THOMAS PYNCHON'S *BLEEDING EDGE* AND CORMAC MCCARTHY'S *THE ROAD* AS DYSTOPIAN 9/11 FICTION

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Introduction

Post-9/11 literature attests to the cultural impact of the terrorist attacks, and offers fictional stories attempting to work through the cultural trauma 9/11 caused and suggest a way to move forward. Post-9/11 literature has become an important topic of academic debate within literary studies. Opening the debate in his 2009 article "Open Doors, Closed Minds", Richard Gray argues that events such as the 9/11 attacks "are a defining element in our contemporary structure of feeling and they cannot help but impact profoundly on American writing". Such events, he continues, "[generate] stories that cannot, yet must, be told", due to their cultural and traumatic impact (129). As Gray points out, much early 9/11 fiction tells stories about families and relationships that were directly or indirectly affected by the trauma of 9/11. Gray criticizes these novels for telling familiar narratives about marital conflict and repeating traditional literary tropes. In this thesis, I will discuss two novels that use the dystopian genre to critically reflect on the *political* and *social* response to 9/11: Thomas Pynchon's *Bleeding Edge* (2013) and Cormac McCarthy's *The Road* (2006). These novels depict a United States that has been, or is going to be, devastated by a catastrophe that is seemingly, or in Pynchon's case explicitly, inspired by 9/11 and the political and social response to it. I will examine how and with what effect these novels use dystopian themes and imagery to respond to the way American society is changed socially and politically because of political efforts to unify it and security measures that were taken in response to 9/11, and critically reflect on the political and social consequences of the attacks.

Bleeding Edge and *The Road* make use of dystopian imagery to represent the United States during and after 9/11. They depict an exaggerated reality, and present a hyper-realistic depiction of 9/11 and its aftermath, emphasizing possible outcomes and consequences. According to Frank Serafini and James Blasingame, the dystopian novel usually describes a

"world [that] has gone radically astray at some point in the future, as authors extrapolate on current social, political, or economic trends" (147). This means that dystopian fiction is influenced and fueled by historical events or conditions, usually in the author's present. However, simultaneously dystopian literature tries to make a critical intervention. The dystopian 9/11 novels under discussion, as we will see, dramatize the potentially catastrophic consequences of the political and cultural responses to 9/11, such as "the [military] invasion of Afghanistan and Iraq, the curtailment of civil liberties" in the name of homeland security, and xenophobia (Crownshaw 760).

The attacks on the World Trade Center were watched by the majority of the American people, arguably the whole world, through live television and endless replays of the images of the second plane and the collapsing towers in the following days and weeks, which generated a collective feeling of terror. Gray, quoting Jenny Edkins, claims that "9/11 was the moment when 'trauma collided with the time of the state, the time of capitalism, the time of routine,' producing a 'curious unknown time, a time with no end in sight'" (*After the Fall* 8). Gray connects this to "Freud's distinction between grief and melancholia, which can be explained as the difference between [mourning] and an 'open wound'", which is a literal translation of the Greek "trauma" (8). Following Cathy Caruth, Gray argues that trauma can be defined as the response to "an event the full horror of which is not and cannot be assimilated or experienced fully at the time but only belatedly" ("Open Doors" 129). This implies that such an event is not directly and immediately witnessed, but rather partially, afterwards, or not at all.

The terrorist attacks of 9/11 were a culmination of the rising tension between the United States and the Islamic Middle East. Proving to the world that the United States could be vulnerable, the terrorist attacks signified to some that the U.S. "was no longer secure and, to that extent, no longer home" for the American people (Gray, *After the Fall* 5). The events

were more than an attack, according to Habermas, as "'they also destroyed an icon [the Twin Towers] in the household imagery of the American nation'" (qtd. in Gray, *After the Fall* 6). Habermas thus contends that it was not merely a physical attack on the United States, but that the terrorist attack also damaged the immaterial belief in the United States. This continued to challenge the notion of the U.S. as an invincible, utopian land of the free, following earlier attacks such as the 1993 bombing of the World Trade Center.

Furthermore, the events of 9/11 created a new "Other", a faceless, abstract adversary of the United States. The creation of an Other, as Kristian Versluys points out, "is an act of exclusion, whereby, through prejudice, ignorance, or both, one refuses to treat someone else fully as an individual" (150). During the Cold War, America's enemy was the Soviet Union, which was believed to pose the largest threat to United States' sovereignty and to global peace and democracy. After the collapse of the Soviet Union and especially after 9/11, Islam came to be seen as the Other, which was only reinforced by the religious and ethnic background of the terrorists involved. In his influential article "Clash of Civilizations?", Samuel Huntington suggests that "[w]ith the end of the Cold War, international politics moves out of its Western phase, and its centerpiece becomes the interaction between the West and Non-Western civilizations" (23). He argues that "the peoples and governments of non-Western civilizations […] join the West as movers and shapers of history", and in doing so become their equal, as opposed to being subjects (23). With this, Huntington suggests that it is not a clash of ideologies, faiths, or states, but a clash of cultures. He furthermore proposes, quoting M.J. Akbar, that "[t]he West's 'next confrontation' […] 'is definitely going to come from the Muslim world'" (32). This means that the othering of Muslims had already begun by the end of the Cold War, and was well underway in the 1990s. 9/11 was therefore not a starting point of the perception of the Muslim as the Other, but rather a result of a process that had been developing for over a decade.

The two post-9/11 novels I will discuss mobilize dystopian imagery and rhetorical strategies to critically interrogate constructions of the Other before and after 9/11, and to warn against the consequences of how the United States deals with social and political issues present in American society around 9/11, such as collective trauma, consumerism and egocentrism. The first chapter of this thesis will outline the theoretical and scholarly framework for my analysis. I will first introduce the main concepts of trauma theory as proposed by Mieke Bal, to be followed by a brief overview of the scholarly debate on 9/11, by among others Gray, Michael Rothberg, Elizabeth Anker, Marc Redfield and Lucy Bond. The second and third chapters will discuss the use of dystopian imagery and rhetorical strategies in Cormac McCarthy's *The Road* and Thomas Pynchon's *Bleeding Edge,* respectively. Through a close reading of both these novels in the light of trauma theory, and the genre of dystopian fiction, I will investigate how these novels address the ways in which the collective trauma caused by 9/11 is used politically and socially and what could be the consequences of doing so. Furthermore, I will examine how the encounter with the Other is represented and how these novels provide a warning against developments before and after 9/11.

Chapter 1: Theoretical Framework

In this chapter, I will introduce trauma theory and connect it to American literature after 9/11 and dystopian literature in general, in order to provide a theoretical framework for my claim that dystopian conventions and rhetorical strategies in post-9/11 literature offer a productive way of addressing the traumas caused by 9/11.

As trauma theory became one of the dominant fields within literary studies in the 1990s, it is not surprising that the cultural response to the 9/11 attacks was widely conceptualized in terms of (collective) trauma, both in the media and later in literature, film and literary studies. Aviva Briefer and Sam J. Miller argue that 9/11 "scramble[d] the relationship between the real and the imaginary", as "[t]he cinematic resonance of the destruction of the towers provides a bleak version of life imitating art" (5-6). Seeing the destruction of the World Trade Center seemed to be as if watching a movie about the destruction of the United States. As Anne Keniston and Jeanne Quinn point out, "the tension between the symbolic suggestiveness of the WTC and the fact of its destruction is central to many literary texts written in the wake of 9/11" (1). They contend that the attack on the World Trade Center was seen as much more symbolic than that on the Pentagon and the crash of the last hijacked plane (1). New York City, and the Two Towers of the World Trade Center as some of its most iconic landmarks, are an embodiment of American power, and wealth, while the World Trade Center specifically stood for global economic power. Watching these attacks, live or in replay, caused both a psychological and a communal trauma. Bert Olivier argues trauma should be understood as "something which disrupts one's life so severely that it is difficult, if not impossible, to 'pull oneself together' any time soon after the traumatic, traumatizing event" (33). Trauma is a response to an experience that is so shocking or mentally scarring that it cannot be experienced immediately, but only through,

for example, nightmares, flashbacks and hallucinations. By translating trauma into a narrative, by "verbaliz[ing] and communicat[ing]" it, one can "assimilate" trauma (Gray *After the Fall* 24). Furthermore, as Mieke Bal points out, when turned into narrative, "traumatic memories [can be] legitimized and narratively integrated in order to lose their hold over the subject who suffered the traumatizing event in the past" (viii).

Bal argues that "the concept of traumatic memory is in fact a misnomer, if not a contradiction," because "[traumatic memories] cannot become narratives, either because the traumatizing events are mechanically reenacted as drama rather than synthetically narrated by the memorizing agent […] or because they remain 'outside' the subject" (viii). These traumatic memories return as what Bal calls "traumatic recall": nightmares, flashbacks, and so on (viii). Moreover, "[i]n contrast to narrative memory, which is a social construction, traumatic memory is inflexible and invariable"; it is not open for reinterpretation and reconstruction. It therefore has "no social component" as it does not "is not addressed to anybody" (Bal x). However, Bal points out, "[t]he need for integration of the traumatizing events of the past […] confirms the understanding of cultural memory," because it "requires incorporation of the past," and it requires "a second person to act as confirming witness," which implies that a trauma is tied to a cultural context (x). Therefore, to be able to integrate such a trauma, "the traumatic event of the past must be made 'narratable'" (x). In other words, traumatic memory needs to be narrativized in such a way so that it can be shared. As Martina Kopf points out, "[n]arrating a trauma […] constitutes a highly complex process marked by the paradoxical relationships between language, memory, and trauma", because "[t]he desire to tell [the trauma] is opposed by the absence of language and meaning the traumatic incident originally provokes" (43). Verbalizing trauma is difficult, but necessary to work through trauma.

Marc Redfield argues that the 9/11 attacks have not only had a psychological trauma effect on individual Americans, but also on the culture (56). Although the attacks "were not of a society-threatening scale" as for example a war or natural disaster would be, "and the literal damage they did to the military and commercial orders symbolized by the Pentagon and the World Trade Center was miniscule" (56), they were more than local and physical in nature. Redfield argues that "it is of course as symbolic acts of violence that they claim culturally traumatic status" (56). The implications of the attacks as well as the breach of Americans' sense of security caused an even deeper wound than the material damage and the loss of lives they caused. This does not imply that the physical effects should be downplayed, but the collective mental and psychological impact of the 9/11 attacks was even greater, causing a trauma that could be felt communally, or as Redfield calls it, a cultural trauma. According to Redfield, this has created the need for "effective public grieving," which took the form of "hyperbolic commemorative efforts," such as "a constant remembering and re-memorializing of September 11 in publications and media events, political sloganeering, security controls, and so forth" (56). What this implies is that rather than a personal trauma that can or cannot be verbalized in, for example, literature and film, the events of 9/11 form a collective trauma that demands public and communal closure. Sonia Baelo-Allué argues, on the other hand, that 9/11 should not merely be seen as a cultural trauma, but as a combination of cultural and individual psychological trauma (64). The difference, Baelo-Allué contends, is that "psychic trauma is a wound on the mind, [while] cultural trauma is a wound on group consciousness as a whole" (64). Finally, E. Ann Kaplan argues that "[p]eople require structures within which often silently endured traumatic experiences can be 'spoken' or imagined," so that "people can begin the task of working through mourning" (135). This means that, particularly for cultural trauma, art in general and literature in particular offer

ways to address, narrativize and thus work through trauma, both on a collective and an individual level.

Whether or not American literature succeeded in providing productive ways to work through the trauma of 9/11, is a topic of debate. Gray contends that American literature after 9/11 was faced with the "struggle to cope with something that seemed to be, quite literally, beyond words" (15). According to Gray, American writers began to doubt "their trade and its tools" in the face of the extreme otherness of the terrorist attacks (*After the Fall* 16), feeling unable to properly and adequately address the events and their traumatic impact. A pitfall for many American writers of 9/11 fiction, according to Gray, is that, faced with this dilemma, they chose to rely "on a familiar romance pattern" in their novels (30). Focusing on novels such as Don DeLillo's *Falling Man* (2007) and Claire Messud's *The Emperor's Children* (2006), among others, Gray argues the writers did not create new rhetorical strategies or a new discourse, as one might expect after such an impactful event, but resorted to old tropes and themes (30). Therefore, their work seemed to be a retelling of older narratives against a new background. As a result, "[t]he crisis is, in every word, domesticated" (30). Instead of ensuring that personal narratives of trauma and experience addressed public issues, "all life here is personal; cataclysmic public events are measured purely and simply in terms of their impact on the emotional entanglements of their protagonists" (30). In Gray's view, this regression to familiar patterns did not offer a way to overcome trauma or to articulate the communal experience; instead, it would merely cause the communal feeling of pain and loss to be translated into a traditional narrative, suggesting mobilization of trauma rather than narrativization. The 9/11 events therefore were capitalized on as a way of retelling old stories in a new context.

Instead, Gray contends, a different kind of literature should be developed, one that investigates the interplay between the known and the unknowable, the domestic and the

foreign worlds ("Open Doors" 138). Gray suggests it would be interesting to learn how a writer who is both internal and external to American culture would depict 9/11 and its aftermath, as this might show a new and perhaps enlightening perspective on the events. Immigrant literature, Gray argues, could provide a more productive framework for analyzing 9/11, as it "reconfigure[s] language, the themes and tropes of American writing, in terms that go way beyond bipolar, biracial models" (140), and therefore is perhaps more effective in dealing with the "radical otherness" represented by the terrorist attacks. This would furthermore give voice to the marginalized writers.

In response to Gray's article, Rothberg proposes that writers shift the focus "away from the homeland" and instead turn to "a centrifugal literature of extraterritoriality" ("Diagnosing" 158). Doing so, Rothberg contends, "entails mapping America's extraterritorial expansion; exploring the epistemology, phenomenology, and impact of America's global reach; and revealing the cracks in its necessarily incomplete hegemony" (158). Rothberg argues that Gray's proposal that 9/11 fiction should deal with immigrant experience is insufficient, because it still explores 9/11 literature from within the United States' borders, and is thus vulnerable to the same pitfalls as existing 9/11 literature. According to Rothberg, "[t]he most difficult thing for citizens of the US empire to grasp is not the internal difference of their motley multiculture, but the prosthetic reach of that empire into other worlds" (153). Rothberg calls for a literature that takes into account the global impact of 9/11 as well. In Rothberg's view, 9/11 fiction should explore the consequences of the United States' foreign policies for people in other countries, as it is important to "imagine how US citizenship looks and feels beyond the boundaries of the nation-state, both for Americans and for others", so that 9/11 is addressed from different perspectives and in all its complexity (158). Gray and Rothberg thus argue that, for 9/11 to be narrativized productively, both the immigrant and international perspectives should be engaged to explore

terrorism's traumatic impact not only in the United States, but in other parts of the world as well.

Significantly, neither Gray nor Rothberg explicitly suggests that Muslim American writers could offer an alternative perspective on 9/11, though Rothberg briefly mentions Pakistani British writer Mohsin Hamid's 9/11 novel *The Reluctant Fundamentalist* (2007) (158). Carol N. Fadda-Conrey points out that "[t]he stark realization faced by many Arab-Americans post-9/11 was that their heretofore relative anonymity and even invisibility […] was being replaced by blanket representations that often portrayed them in a derogatory light" (59). Invigorated by the 'us versus them' rhetoric of their government, many Americans targeted "Arab-Americans and Muslim-Americans" and accused them of "terrorism and fanaticism" (59). As a response, Arab-American and Muslims-American writers tended to "[underscore their] double national allegiances, not favoring one over the other, but aiming to bridge the differences that are constantly at play in separating the Arab from the American" (60). They would thus emphasize their allegiance to both parties, attempting to seek reconciliation. However, apart from Hamid, whose novel has received much critical attention, these voices were largely unheard in the critical debate.

In a special issue of the *Journal of American Studies* commemorating the tenth anniversary of the attacks, Lucy Bond provides a completely different take than Gray and Rothberg. Bond argues that 9/11 has become "a crisis of representation: a crisis engendered less by the traumatic nature of the event itself than by the way in which the attacks have recurrently been illustrated as defying comprehension" (734). Bond argues that perhaps the "discourses of trauma" which have been used to narrativize 9/11 "may be said to mystify, rather than elucidate, the conditions of both analysis and experience" (734). Thus the narratives that attempted to portray 9/11 as a way of overcoming trauma in fact *mobilized* trauma and in doing so distorted both how 9/11 was experienced and how it should be

examined (755). Bond furthermore emphasizes that memorializing 9/11 is not merely to understand and overcome trauma, but that there are "very real political and economic interests" at stake as well (755). She contends that "preexisting paradigms were imposed upon the attacks as the optimum method of interpretation without adequate time for reflection," which ensured that writers and scholars found trauma in every aspect of 9/11 "because they simply looked for it everywhere" (755). She concludes that the scope of both literature and literary research had been too much focused on trauma, which ensured that trauma became the only possible way to reflect on 9/11. With her contribution to the debate, Bond attempts to disrupt this line of thinking, so that 9/11 can be explored from a less personal and individual perspective, which will lead to new insights (756).

The foregrounding of trauma that Bond criticizes in both 9/11 fiction and literary criticism can also be found in the political rhetoric surrounding 9/11. Elizabeth Anker points out that the political rhetoric after the attacks was highly melodramatic. Melodrama, she explains, "portrays dramatic events through moral polarities of good and evil, overwhelmed victims, heightened affects of pain and suffering, grand gestures, astonishing feats of heroism, and the redemption of virtue" (2). The United States government capitalized on the 9/11 attacks to create a more cohesive unity of the American people by at the same time deliberately creating a new Other. In its rhetorical response to the attack, the government attempted to make sure that "the triumph of freedom and virtue were foreordained"; moreover, as the United States was depicted as an innocent victim, revenge was justified, maybe even required (2). As Anker points out, this melodramatic political rhetoric "confers virtue upon innocent people who unjustly suffer from dominating power, and this is part of the genre's cultural work; in this deployment of melodrama, all Americans suffer from the attack, and thus all share the nation's virtue" (5). The unity and identity of the American people were thus emphasized by ensuring that the attacks were experienced as personal

attacks on the American people. Furthermore, the use of this political rhetoric, as Kristian Versluys argues, made sure that the 9/11 attacks "are read as apocalyptic: there is a before and after, and that sharp demarcation also involves separating those who are 'with us' from those who are 'against us'" (150). The United States government deliberately engaged in an attempt, in the words of Richard Kearny, "to divide the world into good and evil" (qtd. in Versluys 150). By creating a communal victimhood, they emphasized, and, in Anker's view, even strategically mobilized the traumatic nature of 9/11.

Dystopian Literature After 9/11

However, 9/11 also inspired the revival of dystopian fiction. The dystopian 9/11 novel, which I will focus on in this thesis, uses dystopian imagery and rhetoric to address trauma. I will first outline the main features of the dystopian genre. The genre takes its name from the philosophical notion of dystopia, which the Oxford English Dictionary defines as "[a]n imaginary place or condition in which everything is as bad as possible" ("Dystopia"). The word is often placed in contrast with utopia, sometimes used as its antonym. Utopia, a term "coined by Thomas More in 1516, as a pun between 'ou topos', or no place, and 'eu topos', or good place" (Milner 827), describes a perfect society which, as its name suggests, is both a place of true goodness and a place that is nowhere; a utopia does not exist because it is unachievable. However, utopia can also be understood as being nowhere in particular and therefore potentially anywhere; it merely needs to be realized for it to come into existence. Dystopia, on the other hand, comes "from the Greek 'dis topos', or bad place" and is a concept that was coined in the nineteenth century (Milner 827). As Andrew Milner points out, "the whole point of eutopia or dystopia is to acquire some positive or negative leverage on the present", and this ensures they retain a certain level of realism (830). These narratives

thus have to convey a recognizable depiction of reality so they can critically respond to it. Moreover, as Rachel Wilkinson points out, dystopian literature "exaggerates our modern context so that we can challenge it. [This p]rovides for its readers a glimpse into a horrifying but fully possible future" (22). To be able to depict a possible future and respond to its potential, a dystopian narrative must emphasize, and often magnify, the current reality. Melissa Ames contends that dystopian works act as "a sort of emotional security blanket for individuals existing in an unstable post-9/11 world" (7). Dystopian narratives thus offer both an escape from reality and a critical response to it.

The use of dystopian or utopian narratives to respond to an influential historical event such as the 9/11 attacks potentially yields new perspectives, as these narratives offer alternative ways to address the political and social consequences of historical events. The traumatic impact of 9/11, for example, can thus be emphasized and made explicit in dystopian narratives, in order for it to be examined from various perspectives. Dystopian narratives would therefore not explore trauma within American society from an external perspective, as Gray and Rothberg propose, but place the trauma outside of the context of American society. Consequently, these narratives can address whether this trauma is real or perhaps (partially) imposed, as Bond proposes. Furthermore, the consequences of the cultural trauma that dystopian fiction explores can offer a way to work through this trauma. As Wilkinson puts it, "[d]ystopian visions can help [people] deconstruct their contexts," and thus create an opportunity to analyze the 9/11 attacks by looking at its separate aspects (25).

According to Lederer, "[m]odeling dystopia also evokes more than an occasional insight into man and society" (1133). The dystopian narratives can provide insight into the present and the conditions that have led to present-day problems. Lederer suggests that analyzing what dystopia might entail or embody for the 9/11 attacks and their aftermath provides the possibility of examining the context in which these attacks could happen as well

(1135). This would place the attacks in a larger philosophical and political context, which potentially leads to a better understanding of the attacks, and perhaps enables readers to work through the cultural trauma.

Therefore, the use of dystopian narratives and imagery may yield a more complex analysis of the impact of the 9/11 attacks. Dystopian narratives using 9/11 as a dystopian setting or constructing a dystopian Other can help deconstruct and reconstruct their real-life counterparts in a way that may provoke critical reflection on the events and their context. By magnifying reality, dystopian narratives emphasize those elements of social or political reality that evoke conflict and trauma, and suggest possible solutions. Analyzing 9/11 through dystopian narratives ensures an exploration that can be both domestic and international, as it proposes an alternate reality in which any potential outcome is possible. A dystopian narrative can thus make trauma explicit by, for example, externalizing the trauma by projecting it onto a landscape, such as post-apocalyptic dystopian settings, or portraying disfigured or wounded characters. Furthermore, dystopian narratives lend themselves to addressing the issues regarding the loss of a national identity and the construction of a new one, for example by deconstructing binary oppositions of good and evil or right and wrong by creating metaphorical entities, societies or races which represent the different voices within a certain society.

The two novels that I will discuss in this thesis both provide a setting and context which make it possible to address 9/11 and its trauma in different, perhaps more productive ways than 9/11 fiction that deals with 9/11 in a realistic manner. *The Road* is set in a post-apocalyptic landscape, arguably the United States, that has been destroyed by an unnamed and unidentified incident. McCarthy creates a dystopian context in which humans have nearly gone extinct, live merely to survive, are constantly in a state of mutual hostility and share deadly, invincible enemies: cold and hunger. Inger-Anne Søfting points out that *The Road* is

"playing with opposites as its discourse contains elements of utopia as well as dystopia," which are represented by the "inner space" and "the psychological inner life," and the "external space" and "the natural physical world," respectively (705).

On the other hand, *Bleeding Edge* provides a more recognizable world, which has been altered in more subtle ways. Set in New York around the 9/11 attacks, the novel depicts an altered American society that is secretly ruled by the Internet, and those who are in charge of it. In the novel, Pynchon makes extensive use of allusions to actual businesses, websites and technological innovations. However, he creates a context that is an extreme exaggeration of real life New York, portraying an exaggerated society based on American ideals the novel deems dangerous. As Hanjo Berressem points out, "Pynchon sets up a realistic and an allegorical level" of American society in which the Americans "have embraced the fully profane logic of banks and the adherent notion of the maximisation of profit […]. The fully profane economy has itself become a religion" (445).

As dystopian texts, both novels have almost endless options in altering reality, because they do not have to adhere to standard norms that define the societies we live in. In contrast to non-dystopian novels, *Bleeding Edge* and *The Road* are capable of emphasizing aspects of society and its collective trauma by projecting them not only on the plot, but on the entire world in which this plot is set. Therefore, these dystopian novels offer a productive way of addressing 9/11, as they, in their exaggeration and metaphorical depictions, can be strikingly explicit. The following chapters will provide a close analysis of the novels' use of dystopian imagery and rhetorical strategies.

Chapter 2: Reading McCarthy's *The Road* as a Dystopian 9/11 Novel

Cormac McCarthy's critically acclaimed novel *The Road* tells the story of the journey of a father and a son, referred to as the Man and the Boy, through a devastated and evidently post-apocalyptic landscape in search of safety and peace. This chapter will give a close analysis of *The Road* as a dystopian novel and in the context of trauma theory, and focuses on its setting and themes such as the Other, fire, silence and memory. In my analysis, I will argue that the novel critically interrogates post-9/11 constructions of the Other, using the dystopian genre to warn against the consequences of how the United States deals with the collective trauma caused by 9/11 as well as with the social and political context of the attacks.

The dystopian character of the novel invites a reading in the context of 9/11, although it suggests other contexts as well. Since the novel was published only five years after the event, the significantly undefined disaster that has caused the devastation of the landscape immediately recalls the impact of the attacks. The setting that *The Road* depicts is a post-apocalyptic dystopia, and provides the landscape for a tale of destruction and horror, but perhaps also hope. McCarthy's writing in the novel is descriptive, but often minimalistic. He strays from many grammatical and punctuation rules, instead focusing on telling the story, which is narrated in the third person through the eyes of the unnamed man and, at the end, his son, and comprised of fragmented descriptions of the man and his son's experiences as they walk in a desolated world and its barren landscape. The undefined time and place in which the novel is set evoke a range of global crises in the post-9/11 world besides post-911/ political and cultural polarization, such as ecological problems and social issues such as consumerism and egocentrism, and their consequences. In the novel, McCarthy does not condemn and judge, but describes and suggests, leaving it to his readers to interpret the novel and imagine which real-life issues it might represent.

If we read *The Road* as depicting the aftermath of a nuclear or an ecological disaster, the narrative can be interpreted as an allegory. The impact of a nuclear attack could be interpreted as an allegorical description of the devastation the United States had to face as a result of the military interventions after 9/11, causing perhaps a new world war, whereas the ecological reading could refer to the events as a consequence of the destructiveness of the consumer society in the United States. As Lydia Cooper points out, after 9/11 Americans felt a desire to "reconstruct the world," which could only be done "by deconstructing it [which] seems to reflect the fundamental fear underlying the novel, namely, the fear that human beings may in fact not deserve to survive" (221).

Although the setting of *The Road* remains unnamed, it can effortlessly be interpreted as a post-apocalyptic, dystopian depiction of the United States. The setting's lack of definition links it to the utopian notion of "no place", which quickly transforms into the dystopian idea of the "bad place" due to the devastated, barren landscape depicted in the novel. On the first page of the novel, the setting is described: "Nights dark beyond darkness and the days more gray each one than what had gone before. Like the onset of some cold glaucoma dimming away the world" (3). McCarthy here presents an image of black and gray, a landscape devoid of all color or light. This can also be seen through the repeated use of words such as "gray", "pale", "dark", "black" and "blank" throughout the novel. The landscape does not offer the characters anything but ash and the faded remnants of a former civilization. The narrator's description of the landscape, which is focalized through the Man for almost the entire novel, evokes images of death and destruction: "Glass floats covered with a gray crust. The bones of seabirds. At the tide line a woven mat of weeds and the ribs of fishes in their millions stretching along the shore as far as eye could see like an isocline of death. One vast salt sepulcher. Senseless. Senseless" (222). The imagery of the sepulcher, bones and millions of dead fish conjures visions of a destroyed world where death reigns.

The landscape is senseless, which implies both the futility of its destruction and the impossibility to perceive it, as the world has become a vision of death and decay.

Richard Gray describes the setting as "a landscape of nightmare", depicting "a map of [the] sense of dread, generated in the Western consciousness by 9/11 and its aftermath, that is precise in both its geographical and mental coordinates because it refuses the easy option of the immediate" ("Open Doors" 138). Gray interprets the setting as symbolic for the traumatic impact of 9/11 on the Western state of mind. Furthermore, McCarthy's withholding the name of a specific location may point to the unspeakability proposed by trauma theorists.

Through this landscape, the man and his son travel south following what they call "the road", seeking safety and warmth (McCarthy 4). Throughout the novel, both the man and the son, as well as most of the other characters, remain unnamed. Even though we tend to identify with the man and the boy, as they act as the novel's main focalizers, their identity is never fully revealed. All that is known is that they are father and son, have lost their wife and mother, and are among the few survivors left in their part of the world. Their journey is narrated almost like a travelogue, and describes their hardships and encounters in and with the landscape. The way the focalizers interact with and describe the landscape corresponds with the dystopian imagery throughout the novel, initially by establishing a sense of doom and destruction, evoking a feeling of hopelessness, and ultimately by the glimmering of a potential end to the dystopia. This potential hope is signified by the Man's attempt to comfort the Boy, and in his perception of the Boy. He repeatedly suggests to the Boy, when the Boy wants to give in to despair, that "ever is a long time," and that there is still a chance to change the future (24). Furthermore, the Man tries to console the Boy by convincing him that his nightmares are in fact a sign that he is still alive and fighting. Nightmares, according to the Man, signify that there is still hope (189).

In his brief discussion of McCarthy's novel in *After The Fall*, Gray suggests that "[t]he structure of the narrative […] clearly repeats the rhythm of the journey, a series of short stages towards something like a destination" (36). The journey, Gray argues, is "one of the iconic images of American literature", but contrary to the conventional use, this time the narrative forms "a route and a landscape on the point of vanishing" (36). This then "gives the sense that beyond the indeterminacy and vacancy of the immediate surrounds […], there is only more vacancy, more empty space" (36). As Gray points out, the novel uses the universal trope of the journey, but turns it into a journey which leads to nowhere, signifying its futility as well as its hopelessness.

The setting of the novel is depicted in dystopian images of bleakness, ashes and darkness. The descriptions of the landscape throughout the novel exemplify the lack of vitality and clarity. Instead, they indicate the extent to which the entire world is destroyed and stuck in an on-going process of dying and decaying. This evokes the concept of dystopia in the sense that it depicts a landscape in which life is unsustainable. The setting signifies the connection between the imminent extinction of humanity and the decay of the landscape. If the setting is interpreted as the United States after a major world-changing event, the context of the novel's publication date quickly conjures the idea of the setting as a symbol of the United States after 9/11. In the dark United States that McCarthy presents in *The Road*, the nation has lost its power and wealth. Stores have been emptied, leaving only empty carts as a reminder of the consumer society that built them and that reflected the wealth of American society (22-23). Furthermore, many houses, towns and cities are destroyed and burned, signifying the loss of home and family upon which American values are built (102). Major cities and their skyscrapers, representing American power, have been replaced by ashes and destruction (272), evoking the image of a fallen nation. The land is dying, and only the Boy represents a potential solution to save the world.

The landscape furthermore acts as a character as well, portraying a symbolical Other constructed from the perspective of the Man and the Boy. The world in which the Man and the Boy must survive is one of the most obvious antagonists in the novel. Although there are several characters who challenge the Boy and the Man's safety, nothing does this as directly as their environment. This is already signified at the opening of the novel when the reason for their journey becomes clear: "They were moving south. There'd be no surviving another winter here" (McCarthy 4). As Inger-Anne Søfting points out, in *The Road,* the main characters "are as truly 'the good guys' as the landscape surrounding them is 'the bad land'. The forceful contrast between the stark brutality of the setting and the tenderness of the emotions between the two protagonists is the novel's most striking feature" (705).

This portrayal of 'good' versus 'bad' recurs throughout the novel, and is signified by the attitude of the Man and the Boy. For example, whenever the Man and the Boy are forced to act violently, they do so in self-defense, as is seen when they encounter a group of men on the road with a truck. When one of the men finds them and he indicates that the men will kill them and perhaps even eat them, the Man and the Boy try to escape, and eventually kill their attacker when no other options are left (66). Furthermore, the Man and the Boy are among the only characters who still hold on to a familiar sense of humanity. For example, when the Boy and the Man escape a house that belongs to a group of cannibals who capture people and then eat them (110), the Boy asks if they themselves would ever eat anybody, which the Man negates (128). This implies that the Man and the Boy see cannibalism as the ultimate act of inhumanity. The Boy then explicitly askes the Man if they are the "good guys", reestablishing the binary opposition, and furthermore confirming that there still is good left in humanity (129).

Søfting argues that in *The Road*, the landscape "is not nature but nothingness, represented by the omnipresent ashes, that encroaches on civilized society as well as nature"

(707). This nothingness becomes clear early in the novel, when it is described that the Man "lay listening to the water drip in the woods. Bedrock, this. The cold and silence. The ashes of the late world carried on the bleak and temporal winds to and fro in the void" (McCarthy 11). Søfting points out that in the novel "human beings are up against something much larger than themselves, something that neither modern science nor technological innovations can remedy, something that, in a moment, has caused humanity to degenerate into a primitive state" (708). Humanity faces a force that it cannot comprehend, let alone defeat. This evokes similarities to 9/11, as xenophobia and egocentrism, arguably two elements of survival instinct, became more visible and widespread in American society after the attacks (Eisenberg and Silver 475). The structure of *The Road* implies that the world is a victim that carries the consequences of human abuse and behavior, and in its turn has become a lethal enemy to humanity. In this way, McCarthy seems to criticize not only the othering of other cultures, but humankind's failure to focus on empathy and solidarity as well, which could make of the world a sustainable place.

The interplay between the devastated landscape and humanity's greed is signified by the shopping cart in which the Man and his son keep their belongings throughout the novel. The shopping cart is one of the only objects that works as a reminder and anchor of familiarity to present-day American society, emphasizing the dominion of consumerism in it. As Susan Mizruchi puts it, the shopping cart is "a reminder of the self-destructive consumer world that has realized its ambitions", and is used in the novel to echo "antithetically a lost abundance". Through the use of the shopping cart as a metonym for the former consumer society, the reader is confronted with "shocking reminders of a civilization paying dearly for its greed and violence" (Mizruchi 123). Therefore, the shopping cart acts as a reflection upon what is eventually left if consumerism is carried to an extreme, which in this case could be read as an ecological disaster. Additionally, it is striking to notice the difficulties that the

shopping cart causes to the Man and the Boy as they navigate the landscape. Often, the Man and the Boy have to leave the shopping cart behind to find shelter, or they have to abandon it altogether to remain safe or because the road's condition is too bad, but ultimately they always retrieve it or find a similar cart (McCarthy 100). This signifies how deep consumerism is rooted within the Man and the Boy, as it makes their lives easier, but also that it cannot be upheld if survival is to be achieved.

The struggle of navigating the shopping cart through the landscape may signify that consumerism has ultimately taken its toll on the landscape, which then turns against mankind. The constant rain and cold endanger the Man and the Boy's journey, as there is hardly any shelter left. The weather's danger can be seen when the Man and the Boy's possessions are stolen and they frantically try to get them back. When they overtake the thief, they take all of his possessions along with their own, leaving him with nothing. Even though the Man tries to justify their abandoning the thief, the Boy speaks the truth they both know: "But we did kill him" (260). The Boy's reply suggests his understanding of the social responsibility that the two of them have and that by leaving the thief without any form of clothing or shelter the Man and the Boy are directly responsible for his probable death. The binary opposition between good and bad is here questioned, as this passage implies the Man and the Boy are not fully good either. In their attempt to be the "good guys", the Man and the Boy represent moral boundaries, but ultimately they are not completely good either, which implies that perhaps there is no pure goodness left in humanity at all, if it was ever there in the first place.

The exposure to the harsh environment ultimately leads to the father's death. Throughout the novel, the Man's constant coughing makes it clear that he is ill. The omnipresent ash is obviously one of the main causes of his illness. At the end of the novel, the Man says, "It's alright. This has been a long time coming. Now it's here" (278), signifying that all along he knew he would die. This is seen as well, for example, when the

Man tells himself: “Every day is a lie, he said. But you are dying. That is not a lie”, right after he had tasted blood after coughing (238). The Man has known the consequences of the environment upon his health for a time, without telling his son. He wants the Boy to hold on to hope, and therefore he does not want to show his son the environment’s effect after long-term exposure. If the Boy had known his father would die, he might have lost hope and died as well.

Even though it is the environment that causes continual and ever-present hardship, the two main characters encounter other antagonists throughout the novel, such as a thief, a group of cannibals, and a couple who fires at them with a bow. None of the characters are named, and none of the antagonists are described in detail as a threat to the Man and the Boy, with the exception of the unnamed group of men who have resorted to cannibalism and who are referred to repeatedly but never directly encountered.

It is striking that a group of cannibals are the other major antagonists in the novel besides the landscape, and that the way they are defined in binary opposition to the Man and the Boy signifies that they are constructed as an Other as well. On the one hand, the cannibals seem to exhibit the animalistic behavior human beings resort to in time of absolute need, displaying the most terrible behavior that is easily connected to a dystopian society. The group of cannibals perhaps see their behavior as the only way to survive the situation; it is a necessity. On the other hand, it can be read as a metaphor for humanity’s behavior in general as well. The existence of a group of cannibals reinforces the dystopian character of the novel through their exaggerated representation of mankind’s last resort and ultimate antagonism. The group’s cannibalism stands in opposition to the two main characters who do kill the thief to ensure their own survival but would not go so far as to eat his body to survive, and furthermore signifies the consequence of mankind’s present-day behavior if it is not altered. As Brian Donnelly points out, “[c]annibalism as a metaphor for consumption […] articulates

a relationship between consumption and the horrific, uncanny and abject" (71). It can be argued that humanity is consuming itself because of the way it is behaving. Consumer society, embodied by the group of cannibals, is not merely destroying the landscape by obliterating it, but it is furthermore consuming mankind itself, which acts in self-interest as opposed to altruism. Cannibalism in *The Road*, thus, is not just a last resort for humanity to survive, but suggests that human behavior is self-consuming and self-destructive.

The one thing that the Man and the Boy can use to arm themselves against the dystopian world around them, besides shelter, is fire. Fire is a major symbol in the novel, though an ambiguous one. Fire symbolizes three different stages throughout the novel. First, it represents destruction, for example, as ashes, or the aftermath of fire, recur abundantly as a remembrance of the destruction of a former civilization. Secondly, it symbolizes a sense of hope, creation, and protection. The Man and the Boy see themselves as "carrying the fire," which signifies their belief in the goodness and hope they represent (McCarthy 83). And lastly, it signifies the preservation of humanity. As Emily Lane points out, "carrying the fire" is a "phrase [the Man and the Boy] use to renew their faith in humanity and sustain their vitality on the road" (15). Glenna M. Andrade argues that it is as if the Man and the Boy carry the idea "of faith, of love, and hope" (6). This is most obvious when the Boy asks his father if they themselves are "the good guys," and then if they are "carrying the fire," suggesting that carrying the fire defines them as the good guys (McCarthy 129). Carrying the fire, then, is what makes the Man and the Boy different from everyone else and what really defines them as protagonists not only in the novel, but in the world created by McCarthy. The Man and the Boy embody the hope that humanity can change and ensure a better future.

Towards the end of the novel, the Man increasingly encourages the Boy that he should carry the fire alone, as the Man cannot always be there to help and protect him. He

tries to convince the Boy that he has to be strong and carry on, because he embodies hope for a better future:

> You have to carry the fire […].
>
> Is it real? The fire?
>
> Yes it is.
>
> Where is it? I don't know where it is.
>
> Yes you do. It's inside you. It was always there. I can see it (McCarthy 279)

This is a crucial point in the novel, as here the Man explicitly states that the fire, and therefore hope, is real and that it is inside of the Boy. The fact that the Man sees the Boy as the carrier of the fire suggests that he believes the Boy is blessed and embodies the hope of salvation. However, perhaps even more importantly, the Man explicitly points out that the fire is *inside* the Boy and that it always has been there, which entails that the hope for mankind to survive is internal, and possibly represented by more people than the Boy alone.

At the end of the novel, the Man and the Boy talk about a young boy they had encountered on their journey. The Boy had wanted to take the little boy with them, but the Man forbade him to do so. However, in the conversation between the Man and the Boy, the lines between the Boy and the little boy become blurred:

> But who will find him if he's lost? Who will find the little boy?
>
> Goodness will find the little boy. It always has. It will again. (McCarthy 281)

The Man dies at the end of this passage, but in this the passage the little boy has become one with the Boy, signifying the Man's belief that the Boy can create a better future for himself, and with that perhaps for all of mankind. Following this interpretation, the Boy and the little boy they encountered are one and the same, but they perhaps portray a different state of mind. Whereas the little boy they encountered represents hopelessness, helplessness and despair, the Man's son portrays the opposite; he offers to help the boy to ensure that he can

share in the better future that awaits them, and to ensure their safety. Therefore, by forcing his son to leave the little boy behind, the Man allegorically ensures that his son has left his own hopelessness and helplessness behind, allowing him to grow and move towards a better future.

Moreover, the symbol of fire seems to represent the presence of hope within the external world as well, which is already introduced early in the novel:

> Everything was alight. As if the lost sun were returning at last. The snow orange and quivering. A forest fire was making its way along the tinderbox ridges above them, flaring and shimmering against the overcast like northern lights. Cold as it was he stood there a long time. The color of it moved something in him long forgotten. Make a list. Recite a litany. Remember. (McCarthy 31)

The fire is giving the Man a sense of belonging and reawakens memories and emotions in him that seemed to be long lost. Fire, therefore, seems to have the ability to spark hope.

Additionally, the presence or absence of fire seems to symbolize the preservation of humanity. When the Man and the Boy invite a stranger to join them at their fire, the stranger says, “I’ve not seen a fire in a long time, that’s all. I live like an animal” (172), exemplifying that the fire is a kind of luxury, present to those who are able to live as humans, as opposed to those who have to live like animals. Furthermore, their ability to create fire seems to work as a sort of protection. The Man tells the Boy that they “have to have a fire” (71) in order to survive, both for its warmth and its light, as well as to preserve their humanity.

In *The Road*, fire is used as a symbol for survival, hope and humanity. Without fire, they cannot survive, because the cold will overtake them and the dark will blind them. Furthermore, the Boy embodies the fire and with that embodies hope for a better future and an end to the dystopia. The Boy, in this sense, carries the solution to resolve the dystopian

character of the world, and with that he is answer to the potential consequences of the post-9/11 society as explored by McCarthy.

To emphasize this dystopian character of the world, McCarthy often alludes to characteristics of trauma, as defined by trauma theory, such as silence and loss of memory. Gray argues that McCarthy's strategy is "to tell [the story] aslant, to approach it by circuitous means, almost by stealth", because it cannot be addressed directly ("Open Doors" 136). Consequently, "McCarthy both says and remains silent. The unnamable remains unnamed, except in its human consequences. McCarthy translates trauma into a narrative memory that captures, with the exactitude and elusiveness of symbolism, what it might be like to live after the fall" (137). Therefore, McCarthy makes trauma explicit and implicit at the same time, depicting a destroyed wasteland both as a new world and an allegory of the post-9/11 world.

When the narrator describes the landscape as the Man and the Boy reach the sea, the description immediately evokes a sense of silence caused by trauma: "Perhaps in the world's destruction it would be possible at last to see how it was made. Oceans, mountains. The ponderous counterspectacle of things ceasing to be. The sweeping waste, hydroptic and coldly secular. The silence" (McCarthy 274). The narrator here gives a description of experiencing the end of the world, emphasizing the sublime, natural elements. The narrator suggests that witnessing the end of the world leaves nothing but silence: it cannot be conveyed; it is unspeakable. This signifies that the Man and the Boy inhabit the landscape of trauma, upon which the trauma of 9/11 is projected.

Silence induced by trauma is seen explicitly in the Boy. Throughout the novel, the Man and the Boy often try to talk about the things they experience, with the Boy frequently asking if the two of them are dying or starving (128). However, when their situation begins to deteriorate even more, the Boy talks less and less. At one point, the Boy stops talking about his dreams to his father: "One night the boy woke from a dream and would not tell him what

it was", other than that he is really scared and would no longer accept that everything was "all right" (189). The Man tries to console the Boy, telling him: "When your dreams are of some world that never was or of some world that never will be and you are happy again then you will have given up. Do you understand? And you cant give up. I wont let you" (189). Here, the Man tells the Boy that if he still has nightmares that depict the cruelty of the world they are in, then he knows he is still fighting against it. Nightmares, other than being a symptom of trauma, should convince the Boy that he is still strong enough to carry on. This suggests that trauma could in fact be helpful to reshape a better future, and the novel therefore seems to imply that the trauma of 9/11 should not be ignored, mobilized or forgotten, but in fact it should help bring about a new, more empathic American society.

At times, the Boy seems to be aware of his trauma, suggesting that he knows he will have to carry his experiences with him. When the Man explains to the Boy why he was so harsh towards the thief, he tells the boy: "You're not the one who has to worry about everything", to which the Boy eventually replies, "Yes, I am […]. I am the one" (259), signifying the weight of the experiences that are bearing down upon the Boy. Ultimately, the Boy refuses to speak of his emotions altogether, declaring that he does not know how to speak of anything that is happy, as it is not "like real life" (268). The Boy then says: "I dont want to talk about anything", after which he confesses that both reality and his dreams are terrible anyway, as it is "always about something bad happening", and he cannot talk about that (269-70). The Boy eventually leaves his dead father, promising to talk to him "every day" (286). While this signifies the Boy's attempt to speak, it also symbolizes his inability to do so: his father is dead and he cannot talk to him, only imaginatively, and therefore the silence cannot be broken and his trauma cannot be spoken.

Trauma, in the novel, often takes the form of flashbacks, focalized through the Man, signifying what Mieke Bal's trauma theory calls traumatic recall (viii). Often, these

flashbacks contain bits and pieces of information that the reader can then put together later. In one of the flashbacks, the Man recalls his wife leaving him and their son (55-58). The narrative does not fully show why and when she leaves, but later in this scene it becomes clear that the Man and his wife had discussed the "pros and cons of self destruction", signifying that they considered collective suicide as an option and it is suggested she left them to die (58). In another flashback, immediately after this scene, we learn of the birth of the Boy. In this flashback, the Man describes humanity as "[a] creation perfectly evolved to meet its own end", which hardly surprised his wife (59). This description of mankind signifies that it is not sustainable as it is and it is on its way to destroy itself. Greed, consumerism and individualism are fatally harming mankind and slowly causing its end, and human beings are letting it happen. The Man's wife seemingly understood this and decided that death was the only escape.

Trauma often clashes with memory. As Richard Crownshaw points out, "McCarthy's post-apocalyptic, post-traumatic landscape is suffused with memory" (774). Memory is invariably tied to the world around the Boy and the Man, as the landscape is often contrasted with the Man's earlier memories from before the devastation. The Man's descriptions often recall instances in which the place had looked different, which is most obvious when they encounter the Man's childhood home (McCarthy 26-27). As Ben De Bruyn points out, the man's memories are not always to be trusted, as "the father's memories of the past world are exposed to the same slow decay as the buildings that surround him". His memories therefore become blurry and unreliable. According to De Bruyn, "[i]ndividual memory and personal identity" are both at stake here, as well as the world itself, as these all slowly fade into nothingness (782). This loss of personal identity is also signified by the lack of names throughout the novel, which could even be contributed to loss of memory as well: the names

are long forgotten, and coming up with new names would do nothing but confirm their initial loss.

Crownshaw argues that the theme of memory recurs in many different forms, such as "the father's fears over the precariousness of memory […], his ambivalence towards acts of remembrance […], the progressive amnesia brought on by the disappearance of things to which memory refers [… and] the struggle against amnesia" (774). As Stefan Skrimshire points out, in *The Road* "memory persists as a curse as much as a blessing," because it can both do harm and give hope (12) For example, the Man says, after the two encounter a corpse: "Just remember that the things you put in your head are there forever […] You forget what you want to remember and remember what you want to forget" (McCarthy 12). The Man's description of memory can be understood as traumatic recall.

According to Laura Godfrey, the flashbacks ensure that the father becomes what "Pierre Nora calls a 'memory individual'". Memory individuals are individuals who make sure that the past remains in place, as they carry with themselves the memories that would otherwise be forgotten (Godfrey 165). In this sense, the Man and the flashbacks are thus a remnant of the past that can only be remembered by verbalizing the Man's memories. It is even more striking, then, that these memories slowly decay and alter, emphasizing the effect of his trauma: "He thought each memory recalled must do some violence to its origin. As in a party game. Say the word and pass it on. So be sparing. What you alter in the remembering has yet a reality, known or not" (131). This passage signifies the importance of remembering for the Man, but also that he fears that the past itself will recede into oblivion if it is remembered within a different context. Remembering recontextualizes memories, according to the Man, and therefore memories slowly become unreliable, emphasizing that memory is colored by trauma.

The flashbacks contribute to the narrative's fragmented structure. The novel is made up of short sections which are almost all are shorter than three pages, suggesting that the entire narrative is a scrambled recollection of the Man and the Boy's journey on the road. This ties in with the notion of trauma theory in the sense that it is a fractured depiction of an experience that is impossible to convey as a connected narrative. *The Road,* therefore, is a fragmented narrative, perhaps even a trauma narrative, which reflects the Man and the Boy's attempt to work through their trauma, and on a different level helps the reader to work through the cultural trauma of 9/11.

With *The Road*, McCarthy offers his readers a way to look at the United States post-9/11 in a way that suggests American society helped bring on the attacks, and the consequences human behavior might have if mankind continues behaving the way it does. Cooper points at Jean Baudrillard, who "suggests that images of terror in literature after 9/11, worlds burning and turning to ash, are evidence of the American public's fear that the pursuit of political, global ascendency is in itself an act of violence whose backlash will be both staggering in its magnitude and inexorable in its execution" (222). Therefore, by creating a dystopian world that symbolizes the object of this fear and at the same time suggesting how we can avoid that this dystopia becomes a reality, McCarthy reflects on the United States post-9/11 society by deconstructing it and enlarging those elements that he deems threatening.

As Crownshaw points out, "[t]o read [*The Road*'s] post-apocalyptic dystopian narrative as an allegory of 9/11 implies the traumatic" (772). He argues that *The Road*'s narrative "is a desperate attempt to resurrect the world in redemptive symbolic terms […] belied by the meaninglessness of the world and its disintegration, the collapse of language, and the death of signification" (772). McCarthy attempts to redefine the good within American society, but at the same time presents it as hopeless as it is damaging to humanity

and the world. While McCarthy looks for redemption through the Man and the Boy, his descriptions of the landscape suggest that perhaps there is no redemption, which leaves it up to the reader to decide if redemption is achievable at all.

The reflection upon the American society in *The Road* offers not much hope for the future, as McCarthy does not end the novel on the positive note of the Boy finding other people and remembering his father. Instead, it is left ambiguous whether the people the boy has found are in fact "good guys" as well, or merely "bad guys" in disguise (282). Furthermore, the novel ends with a description of a "brook trout in the streams in the mountains" (287), offering an ending that does not involve mankind at all: "On their backs were vermiculate patterns that were maps of the world in its becoming. Maps and mazes. Of a thing which could not be put back. Not be made right again. In the deep glens where they lived all things were older than man and they hummed of mystery" (287). This may signify that if mankind does not change, nature will move on without humanity, as it did before humanity existed, and will long after.

While McCarthy attempts to address the social and political unrest in American society after 9/11 and work through the trauma of the events by deconstructing American society, the implication of this might be even more grim than his novel illustrates; perhaps 9/11 signifies that there is no redemption for mankind and that, ultimately, for the world to move on, mankind is redundant, maybe even detrimental for this process. *The Road* entertains the possibility that the world will move on, and mankind will not be part of it if it will not change. And to achieve that change, McCarthy suggests, mankind must act with empathy and unity, as the relationship between the father and son suggests. *The Road* critically interrogates the increase of xenophobia and egocentrism that both caused and followed the trauma of the 9/11 attacks, and predicts that constructing an Other, and thus creating a polarized society, may lead to the end of humanity and human civilization.

Chapter 3: Reading Pynchon's *Bleeding Edge* as a Dystopian 9/11 Novel

Instead of exploring a possible dystopian future as *The Road* does, Thomas Pynchon's *Bleeding Edge* features an alternative reality in which elements that were present in the United States around 9/11, such as capitalism, consumerism, and individualism, and the consequences of this reality are emphasized. As Francisco Collado-Rodríquez points out, in *Bleeding Edge*, "Pynchon pursues his characteristic sociohistorical analysis", critically depicting the American society and politics around 9/11 (229). Joseph Darlington argues that Pynchon "draws attention to 9/11 as a moment embedded within history, demanding serious attention and nationwide analysis" (244-45). It is important to view the events as embedded, he contends, since "[a] multiplicity of trauma, confusions, convictions, new understandings, and events emerged from 9/11 and its aftermath [which] helped to shape the landscape of the twenty-first century" (245). Exploring the dangers of the Internet, cybercrime, and terrorism, *Bleeding Edge* features a protagonist named Maxine Tarnow, a fraud examiner, who accepts an assignment to investigate a dotcom company named hashlingerz, which has ties all over the world via the Internet. It is set just before, during and after 9/11, roughly the period between spring 2001 and spring 2002, and the attacks are alluded to repeatedly throughout the novel. Pynchon often alludes to other historical events as well, such as the dotcom crash that started in March 2000 and lasted throughout most of the decade (Panko 185), and the Madoff investment scandal that was discovered in 2008 but had been suspected since the 1990s (Langevoort 900), and in doing so places the fictional events in the novel into a real historical context. As Michael Maguire points out, Pynchon "articulates his disgust with the government's cooptation of American indignation after 9/11" (96). Pynchon is critical of the notion that the United States is an innocent victim of evil terrorists, attempting "to shift our standpoint from one of originary innocence to an ethical and political responsibility for the

other" (96). I will argue that *Bleeding Edge* exposes and interrogates the links between capitalism, terrorism and the Internet in the turn-of-the-century American society. Using the dystopian genre, the novel particularly warns against the consequences of the cooperation of the United States government and powerful capitalists to mobilize the collective trauma present in American society by claiming that the 9/11 attacks are the sole cause of this trauma, ignoring the social, economic and political context of the attacks and subsequently disregarding the social and political responsibility that the American people should take.

Bleeding Edge tells the story of Maxine Tarnow through a third-person limited point of view focalized through Maxine. Maxine's private life becomes mixed with her professional life as she interacts with a large number of characters from different echelons of society, for example mobsters, policemen, federal agents, hackers and activists. When Maxine brings her sons to school, she is asked by another mother, Vyrva, if she could look into a potential business partner of Vyrva's husband Justin's company, named Gabriel Ice. She is also asked by an old friend, Reg, to investigate the company that has hired him to make a documentary, which turns out to be the same company as the one that is trying to buy Justin's company: Gabriel Ice's hashlingerz. This is the start of her complex and dangerous exploration of the Internet, and the control that companies and governments have over it. Earlier in her career, Maxine lost her certification as fraud examiner for covering up her husband's fraud. However, she has continued her company without certification, which allows her to use sources that would have been out of reach if she had still been certified, such as the Russian mob. Ice is a powerful figure who has managed to keep his company growing while most of his competitors have suffered major losses. Via the Internet, federal agents and acquainted mobsters, Maxine's investigation leads her to uncover fraud, extortion, conspiracy theories and eventually a murder and global terrorism.

Through Gabriel Ice, *Bleeding Edge* directly links capitalism with the internet, and eventually even terrorism. The novel is exceedingly critical of technology and its use, the Internet in particular. It is important to note that the novel was published roughly a decade after 9/11, in an era in which the Internet had taken a much more prominent role than at the beginning of the twenty-first century. Looking back on 9/11 a decade later, Pynchon places the attacks in a larger context of new technological developments, such as the invention of streaming services, creating a dystopian world in which the Internet, capitalism and terrorism are inextricably interlinked dark forces. The dystopian genre enables Pynchon to call attention to the danger new inventions that have become household items in today's society pose. One of the characters predicts, for example, after spreading a dangerous video: "Someday there'll be a Napster for videos, it'll be routine to post anything and share it with anybody" (348). This passage obviously refers to YouTube, which allows just that, and calls into question the safety of such a platform. This idea has proven to be eerily predictive as the live streaming on Facebook of the terrorist attacks in New Zealand on March 15, 2019 show ("Facebook Restricts Live Streaming").

As *Bleeding Edge* is set around 9/11, it unsurprisingly explores the theme of terrorism. As the story takes place in New York City through the year 2001, Pynchon is able to address the political and social tensions that built up to the terrorist attacks as well as their immediate aftermath. The two main settings in the novel are Lower Manhattan and the Upper West Side, often referred to as the Yupper West Side. Lee Konstantinou argues that in using New York City as setting Pynchon's main aim was a "loving, painstaking reconstruction of the mood of the island of Manhattan during the long cultural pause extending from the end of the dot-com crash through the terrorist attacks of 2001" (171). Pynchon places the terrorist attacks in the wider context of the city's multicultural society, ethnic tensions, and consumerist lifestyle, and the way these factor in with the social and political crisis that

became apparent after the 9/11 attacks. The attacks of 9/11 are thus represented as only one event in an ongoing crisis that has both preceded and followed it, suggesting that 9/11 was not a singular event, but the result of an accumulation of many factors that were already present in American society.

The novel questions the idea of the Other by offering different perspectives on othering from within American society. While Maxine, a Jewish American, is the protagonist, among the potential antagonists in the novel are dotcom capitalists, billionaires, Russians and Arabs. The way they are treated, however, differs for each character and the way they are presented is often nuanced by Maxine, who acts as the novel's moral center, often in the form of internal monologue. For example, Maxine finds out that when Nicholas Windust, a federal agent, investigates Igor Dashkov and his two helpers Misha and Grisha, all three of whom have become Maxine's acquaintances, for murder and quickly connects them to the KGB without any evidence, she reflects: "OK, russophobic reflexes to be expected, and yet what goes on here the chutzpah [audacity]. 'You don't like me socializing with Russkies. Excuse me, I thought all that Cold War drama was over" (264). In her internal monologue, Maxine is surprised to learn that the othering of Russians after the Cold War had not diminished as much for others as it had for her. In the novel, othering is often implied to happen intentionally for political purposes. Regarding the murder of Lester Traipse, Maxine is told by Rocky Slagiatt, a capitalist she has befriended: "Wouldn't rule out somebody trying to set it up to *look* like a Russian hit, either" (206). It is striking, however, that the Russians are allowed an identity through the characters of Igor, Misha and Grisha, whereas the Arabs remain unrepresented.

Through Maxine, who is initially skeptical about what she calls "Islam allergy" and "Muslim phobias", the novel calls to question the construction of Muslims as the Other in the context of 9/11 (82). Directly addressing the othering of Muslims during a conversation with

Driscoll, a web designer, Maxine says: "They're serious enough about cyberwar, training people, spending budget, but even Russia you don't have to worry about as much as […] our Muslim brothers. They're the true global force" (47), signifying that in the current era it is not the Russians but the Arabs that the United States should be wary of.

Furthermore, various characters describe Arabs as terrorists and present them as an enemy, for example when Maxine receives a video from Reg, a documentary maker hired by hashlingerz, which shows a group of men pretending, or practicing, to take down an airplane in the middle of New York. When Maxine and March Kelleher first watch the movie, they immediately connect it to a dry run of a terrorist attack that will take place in New York in the near future (268). While they describe the men on the video as "English, the accents not especially local, for someplace out between the coasts" (265), the weapon that they use, a Stinger, has words written on it in Pashto, a language spoken in Eastern Iran and Afghanistan. This implies the complicity of Muslims, or maybe even control. On the other hand, however, the novel also often suggests that ethnic othering is a form of scapegoating, as is seen when Igor examines the Stinger and reflects: "Pashto, 'God is great,' maybe legit, maybe CIA forgery to look like mujahedeen [Jihad extremists], covering up some caper of their own" (273). Igor here suggests that the Muslims could be used as scapegoats, suggesting that conspiracy theories that claim the United States government or powerful American capitalists were behind the terrorist attacks on 9/11 could be true. The fact that Reg has shot the video while working for hashlingerz supports Igor's theory and connects terrorism directly to Gabriel Ice.

The novel alludes to the conspiracy theory of the involvement of American officials directly when March, who is a well-known political and social activist and mother-in-law to Gabriel Ice, suggests that the video could have been made by "[s]omebody who wants to nail Bush's ass […]. Or maybe it's one of Bush's people playing the victim card, trying to nail

somebody who wants to nail Bush" (268). Through Igor, *Bleeding Edge* undermines, or even counters, the othering of Muslims and Russians by suggesting that what they do could be done by the United States instead. Maxine similarly questions the prejudice towards Arabs after Reg claims he saw Arabs make bombs at hashlingerz' headquarters: "How do you know it's Arabs, they're wearing outfits, there's camels?" (91). Maxine's refuses to accept that the people who were making bombs were Arabs without evidence. She does not see Arabs as an Other, unless there is evidence. Pynchon criticizes the construction of otherness on the basis of ethnic difference. Russians are depicted both as mobsters and as friends to Maxine; Muslims are represented by the Arab scientists who allegedly make a bomb but also by average New York citizens; and Jews are represented by Gabriel Ice, who allegedly has ties to the Mossad (263), on the one hand, and Maxine herself, the moral center of the novel, on the other.

What sets the antagonists of the novel apart from the rest of the characters is then not their ethnicity, but that the fact that they represent the capitalist corruption that has marked the United States. In her investigations, Maxine discovers that Gabriel Ice's company hashlingerz is a powerful company that distributes money "all over the place to different mysterious contractors, some of whom are almost certainly ghosts" (Pynchon 42). Powerful big companies like Ice's hashlingerz can do as they please, as they do not have to justify the way they handle their business. Hashlingerz turns out to be a front behind which Gabriel Ice can hide his real organization. According to Driscoll, Ice's company is actually specialized in "cyberspace warfare without mercy […], hacker on hacker" (47). She claims that Ice lures computer nerds into becoming hackers for his company, which is "a virtual corporation, totally bogus, sittin out there as bait for the script kiddies, who they can then keep a eye on, wait till they're just about to crack all the way into core, then bust them and threaten legal action" (47). Capitalism allows companies such as hashlingerz to thrive and to globally

expand, and subsequently work with organizations from other parts of the world, including parts of the Middle East, some of which are accused of terrorism, (47). Maxine accuses Ice of "[wanting] to be the next Evil Empire," because he is allegedly investing and taking part in a "big deal in the Middle East," which could turn out to be the start of "Gulf War Two," and Ice is merely using his employees as "fodder for the machine" (48).

The World Trade Center is highlighted throughout the first part of the novel as the icon of American capitalist society. It is described as being "built like a battleship" (95) and often described as "leaning, looming brilliantly curtained in light gigantically off their pot quarter" (165). It is depicted as an omnipresent shadow of American identity. According to Maxine's therapist, "'The Trade Center towers were religious too. They stood for what this country worships above everything else, the market, always the holy fuckin market'" (338). The therapist's words signify that the capitalist economy is at the core of American society and American identity, serving as a religion upon which all American values are built. This suggests that the attack on the World Trade Center was an attack on American identity and the existence of American society as it was, defined by greed. This does not mean that the novel justifies the attack, but it suggests that the 9/11 attacks were in fact an attack on global capitalism with the World Trade Center as its symbol. Pynchon is highly critical of the fact that capitalism has become a major part of American identity, and he disrupts the interconnectedness of capitalism and American identity by forcefully pulling them apart through the destruction of the capitalist icon of American identity.

Pynchon connects capitalism directly to 9/11 by exploring conspiracy theories that suggest the involvement of the American government and powerful American people with the terrorist attacks. Before the attacks, Maxine's husband Horst mentions that "'[t]here was a sudden abnormal surge of put options on United Airlines. Thousands of puts, not a heck of a lot of calls. Now, today, the same thing happens for American airlines.' […] 'Just those two

airlines?' 'Yep. Weird, huh?'" (315). Since these are the two airlines that the planes that flew into the World Trade Center belonged to, this suggests that there were people with prior knowledge of the events. Furthermore, that same "night Vyrva calls Maxine with panic in her voice. 'The guys are freaking out. Something about this random-number source they've been hacking into suddenly going nonrandom'" (315). These incidents suggest that there were people with prior knowledge of the attacks that were involved in capitalist circles, suggesting the involvement of capitalists in the attacks.

Conspiracy theories are most often presented by March who mockingly writes in her blog: "Poor, poor America, why do these evil foreigners hate us, must be all this freedom of ours, and how twisted is that, to hate freedom?" However, she immediately adds a hyperlink to this message with "counternarratives" that offer a different perspective, implying her own critique of the United States' claim to innocence (388). While the counternarratives she links to are not elaborated on further - the text in fact merely gives the hyperlink - March's message implies that these counternarratives actually contain more truth than what the government is saying.

Although Pynchon uses conspiracy theories to support his criticism of capitalism, he addresses their credibility as well. In the novel, Maxine's father says:

> "The chief argument against conspiracy theories is always that it would take too many people in on it, and somebody's sure to squeal. But look at the U.S. security apparatus, these guys are WASPs, Mormons, Skull and Bones, secretive by nature. If discipline is anywhere, it's among them. So of course it's possible." (325)

Through Maxine's father, Pynchon interrogates whether conspiracy theories could actually be true, suggesting there would be too many people hiding the truth, which would be virtually impossible. However, by arguing that the American government would be able to do this, the novel directly questions its reliability. Pynchon casts doubts on the existence of conspiracy

theories, but at the same time suggests that some organizations could in fact be setting up a conspiracy. He thus directly criticizes the American government, which perhaps even cooperates with Ice (455), by suggesting it could actually very well have been involved in the 9/11 attacks. Furthermore, it calls into question the credibility of the American government's reports. As Maguire points out, few Americans today believe "that the attacks were not used to scapegoat Iraq and justify its invasion" (99). Pynchon therefore "uses […] anarchism both to put contemporary terrorism in historical context and to raise the question of complicity in cases of the strong versus the weak" (99). Pynchon thus encourages the reader to critically question not only 9/11 and the way the American government handled the terrorist attacks, but also terrorist attacks that have taken place since then, and to put those in a large historical framework of which 9/11 is not the starting point, but one event among many.

In the course of the novel, it becomes clear just how much capitalism and terrorism are interwoven with the Internet. The Internet as represented in the novel provides an alternate reality, for example through the computer program "DeepArcher", a pun on "departure," which is described as "a virtual sanctuary to escape to from the many varieties of real-world discomfort" (74). DeepArcher was created by Justin and Lucas, acquaintances of Maxine's, who combined their visions of a world to escape to. For Justin that was

> a California that had never existed, safe, sunny all the time, where in fact the sun never set unless somebody wanted to see a romantic sunset. Lucas was searching for someplace, you could say, a little darker, where it rains a lot and great silences sweep like wind, holding inside them forces of destruction (74).

The creation of DeepArcher was thus a synthesis of Justin's utopia and Lucas' dystopia, which symbolizes the close connection of the two concepts in the novel. The interplay between dystopia and utopia is also represented by the "Deep Web", which is a crucial part of the Internet in *Bleeding Edge*. The Deep Web can be defined as "content hidden behind

HTML [code] forms" that is "a significant gap in the coverage of search engines" (Madhavan et al. 1241). In other words, the Deep Web is an invisible and almost untraceable virtual world that lies beneath the surface of the Internet as it is known by most of its users.

It is this unfamiliar take on the nowadays well-known Internet that offers a promise of unlimited potential. As in many dystopian narratives, the setting offers opportunities for a utopian ideal; the Internet could provide an escape from reality into a world in which everything is possible, an idea represented by the name DeepArcher, which, as mentioned, is a pun on "departure" (Pynchon 36). Jason Siegel points out, however, that Pynchon "critiques [the] utopian movement in posthuman theory by acknowledging the material conditions under which the technologies that challenge the humanist conception of the human arose" (3). The Internet and other technological inventions, Siegel contends, have "become another in a long line of opportunities for freedom that was co-opted by the powers that be and transformed into an instrument of oppression" (3).

In the novel, criticism of technology is voiced by Maxine's father, Ernie, who tells her: "Call it freedom, it's based on control. Everybody connected together, impossible anybody should get lost, ever again. Take the next step, connect it to these cell phones, you've got a total Web of surveillance, inescapable" (420). The novel here explicitly foreshadows the invention of the smartphone that merely a decade later has become a device people have come to depend on. Pynchon makes it clear that the almost utopian idea of always being connected to the Internet, and always being available, could also be used as a way to control and watch people all over the world. Once again, a couple of years after *Bleeding Edge* was published, this proves to have become a menacing reality after monitoring scandals are discovered in increasing numbers in 2019.

Furthermore, Pynchon addresses the invention of the Internet and the reason behind it through Ernie, whose view of the Internet is rather pessimistic, as he claims:

> "[Y]our Internet was their invention, this magical convenience that creeps now like a smell through the smallest details of our lives, the shopping, the housework, the homework, the taxes, absorbing our energy, eating up our precious time. And there's no innocence. Anywhere. Never was. It was conceived in sin, the worst possible. As it kept growing, it never stopped carrying in its heart a bitter-cold death wish for the planet, and I don't think anything has changed, kid." (420)

Ernie represents Pynchon's negative views on the Internet and its dangers. He proves to be remarkably apt in understanding the ins and outs of the Internet. Maxine's fears of the Internet's dangers and who controls it, as well as her jarring experiences with the Internet throughout the novel, are confirmed and verbalized by Ernie, who articulates the novel's criticism of the Internet.

In addition, the Internet is juxtaposed with New York as settings for the novel. The similarities between the two different settings are alluded to throughout the novel, for example in the following passage:

> This little island reminds [Maxine] of something, and it takes her a minute to see what. As if you could reach into the looming and prophetic landfill, that perfect negative of the city in its seething foul incoherence, and find a set of invisible links to click on and be crossfaded at last to unexpected refuge, a piece of the ancient estuary exempt from what happened, what has gone on happening, to the rest of it. Like the Island of Meadows, DeepArcher has also developers after it (167).

The Island of Meadows is described as one of the main landfills of New York, which implies that it is a place where literal and symbolical trash come together to form the wasteland that life in New York leaves behind. By comparing the island with DeepArcher, Pynchon suggests a similarity between New York and the Internet as well, with DeepArcher and the

Island of Meadows as their landfills, or unindexed places that offer both opportunities and threats.

The novel's view of the Internet is furthermore used to interrogate the efficiency of "homeland security" against the threats offered by the Internet. The Bush administration created the Homeland Security Act as a response to the 9/11 attacks in an attempt to "coordinate counter-terrorism measures" as well as to ensure "border and transportation security; emergency preparedness and response; countermeasures for chemical, biological, radiological, and nuclear attacks" (Uhl 276). The novel questions the effectiveness of this security, as Joseph Darlington points out, by "[d]rawing attention to [the] ambiguities of geopolitics", particularly the ambiguous political relationship between Arab countries, the United States and Israel (246). Darlington argues that "Pynchon implicates New Yorkers' daily lives in networks of international power structures in a way that a homogenous vision of 'Homeland' and its attendant narrative of 'security' would seek to deny" (246). Pynchon thus questions whether domestic security would be sufficient with the Internet in place, since threats in New York are not simply domestic, but global, as there is such a diverse group of nationalities and ethnicities in New York, as well as opportunity for global terrorism by means of the Internet, which has no geographical borders.

The Internet changes in the course of the novel from a vague unexplored concept to a limitless alternate reality, mainly represented by DeepArcher. The novel explores the Internet through the eyes of Maxine, who increasingly uses it throughout the novel, both for leisure and professional purposes. Maxine first encounters the Internet through programmers and hackers, some friendly, others less so. Justin and Lucas introduce Maxine to DeepArcher, but she finds herself compelled to access it more and more. The first time she logs onto DeepArcher, Justin tells her: "I think we should log off pretty soon, no telling who's monitoring" (77). While at this time in the novel DeepArcher is still presented as a blank

slate with unlimited potential, here it is foreshadowed that it has a threatening side as well. Furthermore, it signifies the social responsibility to look after each other as Justin and Lucas both guide Maxine through the unexplored world of DeepArcher, and make sure she is not traced by logging off on time. This exemplifies the ambiguous possibilities of DeepArcher, since, as Albert Rolls argues, "in the first two-thirds or so of the novel, Pynchon offers a glimmer of hope for escaping the 'stupefied consensus' […] in the possibilities afforded by the Deep Web" (3). Pynchon thus offers a way of escaping the real world, but also signifies that this escape may not be as secure as was initially hoped for.

The Internet increasingly is represented as a dystopia because of the dangers it poses to American society. Konstantinou argues that "Pynchon dramatizes the attempt to resist […] the commodification of the utopia the Internet briefly seemed to be at the end of the bloody twentieth century" (172), which signifies that, in Pynchon's view, the internet should not become accessible for everyone at any time. In the commodification of the internet lies the danger that people could start to depend on it, making it easier for others to use as a tool of manipulation. Although "the popularity of [dot-com capitalists] gives evidence that we've not yet lost our capacity to dream for a better tomorrow" (Konstantinou 172), the novel shows that the Internet could help create the opposite of a perfect world.

Ultimately, the way Pynchon connects terrorism, capitalism, and the Internet suggests that the events of 9/11 were not an isolated incident, nor did they instigate a new way of thinking. Like McCarthy in *The Road,* he criticizes xenophobia and individualism, which did not start after 9/11. Furthermore, just like McCarthy, Pynchon addresses the role collective trauma played in the aftermath of 9/11. As Collado-Rodríguez points out, "Pynchon describes contemporary society as the site of a structurally traumatized social condition brought forth by the misappropriation and control of collective suffering," which is induced by "web addiction and information overload, and by the blurring of limits between victim and

perpetrator" (236). The unlimited possibilities of the Internet, for example, offer a freedom that humanity cannot cope with and it blurs the lines between innocence and guilt, between good and evil, and perhaps even freedom and confinement. As Maxine's father, Ernie, puts it, society has succumbed to a "[g]reed situation […]. You'd think when the towers came down it would've been a reset button for the city, the real-estate business, Wall Street, a chance for it all to start over clean. Instead lookit them, worse than before" (387).

The greatest threat American society faces, Pynchon ultimately suggests, is the way terrorism, capitalism and the Internet can work together and facilitate each other as an "integrated continuum" to manipulate and influence (345), for example through the mobilization of trauma. The novel alludes rather explicitly to trauma, mainly through the trauma Maxine experiences and the trauma she observes. Maxine's trauma is addressed early in the novel, before 9/11 even occurs, which suggests that the trauma present in American society had a different cause than the 9/11 attacks. Maxine's investigation into Gabriel Ice's company causes her to increasingly have nightmares, which are represented as moments of traumatic recall. In one of these nightmares, "she arrives at a theme shopping mall which she understands has been deliberately designed to look like the aftermath of a terrible Third World battle, charred and dilapidated, abandoned hovels and burned-out concrete foundations" (196). Maxine perceives "everything [in] sorrowful rust and sepia, and yet here at these carefully distressed outdoor cafés sit yuppie shoppers […] behaving no differently than if they were at Woodbury Common or Paramus" (196). Her nightmare indicates that Maxine is unable to come to terms with the way society is pretending that everything is well and unchanged, while she has discovered there is an underlying disaster unfolding: cyberterrorism.

Later in the novel, it becomes clear that the events of 9/11 have deeply impacted the lives of New Yorkers. This suggests that 9/11 was traumatic for the New Yorkers. However,

by juxtaposing the trauma after 9/11 and that before 9/11, it is clear that it is not the trauma itself that Pynchon emphasizes, but the cause of the trauma, which was already present before the 9/11 attacks. Maxine sees American flags everywhere, and posters that state "UNITED WE STAND" (322). She says that "[s]omewhere, down at some shameful dark recess of the national soul, we need to feel betrayed, even guilty", for otherwise Americans are unable to cope with the disaster (322). Pynchon suggests that "[i]f you read nothing but the Newspaper of Record, you might believe that New York City, like the nation, united in sorrow and shock, has risen to the challenge of global jihadism, joining a righteous crusade" (327). Reality proves to be different, however; "[i]f you go to other sources – the Internet, for example - you might get a different picture. Out in the vast undefined anarchism of cyberspace, among the billions of self-resonant fantasies, dark possibilities are beginning to emerge" (327). While this implies that the collective trauma as described in the newspapers after 9/11 is in fact not as obvious as they claim, it furthermore suggests that the notion of collective trauma is an interpretation forced upon the American people. This is similar to what Elisabeth Anker calls the politics of melodrama – the Bush government's attempt to portray the American citizens as innocent victims in order to unite them against the absolute Other of the terrorists (5). The United States' government used this unity and victimhood to force their political agenda, rallying the nation behind the so-called War on Terror (5). Pynchon's juxtaposition of the newspapers report and the opinions found on the Internet suggests that the 9/11 events could have been used as an instrument to strengthen the United States' government's politics of melodrama.

However, the Internet ultimately is as dangerous as its users, according to Pynchon. Pynchon proposes, for example, that the political rhetoric of melodrama is ultimately counterproductive due to the Internet, because every individual is able to express their own thoughts and theories on 9/11 (327). This ensures that the newspapers' perspectives, as well

as the government's accounts, can be contradicted, and refuted. The Internet thus provides the general public the opportunity to voice their opinions as well, which can shape a more complex perspective on what is actually going on in American society, as it is voiced by members of that society, as opposed to members of an organization that would benefit from altering society. However, the possibility to use this positively suggests that it can also be used negatively, and that is precisely the threat posed by the Internet in combination with the power of capitalism and terrorism, the novel implies.

Indeed, the novel ends on a highly dystopian note, with the main characters deciding that the Internet is in fact a scam and that it diminishes freedom instead of expanding it. Eric, one of Maxine's helpers, tells her

> "They get us, all right, we're all lonely, needy, disrespected, desperate to believe in any sorry imitation of belonging they want to sell us… We're being played, Maxi, and the game is fixed, and it won't end till the Internet – the real one, the dream, the promise – is destroyed". (432)

Eric's comment suggests that, ultimately, Gabriel Ice is merely a symptom of a larger problem: the Internet is the true enemy. The Internet serves as an ideal way to fulfil one's personal desires, but at the same time it has the ability to control everyone, "[e]xcept the slaves don't even know that's what they are" (432). The Internet proves to be the greatest threat. There is no solution to the problem in the end. There is personal growth, however, for Maxine. At the beginning of the novel she has problems with letting her sons walk to school alone because she "just doesn't want to let go just yet" (1). However, the novel ends with her finally being able to let them walk to school alone. The fact that she is able to finally let go signifies that she, at least personally, is able to let others take their social responsibility. For her, this realization started when she saw them standing in DeepArcher, "ready to step out into their [self-made] peaceable city" (476). While her sons' private space on the Internet will

be overrun by "the spiders and bots that one day too soon will be coming for it, to claim-jump it in the name of the indexed world", she now realizes that her sons are old enough to look after and take care of each other (476).

Ultimately, Pynchon's criticism in *Bleeding Edge* resembles that of McCarthy in *The Road*. Just as McCarthy suggests that empathy is necessary for mankind to evolve and sustain itself, Pynchon suggests the need to take the responsibility to watch out for and take care of the other as well, which is emphasized right after the events of 9/11 take place in the novel, when it becomes clear that many people who lived in Lower Manhattan were not allowed to enter their houses anymore after which they "have been showing up at the doors of friends farther uptown" (332). Both Driscoll and Eric end up seeking refuge in Maxine's apartment, which she happily offers, and she allows them to stay until they can move to Brooklyn. Furthermore, Pynchon calls for a critical interrogation of technological advancements and by whom and how they are used, and who in fact controls these inventions. Towards the end of the novel, a former employee of Gabriel Ice tells Tallis, Ice's wife:

> "Your husband's rich, maybe even smart, but he's like all you people, livin in this dream, up in the clouds, floatin in the bubble, think 'at's real, think again. It's only gonna be there as long as the power's on. What happens when the grid goes dark? Generator fuel runs out and they shoot down the satellites, bomb the operation centers, and you're all back down on planet Earth again. All that jabberin about nothing, all 'at shit music, all 'em links, down, down and gone" (465)

Pynchon suggests that humanity must focus on how to take care of each other, instead of exploiting others and investing time and money in a virtual world. In an era in which capitalism, terrorism, and the Internet are omnipresent, Pynchon stresses the need to be aware of the dangers of all three forces, and specifically the way they are powerfully

interconnected. The start of the twenty-first-century offered hope for a utopia, but as far as Pynchon is concerned humanity is still as far from finding it as ever.

Conclusion

The trauma of 9/11 has been used, mobilized and shaped by politicians and other powerful figures into a social and political discourse in order to create an American identity that is centered around innocence and self-defined justice. Creating this identity has caused othering and social polarization to occur not only in the United States, but on a global scale. Many American writers, as well as scholars, have questioned the notion of American victimhood and the trauma that followed the attacks and the way this was handled by the American government.

While scholars like Richard Gray and Michael Rothberg, have looked at either domestic, immigrant or extraterritorial narratives to offer a more complex and critical perspective on the cultural trauma of 9/11, and others, such as Lucy Bond and Elisabeth Anker, have argued to stay away from trauma altogether, because it constructs a false image of the United States as an innocent victim, this thesis focuses on dystopian 9/11 fiction as an effective medium to examine the attacks and social and political aftermath in a wider context. As I have argued, the dystopian genre's ability to emphasize and enlarge possible outcomes and consequences of the attacks enables post-9/11 fiction to address and warn against the way American society has developed, and the way that the United States' government has dealt with 9/11. Furthermore, the genre is capable to critically reflect on social and political developments within the United States surrounding 9/11 and the trauma the attacks may have caused.

As my analysis of *The Road* and *Bleeding Edge* have shown, the events of 9/11 were situated in a time of political and social unrest that has created an opportunity for a collective trauma to take hold of American society. While 9/11 is often portrayed as a turning point, these novels suggest that the attacks were in fact part of a chain of events that have given

shape to turn-of-the-century society. The rise of global capitalism, consumerism, Islamic fundamentalism, and technological developments at the end of the twentieth century, in combination with the increase of ecological disasters, created an egocentric and xenophobic global society. What McCarthy and Pynchon ultimately suggest in their novels is that the trauma that had been caused after 9/11 has been used to mask the social, economic, environmental and political problems that were already present in American society. These problems, according to the novels, are caused by a lack of responsibility and empathy in mankind, as well as the consequences of destructive human behavior, such as polluting the environment, cyberterrorism and radical individualism.

Ultimately, Pynchon's *Bleeding Edge* and McCarthy's *The Road* prove to be eerily predictive. McCarthy's critical suggestions regarding the ecological effect of human behavior as well as the destructive consequences of consumerism have become widely visible in the current debate surrounding climate change and human co-existence. Pynchon's depiction of the Internet and his criticism of the influence of capitalism are of course written largely in retrospect, yet the sense of doom that *Bleeding Edge* evokes becomes even stronger in the light of recent events involving terrorism and technological security scandals, such as the attacks in Christchurch, New Zealand on March 15, 2019. McCarthy and Pynchon both suggest a more cooperative way of living in which mankind takes responsibility for its actions, focuses on community instead of the individual, and finds a way to end the destructive forces of capitalism, consumerism, egocentrism and xenophobia. *Bleeding Edge* and *The Road* paint disastrous images of the direction in which humanity is moving, and emphasize the dangers that lie in the future if this is not changed. Mankind is on its way to destroy itself and the world in which it is living, but the novels by McCarthy and Pynchon imply that there is still hope for a better future, if this future is handled with proper empathy, unity and responsibility.

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