect of his art at length.

The easy upshot of this resolute confusion is that US reality requires both the analytic and artistic views to be understood. What Ayad calls his father's "American story" (Akhtar 249) has a factual component, best grasped through the material histories that shape Islamophobia and debt-driven economics, and an element of fantasy, evident in his "enthralment" with Trump and communicated through the fictionalized story of his life (14). *Homeland Elegies* hammers this duality home by delivering the same message through analysis and art, as when Ayad receives an identical lesson about American greed from an erudite friend *and* through watching *It's a Wonderful Life*. In the "Coda," Akhtar invokes the seminar room as a model for how these two models might interact. Ayad has been invited for a public conversation by his former teacher Mary Moroni, whose lectures on US literature prompted Ayad's questions about "the American Self" in the overture. On campus, he finds the national predicament in miniature. Mary's students "spent so much of their time in class—when they weren't on their phones—wondering what was real that it was hard to arrive at a discussion of anything substantial," he notes. They felt bamboozled, and rightly so, for higher education had devolved into a mere "marketplace," like the rest of the public sphere under neoliberalism, leaving them with "no basis for trusting themselves," no stable sense of reality (338). Mary meets this challenge by "teaching them cognitive basics: how to recognize what was worth paying attention to; how to suffer through boredom; how to discern rhetoric from reality, discomfort from defense" (339). She reorients them. How? By teaching the nineteenth-century American canon: Walt Whitman, Herman Melville, Ralph Waldo Emerson, Henry David Thoreau. She combines historical knowledge with aesthetic responsiveness to open students to the ways artworks become elements in explanations of their present—a triumph, it would seem, for team Trilling.

Yet, as satisfying and, in many ways, as right as this solution is, you don't have to press hard to find cracks. The final pages stage two instances of Mary and Ayad disagreeing about "what part (if any) an artist could play in helping to shape the world anew" (342). In both cases, first in a seminar on Whitman's *Democratic Vistas*, then in their public conversation, Mary is the lone voice of hope. Ayad remains "dour" on the topic (342). As a respected teacher and formative influence on the narrator, Mary is an obvious source of wisdom. Yet, by off-loading the novel's optimism onto a member of an older generation, Ayad hedges its force. Mary, indeed, is too good to be true. When she's not in the classroom, she's in her vegetable garden, singing the virtues of giving up her smartphone: "Small price to pay for my brain" (339). If only it were that easy! (Just ask Lockwood or Oyler.) Even Mary's critical canon has something fishy about it—namely that, with the exception of *Moby-Dick* (1851), that most essayistic of novels, it

excludes fiction in favor of direct cultural commentary: *Democratic Vistas*, yes; Hawthorne, no. When these points are added to Ayad's repeated doubts about the political function of art, we are plunged back into the paradoxes of a novel that harbors deep doubts about whether its fictional tools can accomplish its stated aims. But then again—I've said that this novel is a hall of mirrors—the effectiveness with which Akhtar involves us in puzzling through the meaning of his form counts, in itself, as an endorsement of the "particular sort of truth" arrived at through aesthetic experience. In the old Laurentian saw invoked by Ayad, "Never trust the artist. Trust the tale" (25).

The confusion, once again, is the point. Akhtar's novel stages the anxious confrontation between political clarity and aesthetic messiness that informs all the Trump panic fiction surveyed so far. And in its final, guarded defense of art—denied by the teller but performed by the tale—it calls out for a literary fiction more confident in its oblique relation to plain facts.

Conclusion

As I write, Trump has captured the Republican nomination for 2024, even as he has been convicted of election fraud. Trumpism is far from over. If anything, the division of the United States into ontological enclaves has deepened since 2016. The COVID-19 pandemic and the increasing urgency of climate change have politicized science and its claims to reality to an unprecedented degree. ("In this house," the lawn sign reads, "we believe science is real.") In the lead-up to the 2020 election, no less a venue than the cover of *TIME* pictured "American reality" as a ripped, flag-motif face mask. Soon after, the spectacle of costumed goons storming the Capitol presented a truly surreal and disturbing illustration of the alt-right web exploding into the political sanctum. American reality is more troubled than ever.

Fiction, however, has moved on. The novels I've analyzed represent a micromoment in US literary history, one marked primarily by a shared set of questions and moods: the "panic" part of Trump panic fiction. All five of them respond to the particular form of liberal anxiety that characterized the years after the election; they participate in it, portray it, criticize it, or, more usually, do a mix of all three. They belong to a moment in contemporary US life when political explanation doubled as liberal self-help—as we've seen, even when the address is "to America" (as the subtitle of Akhtar's overture has it), the intended audience of Trump panic fiction is always the disappointed, befuddled, and worked-up masses who voted Democrat. If Trump wins in 2024, the mood will be different. It may still shock, but not in the same way. It won't provoke the same tropes of ontological panic, if only because, like the reader at the end of *Red Pill*, we've seen it before.

What will be the legacy of this brief moment in US fiction? I doubt that these novels will be remembered for their explanations of Trump. Rather, what stands out about these narratives is how they all, with different degrees of confidence and convolution, reassert art's intimate connection with the irrational, nonconscious elements of psychological and social life. That they do so might seem banal were these assertions not reached through direct combat with the flood tide of rationalism that pervaded the liberal response to Trump. Remember Andersen's plea for those in "reality-based America" (91) to reject the relativism of the sixties and embrace reason as our best weapon against "alternative realities" (78). That's the view that these novelists had to work against, even as they sometimes shared it. In the process, they pried literary fiction away from the terrain of autofiction into more pressing examinations of the role and function of artistic fabrications. In the course of that project, they also reimagined Trilling's aesthetic critique of liberalism for a new era. Where Trilling worried that a flat-footed notion of the real encouraged technocratic planning of the kind associated with totalitarianism, the authors I've discussed recognize that twenty-first-century threats to liberalism come through an active manipulation of the sense of reality, not through simplistic metaphysics. Such manipulation doesn't oppose art and the mysteries of the aesthetic so much as coopt them to nefarious ends. But that coopting makes understanding the powers of fictions—how they are built and sustained, how they draw on and feed into various realities—all the more urgent. A bigger dose of reason won't dispel the hold of Trumpism. These novels remind us of that difficult truth in ways that only fiction can.¹³

Notes

1. This article excerpts passages from Andersen's *New York Times* bestselling book, *Fantasyland: How America Went Haywire: A 500-Year History* (2017).
2. See, for example, Catherine Gallagher, "The Rise of Fictionality," *The Novel*, vol.1 (2006), pp. 336-63, for a classic account of fictionality as defined precisely against the binary of truth and lies.
3. For a roundup, see Emily Temple, "22 Famous Writers on Donald Trump: 'Come on America. Focus,'" in the 4 Nov. 2016 issue of *LitHub* online; see also Andrew Altschul and Mark Slouka, "An Open Letter to the American People: Writers Speak Out against Trump" in the 24 May 2016 online issue.
4. According to editor Erik Hane, the published material is only the tip of the iceberg. See his lament in *LitHub* ("The Year in Trump Novel Pitches: An Agent's Lament," 30 Mar. 2018) that in 2017 the slush piles of publishing houses began overflowing with "overt representations of Trump."
5. See Sarah Wasserman, "Critical Darlings, Critical Dogs: Joseph O'Neill and What Contemporary Criticism Doesn't Want," *American Literary History*, vol. 34,

no. 2, 2022, pp. 561–85, for an account of the critical blind spots produced by autofiction’s high esteem.

6. For a classic dismissal of Trilling’s views of art as mired in Cold War ideology, see Donald E. Pease, “New Americanists: Revisionist Interventions into the Canon,” *boundary 2*, vol. 17, no. 1, 1990, pp. 1–37. For critical efforts to bring under-acknowledged features of that aesthetic back into view, see Amanda Anderson, *Bleak Liberalism* (2016), and David Russell, *Tact: Aesthetic Liberalism and the Essay Form in Nineteenth-Century Britain* (2017).

7. The New Americanists of the 1980s and 1990s brought this ontologization of politics into the reading of US literature, most obviously in Amy Kaplan’s influential critique of Trilling and Chase in *The Social Construction of American Realism* (1988). Rejecting the romance thesis and its positing of “an inadequate relation between American fiction and American society” (1), Kaplan revived the neglected field of American literary realism by framing it as a technique for managing the ontological clash of politics. Realism, she argued, “both articulates and combats the growing sense of unreality at the heart of middle-class life” generated by “mass culture” and the “fragmented and competing social realities” produced by class conflicts (9). Note that Kaplan invokes realities, in the plural; see also Robert Sklar, “American Studies and the Realities of America,” *American Quarterly*, vol. 22, no. 2, 1970, pp. 597–605.

8. I have omitted an important literary historical variation on this theme. Toni Morrison, Leslie Marmon Silko, Maxine Hong Kingston, and other writers of what Mark McGurl calls “high cultural pluralism” (*The Program Era: Postwar Fiction and the Rise of Creative Writing* [2009] [32]) displayed just as keen of a concern with the fissures of American reality, but with an important difference. They worried less about the ability of imaginative narrative to capture an unmarked “reality” and more about the ability of readers to grasp the range of social experiences that lie beyond their ken. As such, they doubled down on fiction, adopting elements of myth, folktale, and the supernatural to conjure unrecognized social worlds. Their recognition that, for nonwhite Americans, the dislocations between official reality and experienced reality had long been glaring led them to look for new conditions of existential coherence, without the panicked tones of those for whom reality had only just become a problem.

9. For a litany of examples of this exhaustion, see Anna Kornbluh, *Immediacy; or, The Style of Too Late Capitalism* (2023), pp. 65–74.

10. For a happier reading of autofiction’s relation to contemporary politics, see Marjorie Worthington, “Fiction in the ‘Post-Truth’ Era: The Ironic Effects of Autofiction,” *Critique: Studies in Contemporary Fiction*, vol. 58, no. 5, 2017, pp. 471–83.

11. As Stephen Hock notes in the introduction to *Trump Fiction* (2020), a collection of critical essays on literary depictions of Trump, “self-aggrandizement, blurring if not demolishing the line between fact and fiction, has been a hallmark of the Trump impresario” (2).

12. For a more thorough analysis of the novel’s links to modernism, see Michelle Taylor’s review, “No One is Talking about This,” *The Point*, vol. 24, 2021, pp. 187–

97. For an account of Woolf's use of deictics like *this*, see Dora Zhang, *Strange Likeness: Description and the Modernist Novel* (2020).

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