

2022 Essay Prize Competition

Universität Erfurt – BA Anglistik/Amerikanistik
Seminar: Literature of 9/11
Lecturer: Prof. Dr. Ilka Saal
Winter Term 2021/2022

One Event, Two Reactions: How 9/11 Managed to Simultaneously Catapult America into the Past and Future

A comparative analysis of two literary responses to the terror attacks of September 11, 2001

Name: Ciara Olzog

The events of September 11, 2001 drastically altered America's perception of the future, as it becomes apparent in the two texts *first writing since* by American poet Suheir Hammad (2001) and *In the Ruins of the Future* by American writer Don DeLillo (2001). In the wake of the events of 9/11, there has been a crystallization of two new distinct approaches to the concept of the future of the US as well as globally. One approach, represented by the text of Hammad, focuses on directing the gaze forward, intending to take 9/11 as a turning point in politics as well as an appeal for transnational solidarity and the desire for peace. The other strain of thought, which can be observed in the essay by DeLillo, can be characterized by a "possession of the past" (Caruth 151), directing the gaze backwards, indulging in a narrative of victimhood and focusing on revenge, as well as mourning and reconstructing traditional American values. These two strains of thought represented in the texts of DeLillo and Hammad reflect the two most prominent reactions the attacks of September 11 have provoked in the US.

Even though it has been more than 20 years since the Twin Towers fell and the Pentagon was attacked, analyzing the literary responses to the attacks can help us understand how the public perception of safety, multiculturalism and future in the US but also globally was influenced and altered that day in two directions and which implications this may carry for us today.

In order to elucidate my claim, I am going to perform a comparative analysis of two of the first literary responses to the attacks. Firstly, I am going to examine the extra- and intratextual structures of my primary sources *first writing since* (Hammad) and *In the Ruins of the Future* (DeLillo), inspecting and interpreting their similarities and distinctions. After that, I will move on to investigate how the motif of solidarity is employed differently in the two texts, furthermore connecting my findings with the disparate usage of binaries, particularly the binary of the construction of the Them-vs-Us concept. Following this, I am going to inspect the rhetorical and stylistic devices employed in each text, paying special attention to the construction of the titles as well as some specific word choices, and linking everything to the concept of trauma and future. Moreover, I am going to analyze the direction of both texts, i.e. whether, why and how they focus on looking back or forward, as well as elucidating the consequences this bears. Finally, I am going to interconnect my findings in order to prove my thesis statement in the conclusion.

DeLillo's essay *In the Ruins of the Future* (2001) was published only two months after the terror attacks of September 11. It first appeared in the December issue of the print version of *Harper's Magazine*, the oldest general-interest magazine in America, which sets the tone of

context DeLillo positioned this work of his into. As a commissioned piece, the text was meant for the specific demographic of the readers of *Harper's Magazine*, i.e. predominantly college educated, middle aged white (upper) middle class Americans.

It is in front of this background of his presumed readership that the text is written. The essay aims to address this audience and appeal to them. In order to achieve identification, we can observe DeLillo reproducing this exact image of a middle class, white, educated, Christian America that concurs with his readership. The perfect example of the reproduction of this image he conducts can be found in the only two named characters that appear in the text: Karen and Marc, the incarnation of the traditional American family, provide a deep insight into how the events of 9/11 have affected Americans, and how they might have been experienced without being in the middle of the actual situation.

That DeLillo uses characters to help his readership find themselves in his narrative becomes blatantly obvious when comparing the embodiment of the different characters he introduces in his essay. On the one hand we find Karen and Marc, as mentioned before the only named characters he includes in his text. The naming of these characters provides the basis for identification of his audience. The names clearly conjure an image of whiteness, and with regards to the aforementioned demographic of the location of publication, it makes sense that he would choose to lay focus on characters that display an image of a "traditional" American family. He goes further in depicting them as this flagship American family by implying they are a Christian, cisgender, heterosexual, monogamous married upper middleclass couple (36), making them conform to the cultural norms of a traditional and white America. On the other hand, we have the character of the woman on the prayer rug that DeLillo uses to showcase the US' greatness and multiculturalism. In contrast to Karen and Marc, this woman stays anonymous, since there is no further information provided on her. She does not offer any possibility for identification for the reader as she is predominantly observed as an object of interest rather than a subject of the narrative. She functions as a means to an end in depicting New York City's great diversity and multiculturalism without actually granting her any space in the narrative by depicting her as a multidimensional individual. Contrary to what DeLillo tries to convey by integrating her in his text, she is forced to stay outside of the narrative. This offers, for the intended readership, the opportunity to feel like they are engaging in a liberal look on the event without forcing them to actually commit to honoring, identifying and integrating non-white perspectives.

In congruence with Judith Butler's claim that the US tends to view the events of 9/11 virtually exclusively through the frame of a first-person narrative (Butler 5), thus providing a

severely limited and oversimplified explanation of the complex underlying background of the attacks from September 11, DeLillo's essay is written in the first person as well, creating a narrative that focuses on recentering the American point of view without looking beyond.

In terms of genre, it has been proposed that the essay functions as a manifesto. Usually doing the duty of challenging an existing system, Saal proves that in this case, a manifesto might also serve to "resuscitate a status quo that has been temporarily thrown into question" (80), as DeLillo utilizes this text to restore and manifest the notion of "already existing ideological values" (Saal 80) in order to stabilize the sense of American exceptionalism and superiority which has become somewhat unstable, as the attacks of September 11 can be described as a testimony to American vulnerability.

The context of the publication of Suheir Hammad's poem *first writing since* (2001) is a vastly different one. In contrast to DeLillo's essay, her piece was not a requested commission by a grand magazine or targeted at a specific audience. It was a free submission to an impartial online poetry journal, which published the poem only weeks after 9/11, on 7 November 2001 (Chan-Malik 294). This gave her a much greater freedom of expression, as there was no external motivation to appeal to the mainstream American narrative concerning the event, but rather the creation of this work stems from an internal desire to provide a counter narrative that appeals to solidarity, and collective grieving and learning.

This freedom of expression, this breaking out of the mainstream narrative is repeated and reproduced by the chosen format of the piece: as a poem written in free verse, the text does not conform to a certain formal structure. This can be interpreted as mirroring the unwillingness to conform to the implicitly prescribed narrative that the US media, government and public tried to propagate as the only acceptable approach to the events of 9/11. Additionally, trauma is known to be a destroyer of language. Since traumatic experiences can be categorized as events "outside the range of usual human experience" (Caruth 3), they "cannot be placed within the schemes of prior knowledge" (Caruth 153). Therefore, it is plausible that people often lack the ability to express what happened to them. Finding the language to bridge this discontinuity between what we are able to express *because* we understand it and what we need to express *in order to* understand it is thus a very challenging undertaking which might not comply with stipulated narrow formats that abide by specific sets of rules. Therefore, choosing to break free from restricting formats allows to express the inexpressibility of the collective trauma of 9/11 which Hammad processes in this piece.

Another extremely interesting point to look at would be Hammad's continual use of lowercase letters. She refrains from capitalizing any word, once again not conforming to the

grammatical rules of the English language system. This can be interpreted in two ways: on the one hand, it demonstrates her refusal to conform to norms in general, which we have already observed in analyzing her choice of writing this piece as a poem in free verse. On the other hand, reading a text that is written in all lowercase evokes a rather somber, solemn ambiance; it conjures a sense of quietness which can easily be connected to the grief, tiredness and brokenness that the events that inspired this text produced.

Similar to DeLillo, Hammad also writes her text in the first person. However, DeLillo continuously writes his text in the first-person plural, creating a collectiveness; thus generating the sense of a shared experience in the readers while simultaneously using this built sense of community to reproduce a them-vs-us binary. In contrast to this, *first writing since* displays a narrative that avails itself of the first person singular, thus creating the sense that this text displays an individual point of view rather than an already accepted and widely common truth, as DeLillo's use of the first-person plural aims to do.

Since the online poetry journal the text first appeared in was in no way comparable to the scope of *Harper's Magazine*, the initial audience of Hammad's poem was considerably smaller than DeLillo's. However, the readership was also substantially more diverse, as the journal did not target a specific demographic as *Harper's Magazine* does, but rather attracted an international audience from various backgrounds. Moreover, Hammad's poem soon gained a lot of traction as people from all over the world started forwarding the text to each other, discussing it online as well as in real life, and other websites and magazine began reposting and sharing the piece.

The next thing I would like to investigate is the internal structure of the two texts and its meaning, as there are some striking similarities that ache to be investigated. Both texts are subdivided into consecutively numbered sections. It is safe to assume that the number of parts the authors chose to write is not random, but rather conveys a certain implied meaning. In *first writing since*, we can find a division into seven parts, and in the second stanza of the first part, Hammad already calls her readers' attention to the number seven, putting it in a religious context, as "seven is of heavens, gods, science" (139). Developing this thought of the number seven in a religious context further, the seven sections of the poem seem to connect to the Christian history of creation, the creation of the world in seven days. Hammad's poem aims, in a metaphorical sense, to rebuild the world, as the events and resulting collective trauma of 9/11 caused the breaking-down of the world how it was before the attacks. This interpretation of the meaning of the division into seven parts can be backed up by the introduction of the figure of the phoenix (143), a symbol of hope and rebirth.

In Hammad's piece, we can observe a chronological processing of the events, each part representing a different point in time, a different thought that arises in the process of dealing with the trauma imposed by the attacks. The way this poem is thus structured, in that it appears to not have been written in one go but rather over an elongated period of time, also functions as a demonstration as to how trauma can only be processed one thought at the time in order to break it down and find suitable language to express it. The first part is set seven days after September 11, reiterating the importance of the number 7, and once again linking it to a religious context. Due to the proximity of the event the trauma is still extremely raw, which is obvious by the very first two lines of the text: "there have been no words. // i have not written one word" (Hammad 139). Although this is a paradox since these lines are indeed written in words, this amply demonstrates how trauma in its essence breaks down and blocks language. Moreover, this paradox reflects what Caruth calls trauma's "affront to understanding" (154), thus essentially proving and agreeing with Schreiber Weitz' claim that "[t]o speak is impossible, and not to speak is impossible" (quoted in Caruth 154).

DeLillo's essay *In the Ruins of the Future* is divided in not seven, but eight parts. Nevertheless, I believe that this structure can also be connected to the biblical act of creation, since we can find a strong sense of religious, and especially Christian imagery in this piece. According to the bible, God created the world in seven days. DeLillo describes in his essay how the terror attacks of September 11 have destroyed the world the way it was, how it will never be the same again. He equalizes the events with the "apocalypse" (34), the end of the world, which works well with his claim that the future is ruined. Therefore, the eight parts of his text can be understood as consisting of the seven days or parts of the Genesis plus one part representing the apocalypse. This added eighth part reflects the unexpected event which possesses the ability to ruin the future, to bring to world to an end. I would like to highlight here the importance of the unexpectedness of the event, which seems to be so incomprehensible due to its singularity, and so unforeseen that it is able to derail something as dogmatic as the story of creation we can find in the bible.

In both DeLillo's and Hammad's texts, the seventh section focuses on the future. However, Hammad tries to make sense of a new normal and ponders over how the country and the people of America might be able to move on from the tragedy of 9/11. Even though in the beginning of this part, she talks about how there has been a breakdown of America's self-perceived superiority ("the skyline is brought back to human size. no longer taunting the gods with its height." (Hammad 142,143)), the poem then goes on to provide a cautiously hopeful

outlook as it refuses to end on a picture of grief and death, but rather highlights the concept of life, moving on and solidarity (142).

DeLillo on the other hand chooses to centralize the future America was supposed to have, a future of the past if you so want. He focuses on what is lost due to the attacks, what was taken from America on the day of September 11 and presents the future that awaits America in the new light of the events as unstable in contrast to the authority it seemed to radiate before (DeLillo 39). Suddenly, the future does not merely seem bright anymore, but rather carries an aftertaste of danger: he implants the picture of a world that is in a constant state of war, at least mentally, running on “suicidal fervor”, as, in DeLillo’s eyes, the world now exists in a “global theocratic state”, threatening the ideals of modern democracy and thus the Western World in general (DeLillo 40).

Another point of interest are the recurring motifs that are detectable in the texts. Both pieces are centered around the motif of solidarity as well as an Us-vs-Them binary. The rhetoric of an Us-vs-Them construction can be deemed a political instrument, used to create a sense of community by creating a shared enemy and thus generating a common interest, making people more adaptive to one’s ideas. However, there are substantial differences in how these motifs are employed, which are worth being investigated as they help us determine and understand the narrative frame that each of the authors placed their experience of the attacks of 9/11 into.

As already mentioned, both texts are written with regards to a first-person narrative, either predominantly making use of the singular personal pronoun *I*, as Hammad does, or employing the personal pronoun of the first person plural, i.e. *we*, the way it can be observed in DeLillo’s essay. This usage of a collective pronoun, which essentially includes the audience in the text, contributes to the sense of solidarity the texts aim to raise. The question is now, who exactly is included in this collective *we* and whom, implicitly or explicitly, is this group correspondingly differentiated from. As I will show now, the answers to this question will look significantly different depending on the texts.

The binary of Us vs Them DeLillo chooses to execute in his essay parallels the mainstream American point of view that was expressed this shortly after the attacks, and can be broken down to the declaration President George W. Bush made in his address to congress and the nation nine days after the attacks on the Twin Towers and the Pentagon, that “[e]ither you are with us, or with the terrorists” (Bush). Similarly, the two groups DeLillo distinguishes are the terrorists who “ruined the future” and the people who were affected by this destruction. This distinction happens on an extremely extensive level, as becomes evident when looking at the first section of the text. By claiming that “parts of our world, have crumbled into theirs”

(DeLillo 33), he amplifies and deepens this binary into the understanding that the two groups do not even live in the same world, but rather exist in completely distinctive spheres. He marks the attacks as the starting point of his narrative, refusing to acknowledge any US actions that might have fueled this aggression and once again confirms Butler's point that America "positions itself exclusively as the sudden and indisputable victim of violence" (4), excusing and even justifying American acts of violence as self-defense and thus deeming them righteous.

DeLillo bases his sense of solidarity primarily on this very differentiation: there is an "us" because there is a "them". However, there also is a second communality he draws on in order to reinforce this solidarity: patriotism. The national identity of the US has always relied heavily on an ideology of patriotism, and it can be considered one of the core values of the country. DeLillo achieves to evoke this sense of patriotism throughout the entire text, but it reaches its summit in part eight of the essay, the very last and thus most important part, as it is most likely to stay in the mind of the reader: In this part, DeLillo describes the reality of Canal Street after the attacks, i.e. essentially lying in ruins, in one paragraph before he lays his focus on the past, reminiscing on Canal Street a month before the attacks, indulging in the greatness of New York City as a symbol of America in general by highlighting its pluralism and multiculturalism. This solidarity he creates is also based on a shared sense of superiority which, again, ties in with the tradition of American patriotism. One of the most pronounced contrasting juxtapositions he conducts can be found in the second section, where the strengths of both parties are discussed: "*We* are rich, privileged, and strong, but *they* are willing to die" (34, emphasis added). Later in the same section, DeLillo himself even picks up the "Us and Them" (34) binary, acknowledging his usage of this political instrument. His goal here, complying with the goal of the American government and mainstream media, is to justify US foreign policy transgressions in the name of "the war on terror".

We can also find this American sense of greatness as a tool for a sense of community in the beginning of the fifth part, where DeLillo once again seems to try and figure out the underlying motives of the terrorists, seemingly settling on jealousy. He claims that "[w]e don't have to depend on God or the prophets or other astonishments. We are the astonishment" (37), effectively implying that the terrorists lack the superior technology of the US or the Western World in general, which in a way forces them to rely on religion. This implication becomes explicit only a few lines later when he asks whether "they [would] need to rely on a God in whose name they kill the innocent" (37) if only they were on the same level technologically as the miraculous America. Another strategy DeLillo applies in this essay is to evoke solidarity through empathy and shared experience. This can best be observed in sections three and four

of the text. He describes scenes of community and solidarity at the improved memorials in Union Square Park (35) while keeping the reader included in this emotionality by the continuous usage of the pronoun *we*.

Furthermore, he repeatedly mentions the presence of a “flag” (35), which, it is safe to assume, refers to the American flag, tying in nicely with the motive of patriotism. In the same section, we are reminded of yet another American core value: multiculturalism. By interweaving the image of American patriotism represented by the flag with images of “passages from the Koran and the Bible” (35) side by side, as well as displayed artifacts representing the “confluence of a number of cultural tides” (35), DeLillo manages to remind his readership of the pluralism that is so ingrained in American history. Furthermore, by predicting a future which includes “false memories and imagined loss” (35), he also achieves to imply an omnipresent collective grieving which goes so deep as to being able to alter one’s memory, which implies an enormous importance of this event that will not yield in the future.

Moreover, DeLillo also displays American solidarity on a more intimate level. As an illustration of this functions section four of the text, which is dedicated to a personal account on the events of September 11. In this section, the reader is granted insight to how the attacks were experienced by individuals close-by. Since DeLillo in his processing of the trauma takes refuge in a strong national identity based on patriotism and the ideology of American exceptionalism, the entire fourth section reads as an ode to traditional values: throughout the events, the characters display senses of efficiency, empathy, community, the importance of family, love, helping others and crisis management (36 ,37).

In contrast to the extremely pronounced Us-vs-Them binary that can be found in DeLillo’s text, Hammad chooses to deal with the matter of generating solidarity and a sense of community differently. Like DeLillo, she utilizes the pronoun *we* as a tool to make the reader feel included in the statement. Contrary to DeLillo, however, she refuses to comply to the notion of mapping out a defined concept of an enemy in the sense of a binary. An Us-vs-Them thought compliant to the one utilized in DeLillo’s text as well as mainstream media and politics does appear in section four, first as “over there” (140) in contrast to an “over here”, and then in a traditional *we* and *them*-constellation. However, the lyrical I immediately revokes the implied binary by decentering the narrative of American victimhood and recapitulating the consequences of US foreign policy transgressions (140). In contrast to DeLillo, who only superficially grazes on the role American foreign policy might have had by mentioning “the blunt force of our foreign policy” (33) in passing, Hammad’s poem creates a space for the complexity of the background of 9/11.

Furthermore, the solidarity that is craved by the lyrical I extends further than America and includes the entire world, claiming that it is needed everywhere instead of only in the US. Whereas DeLillo highlights the singularity, the unprecedentedness of the events of 9/11, Hammad's *first writing since* dares to not only draw a comparison: "if there are any people on earth who understand how new York is// feeling right now, they are in the west bank and the gaza strip" (Hammad 141), but also chooses a situation where the US is actively involved in creating a situation that can in some ways compare to the events of 9/11. The differences, the tension and the distrust America holds toward the entire Arab world, which have multiplied because of the terrorist attacks of 9/11, are in this instance overcome, substituted with a "transnational link" (Jegić 1) born out of "emotional proximity" (Jegić 1). It is obvious that Hammad's text is striving for a transnational sense of solidarity and compassion, reminding the audience that there is a "shared universe of suffering" (Rothberg 148), which might help connect people to "the most restricted possible zone of public consciousness" (Rothberg 148), over the patriotically connotated notion of nationalized solidarity DeLillo craves to spread.

Additionally, the proposed binary that is mentioned in the beginning of the fourth section when someone on the radio states that they "will feel so much better when the first bombs drop *over there*" (Hammad 140, emphasis added), is broken up at the end of section six, which deals with the complexity of the question of responsibility. With the last line stating that "over there is over here" (Hammad 142), the text refuses to adhere to the common practice of creating a binary narrative of clearly defined friend and enemy. The strict disapproval of such binaries is also expressed earlier in that section, when the famous quote of President Bush is dismantled: "'either// you are with us, or with the terrorists" – meaning keep your people// under control and your resistance censored" (Hammad 142).

However, the poem does propose another binary that could be put in place in lieu of a narrative of *us vs the terrorists*. In the final section of the text, the quote of Bush is modified from "you are either with us, or with the terrorists" to "you are either with life, or against it" (143), thus essentially creating a binary of life vs death, or peace vs violence. This line, in addition to the previous line "we got to carry each other now" (143), also functions as an appeal, a plea for non-nationalized solidarity and social cohesion. The desire for said social cohesion and peace is also expressed in part three of the poem, which is occupied with the dead and the lost of the attacks. Reflecting the rhetorical style of the missing person reports of the relatives of the people who were lost on September 11, the last stanza of this section reads: "i am looking for peace. i am looking for mercy. i am looking for // evidence of compassion. [...] i am looking for// life" (Hammad 140), leaving the reader wondering whether this, like the "dead [, who] are

called lost” (Hammad 140), is something that is addressed as lost even though it is obvious that it is already dead.

There exist two kinds of solidarity comfort in this text. With the first kind, which is condemned by the lyrical I, solidarity and comfort to one group is conditional upon the hate toward another. We find this in the already mentioned first two stanzas of section four, where two characters, Ricardo and a crying woman in a car, indulge in a narrative of revenge which is born out of a binary construction of good and evil (Hammad 140). These two characters present the mainstream American narrative shortly after the attacks, and the poem tries to shift the focus of people away from revenge and towards a collective grieving, since the lyrical I claims that “if i can find through this exhaust people who were left behind to mourn and resist mass murder, i might be alright” (Hammad 141). This second kind of solidarity is rooted in understanding and comfort, mirroring the motif of the desire for peace and transnationality the poem employs. It appears in the form of a second woman, who offers comfort after empathically sensing the struggle of the lyrical I and validates the emotionally demanding position of being stuck in the middle of the widespread image of the enemy and having a brother who might be put in a dangerous position due to his job (Hammad 141).

As discussed earlier, DeLillo’s sense of solidarity is based on patriotism. *first writing since* picks up on the notion of American patriotism as well, which becomes apparent by the assessment of America being “the most privileged nation” (139). However, this text criticizes the importance that is laid upon citizenship over individualism in the course of mourning the victims killed by the events of 9/11. Whereas DeLillo’s text seems to draw strength and highlights the sense of unity resulting from the declarations of patriotism that are exhibited for example at the memorials, Hammad’s lyrical I claims a feeling a feeling of disconnect from their country invoked by the excessive performance of patriotism: “i have never felt less American and more new Yorker [...]//the stars and stripes represent the dead as citizens first – not // family members, not lovers” (142). The first letter of the word *Yorker* is capitalized, stressing the uniqueness, the particularity of New York City compared to the US in general: its multiculturalism is unmatched, which is why excessive patriotism usually is not as omnipresent as elsewhere in the states. This accentuation of New York City’s distinctiveness can also be observed in the last section of DeLillo’s *In the Ruins of the Future*, where it is stated that NYC “will accommodate every language, ritual, belief and opinion” (40). Interestingly, this statement is written in a future tense, indicating that, however much the events of September 11 might have altered the American sphere, this notion of multiculturalism is going to prevail.

I would now like to analyze the use of language in both texts and explore their specific implications, especially with regard to the disparate concepts of future and solidarity.

My first object of interest in this regard is what the people who conducted the attacks of 9/11 are referred to in both texts, as this provides the basis for my argument of what the focus in each text is. On the one hand, we can find DeLillo's essay, where a considerable part of the text tries to shed light on the background of the events, which entails looking into the operators of 9/11. In the course of doing so, the hijackers are consistently referred to as terrorists. In the first two sections of the text alone the words "terror" and "terrorist" appear six times (33,34).

Hammad's poem on the other hand, though dealing with the same event, manages to not use this word even once, apart from the time George W. Bush is quoted (142). Instead, the people responsible are referred to as "hijackers" (141) the one time they are explicitly mentioned. Apart from this, there is only one other time the hijackers are touched on: "I do not know how bad a life has to break in order to kill" (139), agreeing that there is a certain degree of brokenness in life that makes violence seem like a good option while simultaneously condemning the actions of the hijacker. This fifth stanza of section one of the poem offers an implicit attempt to try and put the actions into a context of complexity and refuses to comply with an undifferentiated view of pure good and evil. However, this is phrased implicitly as an I-message, because by not referring to the originators of 9/11 explicitly, they are denied space in the mind of the reader, facilitating Hammad's intention to focus on the implications 9/11 has for American citizens and the world in general.

DeLillo's essay grants the terrorists a lot of space, since he uses the hate for them as a tool to facilitate unity. Furthermore, while Hammad's poem in the few words it does allow on the terrorists implicates the political frustration and complexity behind their actions, DeLillo makes an effort to not put the actions into any political context. Instead, he attempts to depict the terrorist as misguided individuals who might be "less motivated by politics and personal hatred than by brotherhood itself" (34). This dismissal of any political agenda happens by laying focus on an individual instead of the broader complex of problems. It concentrates on what Butler calls "personal pathology" (5), and by highlighting the aspect of brotherhood as a driving factor of the events over the political sphere as an element of consideration, DeLillo escapes the need to come up with a broader and deeper explanation for the events. This depiction is supported by the rhetorical description of "the" terrorist in the grammatical sense of a singular subject, an individual.

Another interesting distinction can be made when looking at how the two authors talk about the US' foreign policy, as the choice of words give a good impression of their thoughts

on the topic. DeLillo writes about “the blunt force of our foreign policy” (33), only mentioning this topic once in the first part of his essay, imbedded in a list of things that “drew [the] fury” of the terrorists (33), the position of this topic in the list revealing the marginal importance he attaches to it.

In Hammad’s poem, however, the notion of American foreign policy keeps reappearing throughout the text. The foreign policy of the United States is referred to as “u.s. transgressions” (140), “america’s bullying” (141) and “hateful foreign policies” (142), thus strongly condemning the foreign policy the US employs. Nevertheless, while denouncing the US’ handling of foreign affairs, the poem also makes a point to distinguish between the American public and the government; emphasizing the unrighteousness of who was affected by the attacks: “these are my friends and fam, // and it could have been me in those buildings, and we’re not bad // people, do not support america’s bullying” (Hammad 141). Furthermore, the seventh stanza in the fifth section of the poem carries the implication that the US military tends to make ethically questionable decisions, as the lyrical I feels the need to pray for the orders her brother, who is a sergeant, might have to take, to be “righteous” (142) and not compromise his faith.

The next item I would like to consider is the use of ellipses. Ellipses are a stylistic device which are featured in both DeLillo’s and Hammad’s text, yet their particular functions differ greatly. In *first writing since*, the most prominent ellipses appear in the very beginning of the first section. The poem commences with the lines “there have been no words. // i have not written one word” (139), which in itself seems to be a contradiction, as the poem is, in fact, written. Notwithstanding, the more interesting part of this is the fact of how well it corresponds with the assumption that trauma influences and virtually breaks down language. As a traumatic experience has long been characterized as something outside the scope of normal human experience (Caruth 3), it is often impossible to immediately express the experienced satisfactorily, as language is limited by what we know. Therefore, traumatic experiences are often hard to describe in their singularity. This struggle with language can also be observed when considering the last three lines of this first stanza. Abiding by the rule of three, they feature parallelly constructed ellipses, which substantiate the breakdown of language with their incompleteness, all the while conveying a sense of speechlessness and somberness.

DeLillo, too, utilizes ellipses as a way of conveying speechlessness and being incapable of understanding, as we can see in section 6: “But when the towers fell. When the rolling smoke began moving downward” (39). The impossibility of understanding what is happening is therein strikingly portrayed by this breakdown and incompleteness of language.

In contrast to this particular function, ellipses in DeLillo's essay are also used to fulfill another. One example of that are the quick impressions of the scenery and atmosphere at the improvised memorials that are described in section three:

“The flags, flower beds, and votive candles, the lamppost hung with paper airplanes, the passages from the Koran and the Bible, the letters and poems, the cardboard John Wayne, the children's drawings of the Twin Towers, hand-painted signs for Free Hugs, Free Back Rubs, the graffiti of love and peace on the tall equestrian statue” (35).

This sequence essentially is a detailed list of what can be found at the memorial. The ellipsis generates a series of rhetorical snapshots, a quick flashing of images, creating a colorful picture in the reader's mind while simultaneously conveying an atmosphere of compassion, pluralism, solidarity and hope. Even though we can thus claim that DeLillo and Hammad utilize the stylistic device of the ellipsis differently, this long ellipsis in the DeLillo text can still be linked to the portrayal of the incomprehensibility of trauma in the sense that simply listing what one can see, might manage to absolve them from the responsibility of explaining it.

Further, the most interesting thing to look at is in what way the titles of the two texts are constructed with regards to the position either text takes on the events of 9/11.

The essay of Don DeLillo is titled “In the Ruins of the Future” (33), which carries several implications. Firstly, the choice of the word *ruin* conveys that the events of 9/11 caused severe damage to the future, destroying to a degree that its value has been lost completely. Secondly, the Twin Towers can be considered a symbol of the future, since in the wake of 9/11, they have been the ones who were turned into ruins, and with this title, DeLillo seems to suggest that destroying a symbol means to destroy what it stands for. Thirdly, while in the rest of his essay consistently using the pronoun “our” when talking about the future, i.e. predominantly targeting the future of America, in the title we can find a generalization, thereby indicating that 9/11 and its consequences have changed and will change the way it is going to be everywhere. Lastly, the preposition *in* enunciates that this condition of a ruined future is not overcome yet, but rather we seem to be in the middle of it still. The image of being located amidst ruins consequently evokes a feeling of crisis, danger and catastrophe, which still seems immediate and ongoing, thus creating an uneasy sense of “this is not over yet”.

A very different approach can be found looking at the title of Suheir Hammad's poem. Titled “first writing since” (139), it implies the new beginning of something. The focus here seems to be on the “after”, as the word *since* implies that something else has ended, and the

word *first* suggests that there might be more to come. Additionally, with regards with what has already been said about the ability of trauma to break down language, the phrase “first *writing* since” (emphasis added) also indicates a first attempt to deal with the trauma and overcome the blocking of language trauma generates by actively trying to translate the experience and its consequences into speech.

Evidently, there is an enormous divergence between the two approaches the different texts have in dealing with the events of 9/11 and how they contextualize them in regard to the future. On the one hand, DeLillo directs his gaze backwards. Driven by his trauma-invoked “possession of the past” (Caruth 151), he longs to “return us to a previous and deeply ‘American’ beginning” (Saal 80). Moreover, he suggests that the terror attacks of September 11 rendered the bright future America was supposed to have unstable and insecure by declaring parts of their world had “crumbled” into the world of the terrorists (DeLillo 33) in the wake of the events, “which means we are living in a place of danger and rage” (DeLillo 33) at the time the essay was written, which is indicated by the use of the present progressive “are living”(DeLillo 33). This is interesting because the rest of the essay is written in past tense, with only a few exceptions. Furthermore, the events seem to have initiated the beginning of the end of the world, as “[t]ime is scarcer now” (DeLillo 39), it is “forced and distorted” (DeLillo 39), once again the intentional utilization of the present tense invoking a sense of immediacy and high intensity.

Hammad’s poem on the other hand heavily implies the possibility of a future, as we have already seen analyzing the title. Moreover, taking a look at the last section of her text, this future might even have some positive aspects to it. In the third stanza of section 7, we can find an acknowledgment of the horrors the events of 9/11 brought about, and the negative consequences it has and will have everywhere: “there is death here, and there are promises of more” (Hammad 143). As there is no clarification of where exactly “here” is located, it is safe to assume that this is once again used in a general way, referring to everyone everywhere, implying the enormous and widespread impact of the events and thus solidifying the sense of solidarity that has been created throughout the entire poem.

However, even though the hardships of the events are acknowledged and addressed, the poem does not end on a negative note. The first line of the next stanza poses a parallelly constructed antithesis, seemingly a paradox, by commencing with “there is life here” (Hammad 143), changing the notion of hardship into a notion of hope and highlighting the fact that not all is lost, and that there is an opportunity for a rebirth of the future by introducing the phoenix (Hammad 143), the symbol of rebirth and hope.

Providing a point of view that deviates from the mainstream narrative centered around American victimhood, revenge, generalization and islamophobia which quickly arose after the events of September 11 is essential for a world which aims to prioritize global solidarity and transnationality over vengeance and “eye for an eye”- politics. Suheir Hammad’s poem *first writing since* manages to supply such a counter narrative without taking away any of the hurt and devastation of the American public, while simultaneously integrating the events into a three-dimensional framework which acknowledges the complexity of the political background and implications of the attacks.

As I have shown in this paper, even though two texts might use similar motifs, like the motif of solidarity, and similar imagery, like religious symbolism, these can be employed significantly differently. While Don DeLillo’s essay *In the Ruins of the Future* feeds into the first impulse of seeking revenge after being wronged, which is a narrative that has been carried out extensively in the public sphere after the attacks of 9/11, by directing its gaze toward an idealized past of America, the essay misses an important opportunity of self-reflection instead indulges in as well as encourages the stiffening of already-existing problems of the US, like islamophobia and a violent foreign policy. This opportunity is taken on by the poem of Suheir Hammad, which, instead of reinforcing a purely American-centered first-person narrative, demonstrates how it can be possible to fiercely condemn the measures taken by the terrorists without overgeneralizing the problem as one of religion and jealousy of America’s “exceptionalism”. Instead, this poem acts as an appeal to the entire world to direct the gaze toward the future, to rebuild and improve what has been destroyed on September 11, to focus on transnational solidarity, peace and hope, and not fall into the trap of seeking revenge, as all this will do is bring more death.

Therefore, Hammad’s work is able to function as a prime example of how tragedies like the terror attacks of 9/11 should be handled in the public sphere, as spreading a focus on the future, hope and compassion will ultimately create a non-dismissible range of influence, and by refusing to reproduce spiteful narratives, these self-centered narratives eventually have a chance to be overcome.

Works cited

Primary literature:

DeLillo, Don, et al. "In the Ruins of the Future, by Don DeLillo." *Harper's Magazine*, 21 December 2001, pp. 33-40.

Hammad, Suheir. "first writing since." *Trauma at Home: After 9/11*, edited by Judith Greenberg, University of Nebraska, 2003, pp. 139-43.

Secondary literature:

Bush, George W. "Address to a Joint Session of Congress and the American People." *National Archives and Records Administration*, 20 September 2001, <https://georgewbushwhitehouse.archives.gov/news/releases/2001/09/20010920-8.html>. Accessed 17 February 2022.

Butler, Judith. "Explanation and Exoneration, Or What We Can Hear." *Prekarious Life: The Powers of Mourning and Violence*, edited by Judith Butler, Verso, 2006, pp. 1-18.

Chan-Malik, Sylvia. "Cultural and Literary Production of Muslim America." *The Cambridge Companion to American Islam*, edited by Juliane Hammer and Omid Safi, Cambridge University Press, 2013, pp. 279-298.

Caruth, Cathy. "Recapturing the Past: Introduction." *Trauma: Explorations in Memory*, edited by Cathy Caruth, Johns Hopkins UP, 1995, pp. 151-57.

Caruth, Cathy. "Trauma and Experience: Introduction." *Trauma: Explorations in Memory*, edited by Cathy Caruth, Johns Hopkins UP, 1995, pp. 3-12.

Jegić, Denijal. "Breaking Dichotomies: Counter-Narratives in the Spoken Word Poetry of Suheir Hammad." *Current Objectives of Postgraduate American Studies* 16.1 (2015).

Rothberg, Michael. "'There Is No Poetry in This': Writing, Trauma, and Home." *Trauma at Home: After 9/11*, edited by Judith Greenberg, University of Nebraska, 2003, pp. 147-157.

Saal, Ilka. "Performing the Manifest: Don DeLillo, 9/11, and the American Temporality of Crisis." *Manifeste: Speerspitzen zwischen Kunst und Wissenschaft*, edited by Ralph J. Poole and Yvonne Katharina Kaisinger, Universitätsverlag WINTER Heidelberg, 2014, pp. 79-91.

