

Trump Fiction

Essays on Donald Trump in Literature, Film, and Television

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Chapter 6

The Deep Web of Conspiracies

Under the Shadow of Trump Tower in Thomas Pynchon's Bleeding Edge

Joseph M. Conte

It would seem impossible to write a novel that turns on the many unsubstantiated theories of the 9/11 attacks and the deep state of paranoia into which the country was plunged in their aftermath without reference to Donald J. Trump.¹ As the president might say in a Tweet, “Sad!” Trump’s own indulgence in conspiracy theories after 9/11, during his campaign for the presidency and as a pervasive feature of his administration, is intimately of a piece with Thomas Pynchon’s *Bleeding Edge* (2013), which not only looks back on 2001 but, published in 2013, also anticipates the present political moment of Trump’s presidency. The direct references to Trump in the novel are admittedly few, but the zeitgeist of paranoia, resurgent nationalism, Russian interference, and the Muslim Scare takes a page from major elements of Trump’s political persona. His Islamophobia, his extreme anti-immigration policies toward nonwhite asylum seekers, his plutocratic self-dealing, nepotism and corruption, and his baiting of Russian cyberintrusion into the electoral process (“Russia, if you’re listening, I hope you’re able to find the 30,000 emails [from Hillary Clinton’s private server] that are missing . . . I think you will probably be rewarded mightily by our press.” [Schmidt 2018]) all arise out of strains in American politics that were energized in the wake of 9/11. Like any historiographic metafiction and, really, all other novels by Pynchon from *V.* (1963) to *Inherent Vice* (2009), the novel places plausible and otherwise highly colorful characters in the historical moment immediately prior to and after 9/11, investigates the intricate weaving of that plot beyond mere “cause and effect,” and projects the future that is ours, Trump’s America.

Donald J. Trump’s checkered career as a real estate developer and his self-inflated ratings as a sometime reality TV star on NBC’s *The Apprentice*

do not seem to have prepared him very well for management of one of the world's largest bureaucracies and its only remaining superpower as president of the United States. Rather, Trump was schooled, not at the Wharton School and certainly not in the eponymous Trump University, in the halls or perhaps underground shelters of conspiracy theory, preceding and continuing through his campaign for the presidency. Beginning in 2010, Trump actively promoted the "birther" conspiracy that claimed his predecessor, Barack Obama, was not born in Honolulu, Hawaii, on August 4, 1961, but rather in Kenya, the native country of his father, and thus would be ineligible to hold the office of the president under Article 2 of the Constitution. This claim of illegitimacy, observers might speculate, only serves to mask Trump's deeply felt sense that the traditional nexuses of power, the Republican establishment, and the smart money would consider *him* to be an illegitimate, unfit candidate with no experience in elected office. To be fair, the claim originated with fringe theorists and was advanced by an assortment of right-wing radio talk show hosts, but Trump directed his now imprisoned personal lawyer, Michael Cohen, to intercede with the *National Enquirer* and its publisher David Pecker to run stories in the tabloid that questioned the legitimacy of Obama's birth certificate while simultaneously promoting the possibility of a Trump candidacy.² Note that the conspiratorial strategy of politicking is essentially disestablishmentarian, such that questioning the legitimacy of a known party as secretly pernicious becomes the leading recommendation for one's own notoriety. Such a strategy of derogation has been lustily employed by populists such as Huey Long and his "Share Our Wealth" campaign of the 1930s, Charles Lindbergh and his America First Committee of 1940, and Joseph McCarthy and the Red Scare of the 1950s. Trump would repeat his "birther" accusation in various media, at one point insinuating that Obama's reluctance to release his long-form birth certificate was because he had something to hide, such as his religion if not his birthplace.³ These baseless accusations comport with Trump's later attempts as president to ban by executive order all Muslim immigration into the United States and his attack on the Constitution's Fourteenth Amendment, which establishes birthright citizenship. He would eventually renounce his claims regarding Obama's citizenship in September 2016 as the Republican presidential nominee, only to assert falsely that his Democratic opponent, Hillary Clinton, was responsible for instigating the controversy during her unsuccessful bid for the 2008 Democratic presidential nomination. For Trump there is never an admission of fault; only, in the spirit of Roy Cohn (who was McCarthy's lawyer and political fixer before he was Trump's personal lawyer and mentor), every charge must be met with an obfuscating countercharge.

Beyond birtherism, Trump has breathed life into other conspiracy theories: that Antonin Scalia, the Supreme Court justice who died in his sleep while at

a remote West Texas hunting resort, was murdered; that, as reported on the cover of the *National Enquirer*, Rafael Cruz, Ted Cruz's Cuban-born father, was photographed with Lee Harvey Oswald, the assassin of President John F. Kennedy; that between three and five million illegal votes were cast during the presidential election, many by undocumented migrants and more than Hillary Clinton's margin in the popular vote count; that Clinton aide and confidant Vincent Foster did not commit suicide; and that vaccines may be the cause of autism and other ailments (Cillizza 2018). And yet, the most egregious of such claims are those having to do with the national tragedy of 9/11. At the time that "low-energy" Jeb Bush was still Trump's main competition for the Republican presidential nomination, Trump attacked Jeb's assertion that his brother, President George W. Bush, had kept America safe. Trump countered that not only had W. failed to stop the September 11 attacks, Bush had known that the 2001 attacks were coming and did nothing. In an appearance on CNN's *New Day* on October 20, 2015, Trump claimed, "His brother could have made some mistakes with respect to the actual hit because they did know it was coming and George Tenet, the head of the CIA, told them it was coming. . . . So they did have advanced notice and they didn't really work on it" (Greenberg 2015). Among the conspiracy theories that swirl around 9/11, foreknowledge of the attacks nefariously suggests that the Bushes and the CIA stood to benefit in their domestic politics or foreign policy objectives, or worse, that the catastrophe was a "false flag" operation conducted by rogue elements within the US government and planted on Osama bin Laden and his poorly resourced Islamist al Qaeda network.

In Pynchon's *Bleeding Edge*, Maxine Tarnow, a censured Certified Fraud Examiner, interviews Chandler Platt, a high-powered New York attorney, regarding video recording of armed rooftop spotters on or before the morning in question, to which Platt replies that he has heard "something . . . peculiar. Not out loud, or in so many words, but as if [. . .] they know already what's going to happen" (Pynchon 2013, 284).⁴ Maxine's ex-husband, Horst Loeffler, a commodities trader with sublet offices on the top floors of the World Trade Center, observes that the week before the attacks there were an inordinate number of put options on United and American airlines, whose planes were then hijacked, and that the last trading days before Tuesday, September 11, saw a series of suspicious stock transactions involving firms located in the World Trade Center, indicating "foreknowledge" of the attacks (324). Theories that 9/11 was an inside job, of course, can be counterfactual; but Maxine's old-lefty father, Ernie Tarnow, proposes, "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. Trained, sometimes since birth, never to run off at the mouth" (325). One

less distinguished inductee into the Skull and Bones secret society at Yale University was George W. Bush, arguably groomed from birth for membership by his father, President George H. W. Bush, also an alumnus. Skull and Bones has been linked to conspiracy theories of world domination (the phrase New World Order comes to mind), and because James Jesus Angleton, the chief of CIA Counterintelligence from 1954 to 1975, was also a Bonesman, there is the suggestion that the CIA has long been under the control of Skull and Bones.

Even so, it's astounding that a major-party candidate for president would endorse the claim that the US government had known in advance about the 9/11 plot. And once elected, President Trump, according to Julie Hirschfeld Davis and Maggie Haberman (2018), writing in the "failing" *New York Times*, continued to promote "new, unconfirmed accusations to suit his political narrative." He is a "president who has for decades trafficked in conspiracy theories [and] brought them from the fringes of public discourse to the Oval Office. Now that he is president, Mr. Trump's baseless stories of secret plots by powerful interests . . . have fanned fears that he is eroding public trust in institutions, undermining the idea of objective truth and sowing widespread suspicions about the government and news media that mirror his own" (Davis and Haberman 2018). Trump's paranoid style of politicking is a carry-over from his approach to management, or the art of the deal, throughout his career in business. A hallmark of conspiracy theory is the assertion that someone, somewhere is in supreme control, which nevertheless masks a deep anxiety of underlying chaos. Trump's paranoid management style is both an overweening assertion of control, "Nobody knows the system better than me, which is why I alone can fix it" ("Transcript: Donald Trump at the G.O.P. Convention" 2016), and the deliberate provocation of chaos that sends rivals and underlings into the swirling waters of Charybdis. Politically motivated conspiracy theories tend to coagulate into two separate but ultimately related camps. One emanates from sources exogenous to government, which may share the goal of exposing covert consolidations of power against the people's will, or theories of a government that is secretly, powerfully in control of the body politic. Trump's assault on the fourth estate as "fake news" serves his political narrative by attempting to delegitimize any reporting that he perceives to be critical, unflattering, or an exposé of the emoluments of the office to which he feels entitled. Like Kellyanne Conway's apparently unironic proposal of "alternative facts" (the other side of the "fake news" coin), such charges rise to the level of conspiracy theory because, as Davis and Haberman (2018) point out, they undermine the very idea of objective truth by positing that observable facts are not to be believed.⁵ As Trump stated explicitly in one of his rambling speeches, "Just remember, what you are seeing and what you are reading is not what's happening. . . . Just stick with us, don't believe the crap

you see from these people, the fake news” (Tornoe 2018).⁶ Trump’s charge of “fake news” expresses a paranoid politics, reminiscent of Richard M. Nixon’s hatred of the press and the *Washington Post* in particular during the Watergate scandal, in which mainstream news media conspire to tear down the presidency by false accusation.

The second source of conspiracy theories in Trump’s brain is endogenous to government. The chief culprit is the “Deep State,” an unelected alliance of the national security apparatus and the career bureaucrats resistant to the change that Trump promised, who conspire to sabotage his political career. It’s worth recalling that Deep Throat, the anonymous informant who was responsible for providing Bob Woodward and Carl Bernstein of the *Washington Post* with information that implicated Nixon in the Watergate break-in, was ultimately revealed to be Mark Felt, the associate director of the FBI. No wonder that Trump demanded loyalty from FBI Director James Comey and that the investigation by Special Counsel Robert Mueller included the potential charge of obstruction of justice (one of the articles of impeachment against Nixon) relating to Comey’s dismissal. As Trump exclaimed to Russia’s foreign minister, Sergey V. Lavrov, and Russia’s ambassador to the United States, Sergey I. Kislyak, in the Oval Office, “I just fired the head of the F.B.I. He was crazy, a real nut job. . . . I faced great pressure because of Russia. That’s taken off,” adding, “I’m not under investigation” (Apuzzo, Haberman, and Rosenberg 2017). Endogenous conspiracies, including in Trump’s mind the Mueller investigation into collaboration between his campaign and the Kremlin, likewise seek to bring down the presidency by false accusation, engaging in a “witch hunt.”

Cultivating an unhealthy disbelief lies at the heart of conspiracy theory. Such speculation obstinately casts doubt on the consensus explanations for a host of historical events, while advancing extremist positions that invariably claim to uncover unacknowledged nexuses of power. Like the sinking of the *Lusitania* in 1915, the attack on Pearl Harbor in 1941, or the assassination of John F. Kennedy in 1963, 9/11 has attracted its share of conspiracy theories from across the political spectrum. From the paranoid-countercultural Left, 9/11 raised the specter of a “false flag” attack meant to promote a neoconservative agenda of war in the oil-rich Middle East and a Pax Americana; while from the populist-extremist Right arose the ugly visage of global anti-Semitism, that the Mossad or its American moles had engineered a controlled demolition of the towers to, again, foment war with Israel’s enemies. Or, that banking and multinational corporate interests, evidenced by a spike in suspicious trading on the Wall Street Stock Exchange shortly before the attacks, conspired to advance a globalist New World Order. Maxine’s brother-in-law, Avram “Avi” Deschler, freshly returned from business in Israel, fumes, ““Every Jew hater in this town [. . .] is blaming 9/11 on Mossad. Even a story

going around about Jews who worked down at the Trade Center all calling in sick that day, warned away by Mossad through their ‘secret network’” (Pynchon 2013, 325). To which his wife, Brooke, adds with only a touch of sarcasm, “The Jews dancing on the roof of that van over in Jersey, [. . .] watching it all collapse, don’t forget that one” (325). In the polymorphism of conspiracy theory, the supposed exultations of the Jews are transformed in the Islamophobic mind of Trump into the celebration of Arab-Americans from the vantage of Jersey City. At a campaign rally in Birmingham, Alabama, on November 21, 2015, Trump asserted, “I watched when the World Trade Center came tumbling down. . . . And I watched in Jersey City, N.J., where thousands and thousands of people were cheering as that building was coming down. Thousands of people were cheering” (Carroll 2015). When challenged on the factuality of this claim, because Trump could not have observed these celebrations from his apartment in Trump Tower in Midtown Manhattan, he told George Stephanopoulos, “It was on television. I saw it. . . . It was well covered at the time, George. Now, I know they don’t like to talk about it, but it was well covered at the time. There were people over in New Jersey that were watching it, a heavy Arab population, that were cheering as the buildings came down. Not good” (Carroll 2015). Considering that 9/11 was the most widely viewed event in real time in human history, no archival television coverage or newspaper reports of American Muslim celebrations have been found. And yet, the lack of corroboration in the “fake news” is no obstacle to the conspiring mind; rather, it’s evidence of a cover-up of whatever “they” don’t want you to know.

Regardless of denomination, conspiracy theory is an expression of incredulity with respect to any rationale delivered by mainstream media or the institutions of the administered state, such as the Warren Commission or the 9/11 Commission. In his classic essay, “The Paranoid Style in American Politics,” Richard Hofstadter observes that obsessive pedantry is a characteristic common to all stripes of conspiracy theorists: “One of the impressive things about paranoid literature is the contrast between its fantasied conclusions and the almost touching concern with factuality it invariably shows. It produces heroic strivings for evidence to prove that the unbelievable is the only thing that can be believed” (1964, 85). A conspiracy theory—if it were truly credible—would assume a level of factuality and the perpetrators of such conspiracy would be, as Pynchon writes of Tyrone Slothrop in *Gravity’s Rainbow*, “positively identified and detained” (Pynchon [1973] 1995, 712). In which case, such a conspiracy is no longer theory but truth. Where is the body of Osama bin Laden, if he ever existed? Where is the second gunman who fires from the grassy knoll in Dealey Plaza? The essence of conspiracy theory is that it exploits a form of unrepresentability; it is an attack on the dominant forms of representation. If it can be *shown*, it’s not the viral insinuation

of terror in the body politic. We can't show you the body, because *they* will never allow their secrets to be revealed; and therefore, since you cannot have the body, such secrets must lie recondite within the bowels of power. No longer relegated to dark crevices and crackpots, paranoid conspiracy has been injected into mainstream culture—as the poison of controlled demolition, a forged birth certificate, crisis actors, and the Deep State—with the syringe now wielded by a president who acts as conspirator-in-chief.

No doubt the magus of the paranoid style of literature is Thomas Pynchon. *Bleeding Edge* is perhaps more Pynchonesque than any of his novels in that it recapitulates conspiracy theories alluded to in earlier works, involving, for example, international cartels (IG Farben manufactures the aromatic polymer Imipolex G for use as rocket insulation in *Gravity's Rainbow*; its subsidiary produced the cyanide-based pesticide, Zyklon B, for use at Auschwitz); secret societies (the Trystero, as in a tryst or clandestine meeting, in *The Crying of Lot 49*); Freemasons, Illuminati, and Jesuits (featured in the eighteenth-century setting of *Mason & Dixon*); and the totalitarian surveillance state (the malignant Brock Vond, from the Old Norse *váendr*, evil, in *Vineland*). *Bleeding Edge* begins on the first day of spring, the vernal equinox, March 20, 2001, as the rising sun fills the Callery Pear trees on the Upper West Side in Manhattan with unnaturally bright light, and it ends with those same pear trees blooming again one year later. On a similarly bright morning in September of that year, a few days before the autumnal equinox, the sun slants between the twin towers of the World Trade Center shortly before they were turned into pillars of fire. On this astronomical calendar the twin towers are a modern Stonehenge, marking the turn not of the millennium, feared by programmers and their binary digit calendars, but in the social order that was remade in the aftermath of September 11, 2001.⁷ The novel spans the period from the collapse of the dot-com bubble to the initial forays of the war on terror, and in that solar year suggests that, had we paid more attention to the details, we might have predicted the pillars' collapse.

While *Bleeding Edge* only briefly tarries on the day of the attacks, the novel strongly implies that the calamity of September 11, 2001, should not have been thoroughly unexpected, but neither was it unprovoked, as the rules of engagement between Islamists and market capitalists had already been drawn up. Nor is the country innocent of conspiring in an assault on legitimate foreign governments. The first assignment of one of the book's villains, a rogue CIA agent named Nicholas Windust (i.e., covering his fingerprints), was as a field operative in the assassination of the democratically elected, Marxist president of Chile, Salvador Allende, "on 11 September 1973" (Pynchon 2013, 108). An adviser in "the infamous School of the Americas" promoting neoliberal privatization and the armed overthrow of leftist states (109), Windust is the novel's representative of the Deep State that surreptitiously

acts on US foreign policy and intervenes as necessary in its domestic affairs. Windust is now investigating Gabriel Ice's computer security firm hashslin-grz for the illegal transfer of millions of USD via *hawala* to the Dubai account of a known Islamist paymaster. He shares the hashslin-grz file with Maxine, knowing of her investigation into irregularities in the company's books. The question is why would Ice, who is an American Jew, be providing aid and comfort to the existential enemies of the state of Israel? While this information may come courtesy of the Mossad, Windust warns Maxine about some of the informants in her own investigation: "You've heard of the Civil Hackers' School in Moscow?" (264). Why yes, the Civil Hackers' School is an internet security firm in Moscow that may have been used by Russian military intelligence to recruit an elite team of computer hackers for its cyberwarfare program and, in particular, its assault on the servers of the Democratic National Committee in 2016 (Kramer 2016). Windust informs her: "According to some of my colleagues, it was created by the KGB, it's still an arm of Russian espionage, its mission statement includes destroying America through cyberwarfare. Your new best friends Misha and Grisha are recent graduates, it seems" (264). Although the Russian torpedoes will later deny having any such diplomas, claiming they're only "*chainiki*" (371), dumb as teakettles, the novel's emphasis on Russian cyberespionage uncannily prefigures the conspiracy theories that have seized the popular imagination in Trump's America. Reflecting on 9/11 conspiracies, it's possible that Ice is funneling money to the jihadists on behalf of the neoconservative Deep State in its conduct of an operation that will prompt US intervention in the Middle East. Pynchon's acuity with regard to all things conspiratorial, however, also points forward to the 2016 presidential elections, the *kompromat* on Donald Trump supposedly contained in Christopher Steele's dossier, and Trump's later protestations at the Helsinki summit that he didn't "see any reason why" Russia would interfere in the American elections because, you know, "President Putin was extremely strong and powerful in his denial" (Diamond 2018), thus publicly rebuking the US intelligence community. Windust is an a priori agent of the Deep State in what will become Trump's "Russia thing" (Griffiths 2017).

Bleeding Edge doggedly pursues the conspiracy theories behind 9/11 without appearing to validate any one of them. Pynchon prods his gullible reader, as he does in *Gravity's Rainbow*, "You will want cause and effect. All right" (Pynchon [1973] 1995, 663). As Igor Dashkov, an affiliate of the Russian mafia in Brighton Beach, tells Maxine, regarding the putative funding of anti-jihadists by Vladimir Putin's FSB, "You want secular cause and effect, but here, I'm sorry, is where it all goes off books" (Pynchon 2013, 376). Pynchon's narrative is an exercise in the paranoid style of literature, but he advisedly holds the unrepresentability of conspiracy theory to account: you will

want the body of evidence; you will want the bodies of the nineteen hijackers whose Arabic names were variously misreported, but that cannot be found.

The leads in Maxine's fraud case, following the hashslingrz money, come in the form of videotapes in plain manila envelopes from a documentary filmmaker/pirater, Reg Despard, and on flash drives from a codebreaker named Eric Outfield. From Watergate's Deep Throat to Wikileaks' Julian Assange and Edward Snowden's revelations of domestic surveillance at the NSA, whistleblowers have signaled penalties within the political, military, and security apparatus. All trails in the investigation lead to Gabriel Ice, the CEO of hashslingrz, one of the few firms in Manhattan's Silicon Alley to survive the technology bust. Consistent with Pynchon's anti-realist penchant for daffy double-entendre, Ice's surname conjures either the "intrusion counter-measures electronics" of William Gibson's cyberpunk classic, *Neuromancer* (1984, 28), or Immigration and Customs Enforcement, which suggests that this avenging angel may either be operating to secure American interests abroad or exploiting the "back doors" of the surveillance packages he codes for his own financial benefit. Ice's firm is either some form of electronic "*hawala*" that is moving money to jihadist groups in the Emirates without interest charges or transaction histories (Pynchon 2013, 81); or, it gains foreknowledge of the attacks and profits on the "leading indicator[s]" of the conspiracy (452). In which case, he is either a patriot or a traitor; or, more than likely, he is a self-dealing agent who defies ideological alignments. Ice may be descended from Immanuel Ice, the ferryman who leads the surveyors Charles Mason and Jeremiah Dixon across the Big Yochio Geni (Youghiogheny) River in Maryland in August 1767 in Pynchon's *Mason & Dixon* (1997, 659). Perhaps like his ancestor, the only survivor of an Indian Massacre, Gabriel is the Charon whose dealings lead Maxine across the Styx into the oblivion of the Deep Web.

Not coincidentally, Ice's home out in Montauk, Long Island, fitted with "four-figure showerheads as big as pizzas, marble for the bathtubs special-ordered from Carrara, Italy, custom glaziers for gold-streaked mirror glass" emulates the gauche taste of "tabloid figure Donald Trump's" Manhattan tower. Like the bankrupt developer, "Ice is now applying the guiding principle of the moneyed everywhere—pay the major contractors, blow off the small ones" (Pynchon 2013, 188). The parallels between Ice and Trump extend beyond the penchant for wealthy developers to stiff contractors, though that was a recurrent theme of Trump projects such as the failed Trump Taj Mahal Casino in Atlantic City, Trump National Doral Miami golf club, the Mar-a-Lago estate in Palm Beach, Florida, and of course, Trump Tower in Manhattan. Miscreant real estate developers of the 1980s such as Trump became a model for miscreant dot-commers of the 1990s, as represented by Ice. Just as Ice, at bare minimum, is under fraud investigation for laundering

money overseas from his computer security firm, so we know that Trump “received at least \$413 million in today’s dollars from his father’s real estate empire, much of it through tax dodges in the 1990s,” and that he and his siblings “participated in dubious tax schemes during the 1990s, including instances of outright fraud, that greatly increased the fortune he received from his parents,” according to a lengthy exposé in the *New York Times* (Barstow, Craig, and Buettner 2018).⁸ As a result of his six bankruptcies, Trump was unable to secure capital loans for his projects from American banks, so he sought loans from Deutsche Bank and, if his tax returns are ever made public, it may be revealed that he is deeply indebted to Russian oligarchs as well. The references to Trump’s career as a real estate developer in *Bleeding Edge* suggest that his avariciousness, litigiousness, bullying of his competitors and contractors, and his flouting of the law, for which he may still be indicted after leaving office, schooled the virtual entrepreneurs of the dot-com bubble of 1994 to 2000 such as Gabriel Ice. March Kelleher, long-time activist and regretful mother-in-law of Ice, makes the connection crystal clear over a cholesterol-soaked brunch with Maxine at the Piraeus Diner on Columbus Avenue: “Central Park itself isn’t safe, these men of vision, they dream about CPW to Fifth Avenue solid with gracious residences. [. . .] At the same time, here’s all these greedy fuckin dotcomers make real-estate developers look like Bambi and Thumper” (116). Or Bambi and Trumper. More than just the gentrification of the “Yupper West Side” (166), where Mr. Pynchon is said to have a residence, the Trump Tower at 725 Fifth Avenue, New York, NY 10022, which houses not only the Trump Organization’s offices but Donald and Melania Trump’s gauchely decorated apartments, fails to approach the concentration of excess capital that Silicon (V)alley entrepreneurs and venture capitalists have amassed.

An earlier reference to Trump occurs when Maxine conducts an informal interview with a venture capitalist in SoHo named Rockwell “Rocky” Slaghiatt. Rocky’s firm has a stake in Ice’s operations, including a failed dot-com called hwgaahwgh that appears to have been used as a shell company through which Ice inconspicuously moves funds. Rocky affects a “disingenuously ethnic” schtick in this scene that winks at stereotypes of the Italian-American mafia (Pynchon 2013, 61), which is interesting in the context of Maxine’s fraud investigation. When pressed, Rocky admits that he has not only dined with Ice in upscale restaurants on the Upper East Side but also crossed paths with him near his home in Montauk (63–64). Rocky offers Maxine a \$5,000 retainer, but she corrects him, “Five hundred, jeez all right I’m impressed, but it’s only enough so I can start a ticket. Next invoice you can be Donald Trump or whatever, OK?” (65). It’s hard to say whether Rocky’s largesse is some sort of a bribe, possibly for Maxine to look the other way rather than pursue the trail of Ice’s shell companies. It’s no secret that Donald Trump’s

alleged ties to New York and Philadelphia mob families were “extraordinarily extensive,” involving both his Atlantic City casino and Trump Tower, a skyscraper built from concrete rather than steel, for which Trump employed the concrete company S&A, controlled by the Genovese and Gambino crime families (Frates 2015). Ice may be involved in the virtual underworld of the Deep Web, while in the gloves-off world of New York real estate development Trump has had to make friends with various mobbed-up characters.

As any mob movie will relate, crossing the boss on the receipts of a job, or siphoning the vigorish (Russian выигрыш, winnings) on a loan, will usually be fatal. Such is the case with Lester Traipse, the former owner of hwgaah-wgh.com, who has embezzled money from Ice’s suspect funds transfers and turns up dead by the rooftop pool of The Deseret luxury apartment building on the Upper West Side. On the night before his “departure,” Traipse leaves a long message on the cellphone of Igor Dashkov to the effect that he is in fear for his life and that “Only choice I have left is DeepArcher,” a virtual space where he can seek “sanctuary” (Pynchon 2013, 376). Later, Maxine encounters the avatar of Lester there, or perhaps a “bot preprogrammed with dialogue” to respond to her questions (427). Also to be found in DeepArcher is a virtual city fashioned by her sons Ziggy and Otis, christened Zigotisopolis, composed of “graphics files for a version of NYC as it was before 11 September 2001” (428). The boys have rendered a more benevolently hued Manhattan, one seen the in silver-gelatin prints of Berenice Abbott’s and Alfred Stieglitz’s photographs or even Woody Allen’s *Manhattan* (1979): “Somebody somewhere in the world, enjoying that mysterious exemption from time which produces most Internet content, has been patiently coding together these vehicles and streets, this city that can never be. The old Hayden Planetarium, the pre-Trump Commodore Hotel, upper-Broadway cafeterias that have not existed for years” (428). The Commodore Hotel was a Beaux Arts hotel that opened in 1919 on Forty-Second Street near Grand Central Terminal, named after the “Commodore” Cornelius Vanderbilt, railroad baron and one of the wealthiest men in American history. In 1975, Donald Trump was a relatively small player in real estate development from the outer boroughs who saw an opportunity to develop the dilapidated property cheaply. He received an unprecedented forty-year tax abatement from the city through the intercession of Mayor Abe Beame, a close friend of Fred C. Trump. But the Donald did not have the quarter of a million dollars needed to secure an option agreement with the bankrupt Penn Central, which owned the Commodore. “Instead, he bluffed. He falsely announced to the press that the option was a done deal and tricked the city government” by sending an unsigned copy of the agreement to City Hall (Rosenthal 2016). It was a crooked deal. Trump’s acquisition of the Commodore exemplifies his shady business practices in the service of gentrification and crony capitalism. And

yet, Pynchon's evocation of a kinder, gentler pre-Trump Manhattan (or, for that matter, before his father's postwar redlining of the Trump housing projects in the boroughs) uncannily prefigures how greed, corruption, and divisiveness will come to define Trump's America. Perhaps as an affirmation of this vision of a better New York in the virtual space of DeepArcher, the New York City Council resolved "that despite president-elect Donald Trump's senseless threats, NYC will remain a Sanctuary City for immigrant residents," on December 6, 2016 ("The New York City Council," n.d.).

Maxine's widening investigation of Ice's computer security firm takes her over the side, from the surface Web with all its banal chatter and cheap transactions into the Deep Web, beyond tracking software and Google-bot indexing, to the virtual space of DeepArcher. Here on the "bleeding edge" there may yet be sanctuary (Pynchon 2013, 78), including for the avatars of 9/11's casualties, "brought here by loved ones so they'll have an afterlife" (357), or conversely, "all kinds of deep encryption" put there by Ice, the feds, terrorists, or other forces unknown to protect their assets and illicit dealings (354). The duplicity of information is like a two-way mirror that presents an image of factuality to the party on its bright side while concealing the secretive existence of the party on its dark side. Maxine's father, Ernie, channeling his old-lefty sensibilities and possibly Pynchon's as well, reminds us that what looks like freedom on the Web is really "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). Maxine jokes with Reg Despard that "paranoia's the garlic in life's kitchen, right, you can never have too much" (11). In the era of paranoid politics, in which every symbol is a false flag, incredulity is the best and only defense.

Donald Trump has been writing his own false narratives for years. Let's call it Trump fiction. His typical rhetorical ploys include extravagant hyperbole, categorical rejoinders to any charge (e.g., "I am the least racist person that you have ever met" [Scott 2018]), belittling nicknames, and a conspiracist's attribution that "they say" whatever outrageous claim he has neither the facts nor the sources to corroborate. So, the tabloid style of the *National Enquirer* has taken over the Twitter feed of the office of the president. Trump's fiction is an amalgam of lies, deceit, and indecent attacks on individuals and classes of people. By contrast, Thomas Pynchon's *Bleeding Edge* takes up the paranoid style in its salutary, recuperative, and inclusive form. As a fraud investigator, Maxine Tarnow is in pursuit of the truth of Gabriel Ice's clandestine financial dealings, of Lester Traipse's murder, and of the attacks on September 11, 2001. She is the Skeptical Inquirer who pursues the leads and weighs the evidence presented by the novel's conspiracists, including March

Kelleher, Ernie Tarnow, Reg Despard, Eric Outfield, Nicholas Windust, and Ice himself. Like Agent Mueller, she believes that the *truth* is out there.

NOTES

1. A portion of this chapter will appear in my book *Transnational Politics in the Post-9/11 Novel*, forthcoming from Routledge. Reprinted with permission.
2. “In 2010, at Cohen’s urging, the *National Enquirer* began promoting a potential Trump presidential candidacy, referring readers to a pro-Trump website Cohen helped create. With Cohen’s involvement, the publication began questioning President Barack Obama’s birthplace and American citizenship in print, an effort that Trump promoted for several years, former staffers said” (Horwitz 2018).
3. See Bump (2019). Here again, Trump’s insinuations only serve to underscore his own reluctance to release his tax returns, his academic transcripts, or his standardized test scores.
4. Ellipses in quotations from *Bleeding Edge* are Pynchon’s, except where indicated by brackets.
5. See also Blake (2017).
6. The address was to the Veterans of Foreign Wars Convention in Kansas City, Missouri.
7. Pynchon joins the British novelist Martin Amis (see “September 11,” in *The Second Plane: September 11: Terror and Boredom* [2008]) in refusing to use the numerical acronym of 9/11 because it denotes a parochial American exceptionalism.
8. The authors won the 2019 Pulitzer Prize for Explanatory Reporting for this investigation.

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