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# Changed Worlds? American Studies, Trauma Studies, and September 11, 2001

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Journalist Ron Suskind has reported a conversation from the summer of 2002 with a senior adviser to then-President George W. Bush that aptly introduces why the notion of a "changed world" after September 11, 2001 matters to the fields of both American Studies and Trauma Studies—let alone to the actual world that each purports to study. He recalls that

> [t]he aide said that guys like me were "in what we call the reality-based community," which he defined as people who "believe that solutions emerge from your judicious study of discernible reality." I nodded and murmured something about enlightenment principles and empiricism. He cut me off. "That's not the way the world really works anymore," he continued. "We're an empire now, and when we act, we create our own reality. And while you're studying that reality – judiciously, as you will – we'll act again, creating other new realities, which you can study too, and that's how things will sort out. We're history's actors … and you, all of you, will be left to just study what we do." (Suskind 2004)

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This anecdote effectively itemizes what has been at stake within the fraught post-September 11 historical moment—the "real world," so to speak—as well as for journalists, scholars, and others seeking to understand that moment: how to answer questions as existentially and epistemologically fundamental as "what is the world," "what happens to and within it," and "who gets to make sense of that world?" This adviser, working within the U.S. government, even makes a uniquely unambiguous affirmative claim on behalf of the nation he serves, stating, "We're an empire now."

September 11 brought to the fore the acute entanglement of ongoing intellectual preoccupations across multiple disciplines. They include the prevalent theoretical recognition within the academy of the interdependent relationship within discourse between knowledge and power; the American Studies concern with how this relationship has shaped contested notions of "American Exceptionalism" and an "American Empire;" and a Trauma Studies interest in abrupt and violent disruption to what is regarded and experienced as ordinary life—the world as we (thought) we knew it.

Like any other event but on a vastly larger scale than most, September 11 left a footprint on contemporary cultural consciousness and has occasioned reflection about the ever-contingent and always relational processes of characterization, interpretation, and response. What is said about the world around us and who gets to say it channel in circumscribed ways how it is understood, which in turn lead to reactions constrained within finite terms. Following cautions by Thomas Kuhn (1996), Michel Foucault (1980), Edward Said (1978), and Judith Herman (1997), among others, theorists across the sciences, humanities, and social sciences have come to recognize the methodological challenges, hermeneutical implications, and therefore the imprints of politics and power that "the study of" anything entails.

I will begin by delineating the vantage points within which I write, positions conditioned by training within the fields of American Studies as well as Trauma Studies. After rendering these starting points transparent, I will then move through the interrelations of characterization, interpretation, and response to examine how September 11, by seeming to augur a precipitously-changed world, manifests as a trauma through

popular culture representation, particularly within the literature and film of the early twenty-first century. At the locus of popular culture, the fields of American Studies and Trauma Studies intersect to reveal how forms of entertainment accessible to most Americans without expectation of particular expertise engage fixedly with the disruptions of subjectivity, agency, and responsibility prompted by September 11 and sustained by its fallout.

## 2.1 American Studies: Knowledge, Power, and Culture

Since its nascence as a focused area of study, American Studies has pursued a problem-oriented and therefore methodologically- and disciplinarily-dynamic approach. That is to say, American Studies scholars have persistently confronted the conceptual terrain of the "American," which has raised rather than followed the questions of disciplinary organization and method. Necessarily, such questions have evolved over time along with the contemporary assumptions and preoccupations of academic thought. Consequently, while the interest in understanding the term "American" and refining the (inter)discipline[1] of "American Studies" has endured from the field's inception, the resulting trajectory of theoretical production manifests stark changes in priorities and values.

What began as an endeavor to delineate the distinctiveness of a homogenous American culture—framed through narratives of "American Exceptionalism"—has developed into an exploration of the everyday lives and practices of the diverse peoples materially and inextricably involved in that American culture—or counternarratives to what would come to be viewed as the imperialist imposition of power flowing from exceptionalist conceptions of the nation. In one sense then, the history of American Studies is a history of knowledge as power, of scholarship

[1]Americanists draw on cultural studies, history, literature, media studies, philosophy, psychology, sociology…in effect, any discipline whose theoretical investments and methodological approaches can support fruitful inquiry about American culture. Terming the field an "interdiscipline" most efficiently foregrounds the interdisciplinarity at the heart of the practice of American Studies.

as capable of setting the terms—the discourse—for who and what is known, how, and with what consequences. A self-aware critique of discursive formations and their implications pervaded the practice of American Studies by the end of the twentieth century, shaping how Americanists would approach September 11, 2001 and its aftermath.

The early intertwining between the national culture Americanists sought to study and their own ideological predispositions has rendered the notion of American Exceptionalism a critical and enduring preoccupation of the field. Robert Gross argues that the "founders of the American Studies 'movement' made this idea of exceptionalism the central problematic" of that movement (2000, 385). But many critiques have since emerged. Illustrating one category of critique, Michael Bérubé contextualizes this project within a Cold War era in which academic research complemented national interests (2003, 109). As Paul Giles succinctly summarizes, "the end of the Second World War led to a patriotic desire to identify certain specifically American values and characteristics; this led to various mythic idealizations of the American spirit in seminal critical works of the 1950s" (1994, 335) so that scholars contemplating how the U.S. could be understood as a novel nation produced scholarship that elaborated singular qualities within its history. Yet as Gross points out, "Ever since the Puritans, spokesmen for America have claimed a special destiny…Whatever the version, Americans have repeatedly deemed themselves an 'exceptional' people, favored by history" (2000, 384–385). For Gross, scholars of American culture in the early- to mid-twentieth century were trying, not necessarily to advocate for this view, but rather to explicate and evaluate a pre-existing conceptualization dominating a nation's rhetoric about itself (385–387). Whether Americanists are regarded as having endorsed or challenged the idea that the U.S. occupies a special place in world history, that idea has persisted within American cultural consciousness and therefore has persisted as a focal point for American Studies research. The notion of American Exceptionalism still sufficiently mattered in both American culture and American Studies scholarship by September 11, 2001 to occasion continued, and by then increasingly expressly critical, assessments of the term as a phenomenon with real effects in the world.

Those increasingly and expressly critical assessments emerged forcefully by the end of the twentieth century. Informed by developments within other disciplines, American Studies scholars began to adhere more explicitly to a particular set of conceptual premises. Drawing on roots in phenomenology, structuralism, post-structuralism, and other theoretical constructs originating largely within continental philosophy, frameworks matured for understanding how systems of meaning operate throughout cultural contexts without recourse to some form of objective authority or teleological explanation. Fundamental insights have included the relational interaction between observer and observed, subject and object, through the self-regulated and self-referential structure linking signifier to signified—a structure in which difference generates meaning—and the idea of representation as mediating rather than reflecting or recording reality. French philosopher Michel Foucault (1980) has argued that knowledge, as well as the subject once considered the origin of knowledge, are historical productions, neither given nor natural. In effect, he has asserted that language constructs reality and produces knowledge, and in the vacuum of indeterminate possibilities, power intervenes to determine what counts. His conception of discourse generally engages this sense of the mutually constitutive relationship between power, truth, and knowledge. Such insights have inspired transformations within the humanities, social sciences, as well as the philosophy of science, whose theorists have become more skeptical about truth claims and more active in seeking to dismantle the unequal power relations that such claims sustain, including through the mechanisms of common, pervasive forms of representation—popular culture.

Accordingly, Americanists by the end of the twentieth century were especially wary of politically self-serving ideological constructs such as American Exceptionalism, particularly as a manifestation of substantial institutional power. Granted, Robert Berkhofer writes in 1979 with suspicion, characterizing as a "guise" the "broadening of [of] the conception of American Studies…from high to popular culture, from elite to masses and minorities," regarding these approaches as "practical expedients for retaining students and funds" amidst a "countercultural revolution and minority demands" (341). He foresees that "Innocence, nostalgia, confidence, mission, and exceptionalism will

prevail" (345). But, by 1994, Giles acknowledges that "other scholars aggressively challenge any idea of American exceptionalism" (336), with comparative work opening possibilities for posing such challenges. By 2003, Bérubé argues, "Today, by contrast, American studies is defined emphatically by its wholesale rejection of exceptionalism, its success at putting American race relations at the center of cultural analysis, its increasing willingness to expand its intellectual interests beyond the borders of the United States nation-state, even to consider changing its name to reflect its geopolitical concerns more adequately" (109). Such internal assessments of American Studies at the turn of the century signal the field's already prominent commitment by 2001 to interrogating discourses differentially serving national power. Bérubé's comments in 2003 affirm a pre- through post-September 11 continuity of investment within American Studies in disrupting discursive frameworks, such as American Exceptionalism, that uncritically and unilaterally advance U.S. dominance.[2]

A similar point can be made about the internationalization of American Studies pre- and post-9/11. Already in 1993, Michael Kammen speculates, "Perhaps the next item on one or another agenda… will be the question: how exceptional *was* (past tense) American exceptionalism" (33)? In 1996, Jane Desmond and Virginia Domínguez argue for the internationalization of American Studies to address real-world inequalities of power by redressing differentiations within the academy privileging American scholarship about and over other national cultures. In 2000, Gross points to the turn toward internationalism as evidence of the "hostility to exceptionalism" (387), with the American Studies "foray into transnationalism…ratify[ing] anti-exceptionalism" (392). He characterizes "transnationalism [as]…a way to fuse domestic and international concerns into a critical tool for democratic change…[T]he new outlook retains the oppositional spirit that has animated American Studies since the 1960s" (380). Others advocating before 2001 for a transnational or internationalized American Studies to counter notions

[2]The title of David W. Noble's (2002) book, *Death of a Nation: American Culture and the End of Exceptionalism*, indicates confidence about this ideology's demise.

of American Exceptionalism and its imperial manifestations include Janice Radway (1999), John Carlos Rowe (1998), Priscilla Wald (1998), and Donald Pease (2000). All contend that situating the U.S. as merely one among nations, rather than as a model above them all, not only produces more fruitful research that responds more faithfully to lived experience, but also actively contributes to a more just and responsible political posture for the U.S., both domestically and globally.

As noted earlier, American Studies encompasses a variety of disciplinary approaches informed by intellectual developments across other fields of study. Palestinian-American literary theorist and public intellectual Edward Said's influence enabled consideration of the specific conditions of empire and the Middle East. Drawing upon Foucauldian elaborations of the contextually-specific character of knowledge, he explained how knowledge both derives from and forms one's position in the world and, ultimately, the mutually-constitutive character of knowledge in relation to power. In *Orientalism*, Said (1978) develops this framework of knowledge/power in a critique of how Western art, scholarship, and popular culture have formulated knowledge of the "Orient" that enables, justifies, and manifests Western dominance over the area thus constructed. In this way, Orientalism instantiates the knowledge/power dynamic. Said's critique usefully foregrounds how Orientalism instrumentalizes Western hegemony, potently aggregating a regional, religious, and racial entity for subordination. Yet Said's critique itself evidences the possibility of fracturing this hegemony with alternate knowledge/power constructions—or deconstructions, as Derrida would assert. At the very least, Said's critique usefully dismantles the decadent monolith that the Orient has represented by exposing Western hegemony and asserting alternative perspectives. In fact, Said's contribution to cultural theory draws not only on the deconstruction of the "Orient," but also, as subsequent scholarship would demonstrate, the deconstruction of the "West" itself. In other words, Said's application of Foucault's power/knowledge formulation provided strong foundations for broader understanding, and therefore challenging, of how power operates through dominant cultural formations. Said's intervention, specifically in

the relationship between Western representation-as-power and the geographic space termed the "Middle East," would provide a schema apt for Americanists seeking to contextualize the events of September 11 within that very same relationship.

Long before September 11, scholars within American Studies began tracing an intellectual debt to Said by engaging postcolonial studies (which Said helped to found), but also by attending specifically to how the U.S. functions as an empire. Increasingly, American Studies research has interrogated how the U.S. unexceptionally has imposed power in the service of government and business interests in ways not very different from European empires that—unlike the U.S.—have been commonly acknowledged as such. Amy Kaplan and Donald Pease's collection, *Cultures of United States Imperialism*, appearing in 1993, offers close historical scrutiny of U.S. global power. Kaplan dedicated a 2003 presidential address to the American Studies Association to Said's memory (1), noting that the notion of a "U.S. empire" had emerged from a concern once relegated to those on an agitated Left into a now taken-for-granted premise within mainstream political discourse (2004, 2–7).[3] In 2004, John Carlos Rowe traced Said's influence on the field, finding "*Orientalism*…the work most frequently cited as a model for a new American Studies committed to the critical study of the United States as an imperial power" (36). Near the end of the first post-September 11 decade, Pease (2009) continues to argue that exceptionalist discourse masks U.S. imperialism (19) and to advocate for a transnational/global orientation of the field (20–21), marking fifteen years of seeking a "post-exceptionalist American Studies" (19). In sum, by 2001, American Studies scholars were already assessing the footprint of U.S. power in the world, with September 11 compellingly occasioning persistence in this analytical direction, particularly in connection to the Middle East.

Importantly, this trend of critically situating the U.S. in relation to world power has also attended to domestic power relations, with the two contexts dynamically linked. In 1986, Michael Denning was

[3] Shelley Fisher Fishkin (2005, 21), and Pease (2006, 74) make this same argument.

reviewing the "labors of reconstructing a critical and emancipatory understanding of American culture" (372), with attention to how the U.S. has functioned within the framework of "a specifically 'settler colonial' capitalism" (364). In 1989, Linda Kerber argues, "empowered by our new sensitivity to the distinctions of race, class, and gender, we are ready to begin to understand difference as a series of relationships of power, involving domination and subordination, and to use our understanding of the power relations to reconceptualize both our interpretation and our teaching of American culture" (429). Such reconceptualizations have included awareness. In 1992, Alice Kessler-Harris writes of American identity as constructed, contested, fluid, and relational (311), in 1995 George Lipsitz painstakingly outlines the "possessive investment in whiteness" that structures "racialized social democracy" (369), and in 1997 Mary Helen Washington foregrounds the troubled relationship between center and margin by asking the discipline of American Studies to consider what it would mean to centralize African American Studies (1). While Elaine Tyler May (1996) makes an explicit call for Americanists to fully and consciously embrace a unity of scholarship with activism, in 1998 Lipsitz traces the relationship between American Studies, globalization, and the history of social movements. Writing with September 11 just a few years away, Lipsitz offers a kind of prophetic pronouncement for how the field could connect research with political action, forecasting that,

> Scholars who work through social movement institutions as well as academic institutions, who refuse to separate social identities into mutually exclusive realms, who understand the always international dimensions of U.S. culture and the connections linking low-wage labor and racialization to sexism and citizenship, and who embrace the ways in which new eras demand both new forms of cultural expression and new methods of cultural criticism, will be prepared for the demands of the future in a way that does honor to our past without getting trapped by its contradictions and shortcomings. (Lipsitz 1998, 222–223)

By the turn of the century, the field of American Studies had become fully immersed in questions not only of how social constructions of identity

determine the positioning of whole categories of people within both international and domestic power relations, but also how Americanists could intervene through their scholarship and through activist politics.

This positioning would frame responses within American Studies to September 11 and its aftermath. Addressing the American Studies Association in November of 2001, George Sanchez (2002) had to reckon with the immediate impact of 9/11 on his field. Sanchez initially claims, "The horrific events of September 11, 2001, and the aftermath of a new-fashioned global war on terrorism, have transformed the thinking and direction of many of us who study and interpret social and cultural life in the United States." Yet immediately following that claim, he asserts, "For me to make sense of my own world in these troubling times, I have deliberately returned to work that I have done for over a decade that gives meaning to my own life as an academic" (2002, 1). This suggests, rather than a rupture, a pre- and post-September 11 continuity within the practice of American Studies.

In that same speech, Sanchez (2002) calls for public engagement (6–7), while acknowledging tension with contemporary patriotic displays, affirming that the field has "tried to move to a 'postnationalist' American Studies that does not triumph in an exceptionalist America in contrast to the rest of the world" (8). In effect, he sees constructive promise in what Americanists could contribute to public discourse through the embrace of "tolerance of difference…and global interconnectedness" (10). In 2002, Heinz Ickstadt affirms this entanglement within American Studies between progressive-oriented politics and scholarship by celebrating the "logic of subversive democracy that lies at the heart of American studies itself" (548). In 2006, while terming the September 11 hijackings "ruptural events" (73), Pease characterizes contemporary American Studies scholars as an "academic formation in which contestation over normative assumptions had become the rule" (77) which could do the "work of constructing an oppositional common sense to form a community of justice in their war of position with the post-cold war state" (80). In sum, post-September 11, Americanists were continuing a pre-September 11 commitment to social activism in both research and practice that challenged any imposition of national power construed as exceptionalist and imperialist.

In political alignment with the field of American Studies, law professor Muneer Ahmad wrote in 2002 about the need for the "[d]ecentering of September 11" (101). This would open possibilities for solidarity (111–112) in confronting post-September 11 discrimination against "Arabs, Muslims, and South Asians" reminiscent of other race-based structures in U.S. history that produced a divide-and-conquer separation among communities with otherwise shared interests (101–102). He argued, "By examining the recent phenomenon of hate violence and racial profiling aimed at Arabs, Muslims, and South Asians, I seek here to situate our current moment of crisis within multiple histories of racial oppression in the United States" (102). This concern persists throughout the first decade of the twenty-first century among those studying American culture. In 2011, literary scholar Carol Fadda-Conrey similarly contends that the "reductive perception of Arab Americans in the US" predates September 11 (533), and the policing of Muslim and Arab identities echoes prior domestic measures against suspect populations with the effect of undermining activist alliances (534–535). The interconnectedness of scholarship and political activism that Americanists had been explicitly advocating[4] persisted in the fraught post-September 11 terrain of the War on Terror, with an ongoing awareness that the academy can, and perhaps even must, address power within lived, material conditions. Drawing on years of activist positioning, scholars of American culture expressly embraced an interventionist role in the discourse through the construction of that day's history, representation, and effects.

As noted earlier, popular culture has long been recognized as participating in the production of history and its effects through the work of representation. May traces American Studies attention to popular culture as far back as the 1930s, with heightened awareness beginning in the 1960s of how popular culture texts provide insight into the cultural lives of those ordinarily marginalized by constructs such as race, gender, sexuality (1996, 189–190). Similarly,

[4]Fishkin argues that "criticizing your country when you know it to be wrong is *as American as Mark Twain*" (2005, 19).

Rowe has asserted that “American Studies has traditionally claimed the mass and popular media as indispensable fields of study” (2002, xxii). Referencing the “crisis of representation” in 1990, Lipsitz points out that national boundaries, canons, distinctions between “high” and “low” culture, and notions of art as reflective of a unified culture, among other mainstays of early American Studies practice, no longer made sense within contemporary strains of continental thought as articulated by Foucault and others (617). Instead, theory should attend to other concerns, including those otherwise discounted or discredited, or located outside of academic discourse, such as “popular culture [which serves] as a crucial site for the construction of social identity, but also as a key terrain for ideological conflict” (618). In effect, he argues, popular culture provides ground for contesting power, with meaning formulated through the interaction of life with art (624–625). Reminiscent of Said, Lipsitz calls for self-reflexivity about how “language positions the subjects and objects of knowledge” (619). Ultimately, he advocates for American Studies theory that,

> refuses hypostatization into a method, that grounds itself in the study of concrete cultural practices, that extends the definition of culture to the broadest possible contexts of cultural production and reception, that recognizes the role played by national histories and traditions in cultural contestation and that understands that struggles over meaning are inevitably struggles over resources. (Lipsitz 1990, 621)

In sum, Lipsitz regards American Studies as de-privileging dominant discourses and awakening to possibilities for alternative thought and practice, a critical move explaining why the study of popular culture forms, such as film and television, could be viewed as legitimate and productive sites for interrogating the cultural imprint of September 11 and its aftermath.

Taken together, these brief outlines of signature moments in the development of American Studies mark the field’s primary influences, interests, and approaches at the time of September 11, and therefore the pre-existing lenses through which that day and its fallout could be explored. In keeping with its origins as question-oriented

and methodologically-diverse, the interdiscipline has engaged in cross-disciplinary scrutiny of September 11. Complementary sites of investigation include cultural studies, history, law, literature, and media studies, among other areas of study. Above all, by drawing on years of dismantling notions of American Exceptionalism and challenging the operations of empire, such investigation has focused on critiquing the political implications of September 11-oriented discourse and representation. By the time September 11, 2001 arrived, inquiry within American Studies was already focusing on how culture—including the culture of academic discourse—serves as a site for meaning and knowledge production, contestation, and negotiation, preparing the way for a practice of contextualizing the day and its aftermath within and against dominant political ideologies. At least for the field of American Studies, September 11 did not pose an abrupt, stark, and destabilizing change to long-held intellectual positions and values. Rather, the day and the subsequent War on Terror occasioned an enhanced investment in advocating for those positions and values under conditions of heightened stakes and imminent consequences for the world.

## 2.2 Trauma Studies: Knowledge, Power, and Abrupt Harm

The study of trauma originated in psychology but developed into a robust subset of the humanities toward the end of the twentieth century. What began around the turn of the twentieth century largely as paternalistically-inflected clinical observations of so-called hysterical women and shell-shocked World War I veterans transformed after the end of the Vietnam War into the formally-recognized psychiatric diagnosis of Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD).[5] These developments afforded social legitimacy and productive therapeutic treatment for patients who

[5]The American Psychiatric Association's *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders, Fifth Edition* (DSM-5) associates a number of "trauma- and stressor-related disorders" with the aftermath of a traumatic event (2013, 265).

exhibited specific kinds of symptoms following profoundly troubling and disruptive life events. At the same time, memoirs and other texts confronting the Holocaust contributed to budding interest in trauma within cultural, literary, and historical studies, which often reflected on the fraught and complex terms through which violent history might be represented and understood. By the late 1990s, scholarship on trauma—what is called "Trauma Studies" within the humanities—was proliferating, just in time for the unprecedented global witnessing of the unexpected violence occasioned by the live broadcasts of September 11.

As is the case with American Studies, the Trauma Studies literature engages with many disciplines. Whatever the disciplinary inspiration, dominant scholarship within Trauma Studies has pointed to the a-, anti-, or reactionary political tendencies wrought by a focus on individualized trauma in regard to September 11. Trauma Studies scholars view such a focus as a discursive framework that could confine responses within a victimized domestic sphere preoccupied with individual affect at the cost of globally- and historically-contextualized critique. This concern resonates with the commitment within American Studies to avoid claims of an exceptional American experience in favor of situating that experience within domestic and international power relations. As a paradigmatic case of exceptional experience—post-traumatic symptoms, after all, derive from an encounter regarded as outside the range of expectations for ordinary daily life[6]—trauma has been characterized as an event rupturing connection to the past so completely that meaningful representation, which depends on the familiar to communicate the unfamiliar, has been construed as impossible.

Accordingly, Lucy Bond has wondered whether the "discourses of trauma…may be said to mystify, rather than elucidate, the conditions of both analysis and experience" (2011, 734), since she worries that "limit narratives threaten to create the very void in understanding they lament" (735). Sabine Sielke has also cautioned that "the rhetoric

[6]The DSM-5 elaborates what such encounters and resulting disorders might include (2013, 265–290), with "exposure to actual or threatened death, serious injury, or sexual violence" among the criteria for Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (271).

of the unrepresentable remains a risky business" in terms of its political consequences (2010, 405), while the "trope of fracture" obscures political continuities with deep historical roots and complicated contexts to make more possible particular kinds of state action (395). Likewise, Melanie McAlister (2002) has traced how the forgetting of history and the exclusive foregrounding of personalized loss can inhibit any process of informed, considered policy decision-making. According to Bond, trauma theory's expanse and "overpersonalization of the American public sphere," which pre-date September 11, have shaped its discourse (2011, 738). In effect, she "suspect[s] that the ubiquity of these narratives [of personalized rupture] is tied to the prevalence of traumatic tropes in American culture prior to 9/11, meaning preexisting paradigms were imposed upon the attacks as the optimum method of interpretation without adequate time for reflection" (755). Yet, while expressly desiring a "convincing, antihegemonic counternarrative…to be created for 9/11 and its aftermath" (756), she stops short of articulating what that counternarrative might be, if it even exists, or if it would be a singular, rather than a plural, phenomenon. Richard Crownshaw considers one possibility: that narratives of trauma could create space, literally and figuratively, for "deterritorializing" the concept of the "Homeland" (2011, 757). He, like the other Americanists mentioned here—Bond, Sielke, and McAlister—have turned to popular culture[7] to explore how representation participates in the production of history and of public understanding of that history.

These concerns and approaches accord with the outline of American Studies commitments at the dawn of the twenty-first century that, as elaborated earlier, dwell primarily on how cultural constructs reinforce and even advance Western hegemony. These commitments both espouse and enact the importance of pre- and post-September 11 continuity, urging an attentive memory of real-world developments and the adopting of an ongoing critical posture when analyzing those developments.

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[7]I include literature within the category of popular culture in the sense that the fiction I address here is readily-available to any interested reader, rather than accessible only to an elite or specially-trained few (apart from those with literacy skills).

Bond's sense that notions of trauma prevalent before September 11 were employed in interpreting the event without necessarily being altered by the event would suggest that, like American Studies, Trauma Studies as a field within the humanities has remained fundamentally—at the level of theoretical premises and methodological practices—unchanged after September 11, with the day explored within pre-existing paradigms and themes. As noted earlier, Bond, Sielke, and McAlister have characterized this approach as politically problematic. Here, I depart on a different trajectory.

Instead, I take seriously the possibility that September 11 did incite a kind of violent rupture with significant cultural implications. Ordinary people's fears, rooted in the event itself—rather than any institutional superimposing of a dominant characterization or interpretation of the event—fueled responsiveness to extreme political reactions. In other words, rather than interrogate the discourse *about* trauma and its effects, I seek here to assess through the mediation of popular culture how trauma functions *as* discourse, a force by which knowledge is done and undone. I consider the phenomenon of trauma as itself a crisis of knowledge and power, noting the basic features—beginning on the individual level but extrapolating toward a larger scale—that render an event such as (but not only) September 11 sufficiently powerful to catalyze abrupt, stark, and destabilizing cultural change.

To orient this approach, I return to the psychology-based roots of Trauma Studies. I draw first on the work of psychiatrist Judith Herman (1997), whose research with populations as diverse as Vietnam veterans and rape survivors distinguishes certain commonalities in individuals' post-traumatic symptoms. From these commonalities, she formulates a view of traumatization as a process of injury and disempowerment through physical and volitional violation—that is, overpowering of a victim's body and will. When one cannot do or be what one chooses—when one must do or be precisely what one would not choose—what, then, would power and knowledge mean in the traumatic context? On what terms could utter powerlessness make way for a renewed sense of control? On what terms does incomprehensible horror become bound within the effable, and how are terms for the effable constructed?

What struggles does horrific knowledge produce, what are the stakes of these struggles, and what are the possible implications? Such questions, grounded in trauma, point to the parameters and demands of subjectivity, agency, and responsibility under conditions of constrained choice and action. Traumatic experience uniquely, painfully, unavoidably, and undesirably makes survivors and witnesses feel very much isolated, trapped alone within the trauma and its aftershocks. Yet at the same time, trauma violates selfhood, exposing its shortcomings as a construct of physical and psychological independence and integrity. This disruption of one's sense of self—one's autonomy, one's judgment, one's identity—points to trauma itself as a form of power and knowledge.

Additionally, I draw on the work of psychologist Ronnie Janoff-Bulman, who has argued that trauma shatters three foundational assumptions developed during infancy that lay the groundwork for understanding the nature of the world and one's place in it. These three assumptions, "The world is benevolent/The world is meaningful/The self is worthy" (1992, 6), at first might seem unwarranted universalizations. In fact, Janoff-Bulman admitted that not everyone necessarily would have such assumptions (6); of course, those who suffer abuse and/or neglect since birth likely form different assumptions. However, her elaboration of these assumptions suggests that they do play a meaningful role in orienting most people's involvement with their surroundings. In this way, people go about their lives with underlying beliefs about the world and their relationship to it that most of the time work well enough to enable them to function readily in ordinary life. Ultimately, trauma violates, and therefore warrants the reconstruction of, these worldview assumptions. But it does not directly determine what form new assumptions might take. Instead, an individual—or a culture, if the idea of fundamental assumptions is extrapolated to recognize the premises shared within and taken for granted by whole communities—is left in the wake of trauma surrounded by shattered pieces awaiting reconfiguration.

This extrapolation leads to questions about how shattering fundamental cultural assumptions might prove traumatic. Consider the hypothetical premise that traumatic cultural disruptions might occur more often, not through singular violent and dramatic events, but

through other direct challenges to the dominant paradigms of knowledge and power. Such disruptions would prompt similar contradictions to fundamental illusions offering meaning and security and require similar recovery through reconstruction of meaning and security on new terms. For example, American literature scholar Rosemarie Garland Thomson points out that the disabled body manifests a contradiction to the Emersonian doctrine of self-reliance, dominant within American cultural values, by evidencing the fiction of the fully autonomous individual. In effect, she contended, "In a world increasingly seen as free from divine determinism and subject to individual control, the disabled figure calls into question such concepts as will, ability, progress, responsibility, and free agency, notions around which people in a liberal society organize their identities" (1996, 47). As Janoff-Bulman discusses regarding others' avoidance of trauma survivors who personify the illusory nature of their fundamental assumptions, Thomson notes that disabled bodies provoke similar discomfort for similar reasons. While terming the encounter with difference unsupported by dominant cultural paradigms as culturally "traumatic" initially might seem problematic, a problem arises only if it is assumed that only those who are "in the right" can be traumatized—as if the kinds of fundamental cultural concepts that trauma violates are solely those worth preserving. Yet such an encounter can present a contradiction to troubling paradigms sufficient to instigate a paradigmatic crisis of knowledge and power. In such instances, the crisis can prove destructive, with hegemonic values that view difference as dangerous reasserting themselves with greater vehemence. Or, the crisis can prove constructive, occasioning the formation of new paradigms more responsive to the realities of lived lives than the protective fictions they replace.

And so, traumatic encounters with the imminence of mortality provoke troubling questions about knowledge and power. The violation of functional assumptions about bodily integrity and personal will that characterizes trauma poses for witnesses as well as survivors existential and epistemological crises, foregrounding these assumptions as problematic and unstable. In effect, traumatic events serve as sites of knowledge effacement and production, replacing taken-for-granted notions about health and agency with an indelible understanding of

vulnerability. In the wake of a perpetrated event, survivors and witnesses must return to life with any previously comforting presumptions corrupted by their new, intimate knowledge of the human ability to endure and inflict great harm. On September 11, 2001, those seen jumping from the World Trade Center towers embodied an appalling predicament that those on-hand, and millions of media viewers worldwide, probably never before imagined. It was a new and unique knowledge—formed quickly but assimilated haltingly—about life possibilities that one neither wants nor readily forgets.[8]

## 2.3 Popular Culture Narrative and September 11, 2001

In effect, traumatic events contradict the premises of meaningful human life, disrupting the narrative flow—the connections between cause and effect, actions and intended consequences, efforts and commensurate results—with which individuals make sense of daily living. Those who witnessed September 11, whether in person or through television coverage, all shared exposure to a stark, unanticipated, violent contradiction of cultural expectations about what ordinary life involves. Conditions featured confusion, vulnerability, and doubt, challenging taken-for-granted presumptions about one's ability to know how to act safely and purposefully in the service of the most fundamental concern: self-preservation. What kinds of new stories would engage this fraught and threatening terrain? Early twenty-first century popular culture, across multiple forms, has persistently showcased preoccupations with existential crisis, vulnerability, and moral ambivalence. These conditions are counter to traditional American values of optimism, self-determination, and belief in a just world that serve as indices of a common, cultural trauma (Muller 2017). Here, I select from the two

[8]See Tom Junod (2003) for a reflection on the cultural implications of witnessing those falling from the twin towers.

sites of literature and film sample narratives with distinct approaches yet compatible concerns that evince such preoccupations.

Post-September 11 literature has proliferated. Texts range from those, such as Don DeLillo's *The Falling Man*, that explicitly dwell on the day and its aftermath, to those, such as Joseph O'Neill's *Netherland*, that take a more circuitous route. Jess Walter's *The Zero* confronts September 11 as a force provoking an immediate and enduring struggle for a fathomable world. The novel features a main character, Brian Remy, precipitously and uncontrollably propelled through fragments of time, proceeding chronologically forward from September 11. Remy's time travels leave him disoriented, suspicious in moments of lucidity of the nefarious operations he realizes he must be performing when not fully conscious. Cumulatively, these travels signal the destabilizing transformation September 11 has posed for the former New York City cop turned security expert, when the firm ground on which his sense of self and world stood literally and figuratively collapsed.

Mid-way through the novel, by which time Remy has come to expect, if not accept, the time disjunctions jolting his daily life, he finds himself grilling dinner on his girlfriend's fire escape. He starts to wonder,

> Maybe this was not some condition he had, but a life, and maybe every life is lived moment to moment. Doesn't everyone react to the world as it presents itself? Who really knows more than the moment he's in? What do you trust? Memory? History? No, these are just stories, and whichever ones we choose to tell ourselves…there are always gaps. (Walter 2006, 160)

His musings raise important and common existential questions for any individual, but for someone who has walked away from an unexpected brush with large-scale death, they assume intensified significance. After all, when the unexpected arrives, how else can one react but by responding moment-to-moment as events unfold? When the unprecedented occurs, what existing stories can make sense of the new, unfathomable reality? Remy's jarring jumps through time replay in every instance the startled confusion, adrift fear, and urgent need to act—in spite of that confusion and fear—that September 11 first occasioned. The apparent disconnect, from the perspective of those under attack that day, between

cause and effect, action and fate, reproduces itself through every scene in which Remy arrives unaware, accountable but always without warning.

When he returns to Ground Zero—or "the Zero" as the novel's characters term it—Remy contemplates what might be lacking, not only in his own mental resources, but also in those of the nation. He reflects,

> The ground is where history lay…They were the same: ground and place – plowed and scraped and rearranged, sure, but still you knew that in this place the soil was tamped with bone and gristle and bravery. That was important. The ground was important, imprinted with every footfall of our lives…the full measure and memento of every unremarkable event, and every inconceivable moment….Maybe his mind was a hole like this – the evidence and reason scraped away. If you can't trust the ground beneath your feet, what can you trust? If you take away the very ground, what could possibly be left?…God, they scraped it all away. No wonder they couldn't remember what it meant anymore…How can you remember what isn't there anymore? (Walter 2006, 307–308)

In this passage, Remy literally and explicitly connects the physical ground with the "groundedness" of his own and his nation's identity and worldview. Ground alone, in this sense, can keep movement through time, however it is paced, from losing its grip on the past while orienting to the future. "Ground," the word absent from but implied in the title *The Zero*, serves as the implicit theme and missing anchor underlying Remy's leaps in time away from September 11. In this sense, the term offers an elusive alternative, an aspirational but not-yet-secured remedy, to the cultural disjunctures provoked by the trauma of September 11 and evoked by the narrative of *The Zero*.

Like literature, film has explored September 11 and its fallout through multiple genres and varying degrees of ambiguity. I look to the film *Star Trek* to elaborate the parameters of the no-win scenario that has proven pervasive within the popular entertainment of the first decades of the twenty-first century. With this movie, Director J.J. Abrams presents viewers with a 2009 reboot of the 1966–1969 science fiction television series *Star Trek*. To do so, he integrates familiar characters and plot elements with a narrative designed to re-launch a continuing film franchise. These familiar elements prominently feature Captain

James T. Kirk (Chris Pine), known for his brash, quick-thinking, never-say-die, youthful leadership of a loyal crew, and the stalwart starship the USS *Enterprise*. In keeping with his characterization, Kirk is known within *Star Trek* lore for having been the only Starfleet Academy cadet to have defeated the Kobayashi Maru. This training exercise, engineered to preclude participants from any possibility of a successful outcome, aims to introduce command-track individuals to no-win scenarios. In this way, they should learn how to cope with circumstances of the highest duress. In effect, the test itself is a cheat, always programmed to circumvent any cadet's attempt to "win," which Kirk regards as grounds for his own "innovative" response: he rigs the test himself to permit a positive resolution (*Star Trek* 2009).

The no-win scenario cultivated by the Kobayashi Maru figures centrally in *Star Trek*. The film begins with the USS *Kelvin* under attack by a superior foe in deep space. The starship's doomed captain, summoned to the aggressor vessel, rapidly dispenses orders for Kirk's father, George (Chris Hemsworth), to become the acting captain in his absence. George Kirk assumes command while Captain Robau (Faran Tahir) rebuffs suggestions of finding back-up by insisting, "There is no help for us out here." Words marking stark loneliness set the tone both for the vulnerability of space exploration and the unblinking courage of its pioneers. Soon, Captain Robau is killed, the *Kelvin* comes under fatal fire, and George Kirk is able to buy time for a full evacuation only by remaining on the damaged ship until it is destroyed. It is at that moment of the *Kelvin*'s explosion and his father's death that James T. Kirk is born on an escaping medical pod (*Star Trek* 2009).

The story soon and repeatedly revisits the concept of a no-win scenario that began the film and the protagonist's life. Christopher Pike (Bruce Greenwood), here Kirk's mentor, tells him that he wrote his dissertation on the *Kelvin*. He says, "Something I admired about your dad. He didn't believe in no-win scenarios," to which Kirk replies, "Sure learned his lesson." Pike responds, "Well, that depends on how you define winning. You're here, aren't you?" It turns out, according to Pike, that George Kirk saved 800 lives at the cost of his own. This fact opens Kirk's eyes, and perhaps spurs the creativity that later leads him to decide that, if the Academy's Kobayashi Maru is a cheat, then he should

put himself outside the game and set his own terms for success. On his third attempt at the exercise, he rescues the endangered, escapes with all crew intact, and eliminates the enemy, a feat precluded by the exercise's original programming. He emerges unscathed only because he changed the conditions of the test. While this act of ingenuity earns him an academic integrity inquiry, the inquiry is interrupted by a Romulan attack (*Star Trek* 2009).

When confronting the Romulan ship, Pike is exposed to the same danger that killed the *Kelvin*'s captain and resulted in that starship's demise. Yet this time, the outcome changes. Once Kirk becomes captain of the *Enterprise*, Pike is rescued, the Romulans are defeated, and all of Earth—and the Federation—are saved (*Star Trek* 2009). With the first decade of the twenty-first century comprehensively preoccupied, across forms of popular culture, with the absolute futility of the no-win scenario (Muller 2017), it would seem that the antidote to the fear of a no-win scenario lies only in the unreal realm of fantasy: a cocky fictional captain convinced that he cannot fail because he must not. It is also about the equally fantastical, and improbable miracle, of luck—luck, and a charmed starship.

## 2.4 Conclusion

By the dawn of the twenty-first century, the field of American Studies had become persistently critical of discourse that advanced national power. Critiques of notions such as "American Exceptionalism" and U.S. imperialism developed before September 11, 2001 and intensified as the War on Terror emerged, with no end in sight (with or without the use of the specific term "War on Terror"). Rather than a changed world, Americanists' intellectual frameworks encountered a fathomable progression post-September 11 from already long-standing state practices. This framework would inform suspicion of the rhetoric of trauma, whereby Trauma Studies scholars' interests in fracture and singular, unrepresentable experience were construed as discourses rationalizing problematic political responses to the September 11 hijackings.

However, here, I view trauma as itself a crisis of knowledge and power, a discourse that indeed ruptures familiar ways of knowing and acting in the world and thereby frustrates stable and productive choices and actions. The phenomenon of a conceptually "changed world," in which fundamental, familiar cultural beliefs and practices seem no longer to apply, signals an existential destabilization rooted in people's encounters with September 11 that poses fraught implications. As the two samples of narrative discussed here instantiate from across a broader array of popular culture sites, ordinary, non-expert readers and viewers have engaged with dramatizations featuring complex, consequential challenges that preclude readily-accessible, plausible resolutions applicable for the real post-September 11 world. Rather than a rhetoric that necessarily favors particular political policies, trauma as discourse erupts fertile ground from which new ways of thinking and being—for better or worse—can unfold.

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