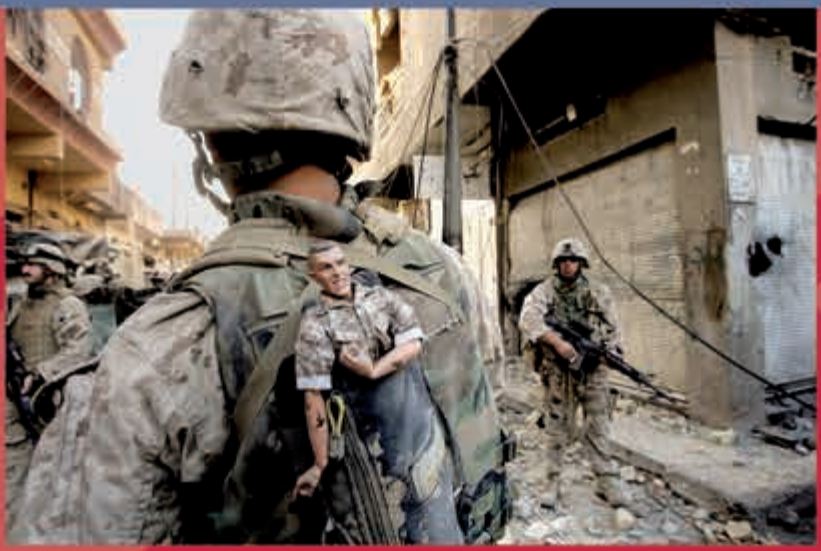
AHU TANRISEVER

Fathers, Warriors, and Vigilantes

Post-Heroism and the US Cultural Imaginary in the Twenty-First Century

European Views of the United States Volume 10



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Volume 10

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A U.S. Marine carries a mascot in his backpack as his unit
pushed into the western part of Fallujah, Iraq, Sunday, Nov. 14, 2004.
Photo by Anja Niedringhaus.
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Anne ve babama,
Miyase ve Urhan Tanrısever,
benim kahramanlarım

To my parents,
Miyase and Urhan Tanrısever,
my heroes

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Preface

This superbly crafted book received the 2014 Rob Kroes Publication Award of the European Association for American Studies. The author, Ahu Tanrisever of Goethe University Frankfurt, discusses the notion of heroism during the first decade of the twenty-first century in the United States. The argument is based on the contention that the shifting image of the hero reflects redefinitions of US national identity following the attacks of September 11, 2001. Seeing heroism as a problematic but pervasive concept, Ms. Tanrisever teases out the complex gender implications of the "post-heroic" by placing it within a set of shifting personal, familial, cultural and social relationships.

The most obvious form of heroism at the scene of 9/11 was embodied in the firefighter, a figure who was, on the surface, emblematic of muscular masculinity and of a nation that could pride itself on responding rapidly to the catastrophic events that hit lower Manhattan. The author sees this reflected in the memorialization of the World Trade Center, which has merged with a set of values and ideologies "to create a powerful plot of sacrifice, endurance, and heroism" that has made 9/11 a "gendered narrative as a well as a narrative of gender."

But Tanrisever's carefully argued book also prompts the reader to think about the forces that shaped this construction of masculine identity at a formative moment for the early century. It does so by analyzing the tensions between hegemonic and subversive versions of masculinity in a diverse range of texts, including Cormac McCarthy's novel *The Road*, Kathryn Bigelow's film *The Hurt Locker* and Colby Buzzell's blog *My War: Killing Time in Iraq*. Via perceptive readings of these and other written and visual texts, the author offers us a fuller understanding of both the historical roots and contemporary status of the "post-heroic." The book does not eschew classical heroic traits of resilience, strength, and daring, but grafts these qualities onto "notions of ambivalence, inadequacy, and failure" that give the three figures in the book's title—fathers, warriors, and vigilantes—a certain valency in post-9/11 culture, particularly when they are linked to tropes of maiming, wounding, and aging.

This, then, is a book that is positioned in the mainstream of American Studies. But it also revives the spirit of poststructuralism by interrogating a discursive formation which is simultaneously both present and absent, enacting "the perpetual double movement of concurrently destructing and

constructing" that reflects the narrative of 9/11 itself from a US perspective—though it poses questions that are transnational and global in scope, too. It is also a thorough materialist study in its examination of the ideologies that underpin hegemonic notions of masculinity, racial identity, and nationhood at a time of crisis. Anyone interested in the culture, history or politics of the contemporary United States will take much away with them from reading Ahu Tanrisever's sophisticated and deeply scholarly book.

Martin Halliwell
Chair of the Jury
Leicester, February 2016

A List of Publications under the Auspices of the European Association for American Studies

EAAS Publications in the Series *European Views of the United States,* Hans-Jürgen Grabbe, General Editor, Heidelberg: Universitätsverlag Winter, 2008–

Intercontinental Crosscurrents: Women's Networks across Europe and the Americas, eds. Julia Nitz, Sandra H. Petrulionis, and Theresa Schön, vol. 9, 2016.

America: Justice, Conflict, War, eds. Amanda Gilroy and Marietta Messmer, vol. 8, 2016 (The Hague Conference 2014).

Gross, Andrew S. *The Pound Reaction: Liberalism and Lyricism in Midcentury American Literature*, vol. 7, 2015 (Rob Kroes Publication Award 2013).

The Health of the Nation, eds. Meldan Tanrısal and Tanfer Emin Tunç, vol 6, 2014 (Izmir Conference 2012).

Mehring, Frank. *The Democratic Gap: Transcultural Confrontations of German Immigrants and the Promiseof American Democracy,* vol. 5, 2014 (Rob Kroes Publication Award 2011).

Forever Young? The Changing Images of the United State, eds. Philip Coleman and Stephen Matterson, vol. 4, 2012 (Dublin Conference 2010).

E Pluribus Unum or E Pluribus Plura? Unity and Diversity in American Culture, eds. Hans-Jürgen Grabbe, David Mauk, and Ole Moen, vol. 3, 2011 (Oslo Conference 2008).

Franke, Astrid. *Pursue the Illusion: Ceremonies and Spectacles: Problems of Public Poetry in America*, vol. 2, 2010 (Rob Kroes Publication Award 2009).

Conformism, Non-Conformism, and Anti-Conformism in the Culture of the United States, eds. Antonis Balasopoulos, Gesa Mackenthun, and TheodoraTsimpouki, vol. 1, 2008 (Nicosia Conference 2006).

EAAS Publications in the Series *European Contributions to American Studies,* Rob Kroes, General Editor, Amsterdam: Amerika Instituut, Universiteit van Amsterdam, 1980–1988; VU University Press, 1990–2006.

America in the Course of Human Events, eds. Josef Jařab, Marcel Arbeit, and Jenel Virden, vol. 63, 2006 (Prague Conference 2004).

The Cultural Shuttle: The United States of/in Europe, eds. Véronique Béghain and Marc Chénetier, vol. 57, 2004 (Bordeaux Conference 2002).

"Nature's Nation" Revisited: American Concepts of Nature from Wonder to Ecological Crisis, eds. Hans Bak and Walter W. Hölbling, vol. 49, 2003 (Graz Conference 2000).

Ceremonies and Spectacles: Performing American Culture, eds. Teresa Alves, Teresa Cid, and Heinz Ickstadt, vol. 44, 2000 (Lisbon Conference 1998).

Living with America, 1946–1996, eds. Cristina Giorcelli and Rob Kroes, vol. 38, 1997 (Warsaw Conference 1996).

The Insular Dream: Obsession and Resistance, ed. Kristiaan Versluys, vol. 35, 1995 (Luxembourg Conference 1994).

The American Columbiad: "Discovering" America, Inventing the United States, eds. Mario Materassi and Maria Irene Ramalho de Sousa Santos, vol. 34, 1996 (Seville Conference 1992).

Victorianism in the United States: Its Era and Its Legacy, eds. Steve Ickringill and Stephen Mills, vol. 24, 1992 (London Conference 1990).

In the European Grain: American Studies from Central and Eastern Europe, ed. Orm Øverland, vol. 19, 1990 (EAAS Translation Project).*

Looking Inward, Looking Outward: From the 1930s through the 1940s, ed. Steve Ickringill, vol. 18, 1990 (Berlin Conference 1988).

The Early Republic: The Making of a Nation—The Making of a Culture, eds. Steve Ickringill, Zoltan Abadi-Nagy, and Aladár Sarbu, vol. 14, 1988 (Budapest Conference 1986).

Social Change and New Modes of Expression: The United States, 1910–1930, eds. Rob Kroes and Alessandro Portelli, vol. 10, 1986 (Rome Conference 1984).

Cultural Change in the U.S. since World War II, eds. Maurice Gonnaud, Sergio Perosa, and Chris Bigsby, vol. 9, 1986 (EAAS Translation Project).*

Impressions of a Gilded Age: The American Fin de Siecle, eds. Marc Chénetier and Rob Kroes, vol. 6, 1983 (Paris Conference 1982).

The American Identity: Fusion and Fragmentation, ed. Rob Kroes, vol. 3, 1980 (Amsterdam Conference 1980).

* Books resulting from an EAAS Board decision to sponsor and finance volumes containing essays produced by European scholars in languages other than English. The selected contributions were translated and published to give the authors a wider audience.

Individual Conference Volumes Published before 1980

Vistas of a Continent: Concepts of Nature in America, ed. on behalf of the European Association for American Studies by Teut Andreas Riese, Anglistische Forschungen 136, Heidelberg: Winter, 1979 (Heidelberg Conference 1976).

Contagious Conflict: The Impact of American Dissent on European Life, ed. A. N. J. den Hollander, Leiden: Brill, 1973 (Geneva Conference 1972).

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Proceedings of the Second Conference of the European Association for American Studies Held at the Fondation des États-Unis, Paris September 3–6, 1957, Paris: European Association for American Studies, 1957 (Paris Conference 1957).

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Secondly, as part of chapter one appeared in *Towards a Post-Exceptionalist American Studies* (Tübingen: Narr Verlag, 2014), edited by Winfried Fluck and Donald D. Pease, and an early version of a part of chapter three appeared in *The Health of the Nation* (Heidelberg: Universitätsverlag Winter, 2014), edited by Meldan Tanrısal and Tanfer Emin Tunc, I want to thank both publishers for their permission to reprint the material here.

This book began as a dissertation at the Graduate School of North American Studies at the John F. Kennedy Institute for North American Studies of Freie Universität Berlin, funded by the Excellence Initiative of the German Federal and State Governments. For the generous funding and institutional support received during this early stage, I am profoundly grateful.

The many conversations about my research have left their lasting marks in the pages that are about to follow. In the first place, this pertains to my doctoral advisor, Winfried Fluck, who has persistently supported me with constructive feedback, professional guidance, and, many a time, his wonderful sense of humor; thank you. I am indebted to both Joel Pfister and Ulla Haselstein, my co-mentors, whose instructive input has motivated me to refine my thinking and writing. Over the many years of this book's evolution, I have had the privilege of sharing my research with many inspiring scholars in Europe and the United States, and I want to thank Richard Slotkin, Hayden White, Wai Chee Dimock, Hamilton Carroll, Sarah Wasserman, Simon Wendt, Frank Kelleter, Alexander Starre, Rebecca Brückmann, Sonja Longolius, Ruth Steinhof, Dietmar Meinel, Florian Plum, Viola Amato, Melanie Eis, the participants of the 2012 Futures of American Studies Institute at Dartmouth College, all participants of the 2012 Bologna Conference of the International American Studies Research Group at Yale University, and the presenters of the 2015 conference "Race, Gender, and Military Heroism in U.S. History" at Goethe-Universität Frankfurt for their questions, comments,

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Most importantly, I owe all of you who keep me grounded so I can muster the courage to venture out. . . . Kaliroi Menti, Nino Re, Sahba Yadegar-Yousefi, Tamara Kirschner, Anja Wieden, Anna Bessler, Rebecca Brückmann, and Sonja Longolius—thank you. Thomas Ward, you are my rock. And, lastly, to my brother, Hakan, who introduced me to the world of literature, and his family, to my sister, Arzu, who believed in me when I would not, and to my parents, Miyase and Urhan Tanrısever, who have always encouraged me to follow my passion: This book would not exist without you; thank you.

Introduction: Reading Masculinities

In one of his earliest public speeches after 9/11, President George W. Bush articulated one of his signature remarks on the attacks, which was to be repeated in numerous variations in the weeks and months to come: "Freedom itself was attacked this morning by a faceless coward, and freedom will be defended" (qtd. in McCaleb n. pag.). Describing the attacker as "faceless" transforms that person into a dehumanized agent, whereby the usage of the indefinite single article defies individuality, collapsing particularity into an anonymous and amorphous collective body. Stigmatized as a "coward," the attacker is denied one of the central features of heroic masculinity, which combines courage with physical strength and moral virtue. Instantaneously, these remarks sparked a debate over governmental rhetoric in the construction of both national identity and the villain "other." Among other US intellectuals, Susan Sontag openly criticized President Bush's framing of the events:

> Where is the acknowledgment that this was not a "cowardly" attack on "civilization" or "liberty" or "humanity" or "the free world" but an attack on the world's self-proclaimed superpower, undertaken as a consequence of specific American alliances and actions? [. . .] And if the word "cowardly" is to be used, it might be more aptly applied to those who kill from beyond the range of retaliation, [. . .], than to those willing to die themselves in order to kill others. In the matter of courage (a morally neutral virtue): whatever may be said of the perpetrators of Tuesday's slaughter, they were not cowards. (Sontag et al. 32)

In her contribution to the famous *New Yorker* edition with the "9/11/01"-cover by Art Spiegelman published on September 24, 2001, Sontag emphasizes the significance of the governmental discursive framing of 9/11 that employs a gendered, pseudo-liberal, and mobilizing rhetoric to create a rigid binary order. Sontag's critique caused an outcry in the US public, echoing the indignation about talk show host Bill Maher's previous statement on air, which led to the cancellation of his show *Politically Incorrect*: "We have been the cowards lobbing cruise missiles from 2,000 miles away. That's cowardly. Staying in the airplane when it hits the building—say what you like about it, it's not cowardly" (Maher qtd. in Patterson n. pag.). Critical

comments on this discursive creation of the "enemy," questioning the binary opposition between heroes and villains, were not welcome in the immediate aftermath of September 11, 2001.

To be sure, the position of hero was just as quickly occupied as the villains had been demonized. Analyzing the Fox News broadcast of 9/11, Elisabeth Anker illustrates how media coverage instrumentalized melodrama in the discursive production of a collective national identity to build a justificatory basis for ensuing retaliatory action. Hence, framing 9/11 through a melodramatic narrative proves a powerful tool of creating a collective national identity while, at the same time, constructing a plot that legitimizes any political, economic, or military means to fight for, as is carefully discursively constructed, a just and moral cause, thereby silencing any potential criticism. As Anker holds, "American national identity was created out of victimization; it was both America that was victimized and America that then had to become heroic and rescue itself" ("Villains" 35). The crucial question of who would come to embody US heroism was answered almost instantaneously. After the so-called crisis of masculinity of the 1990s, the rebirth of the male hero out of the smoldering ruins of the former World Trade Center, embodied by 9/11's ash-covered first responders, promised, if only temporarily, a relief.[1]

The representation of and public discourse on rescue workers (in particular, the New York City firefighters) created an impromptu concept of heroic masculinity along the lines of the normative ideal of US hegemonic masculinity, which clearly contradicts the overt national narrative of collectivity and community dominating descriptions of New York City's early post-9/11 public life. Erica Doss' discussion of the conflict over the design proposal for a commemorating statue for the first responders is symptomatic of how discourses of 9/11 are tied to negotiations of concepts of masculinity and, ultimately, of the US nation-state. Plans to build the statue failed due to protests against depicting a multiracial group of firefighters, which, as is pointed out by Doss, exemplifies how the realm of 9/11 constitutes a site of ongoing struggles over different narratives of signification (131). Susan Faludi's 2007 *The Terror Dream* has become a benchmark publication on the interplay between 9/11 and representations of gender, which illustrates how "the cultural troika of media, entertainment, and advertising declared

[1] A similar point is made by Michael Kimmel: "The rehabilitation of heroic masculinity among the firefighters, police, and other rescue workers was immediate. [. . .] Even those few writers and pundits who managed to notice that there were female firefighters, police, and rescue workers among the heroes of 9-11 trumpeted the revival of traditional masculinity. [. . .] Real men were back—and we were safer for it. Some even proclaimed the crisis of masculinity over." (Manhood 249)

the post-9/11 age an era of neo-fifties nuclear family 'togetherness,' redomesticated femininity, and reconstituted Cold Warrior manhood" (3–4). Analyzing a large corpus, including media broadcasting, newspaper articles, popular TV serials, interviews, and the 2004 presidential campaign, Faludi argues that public discourse after 9/11 works to reinstall a traditional gender binary (of male active heroes and female dependent victims) by drawing on the frontier myth. This critique of public discourse is echoed by Elaine Tyler May, who argues that the discourse of 9/11 reinstalls concepts of "heroic men and dependent women" (49).

By entering the field of cultural production, the "real" heroes of 9/11 soon turned into reel heroes with movies such as *United 93* (Paul Greengrass, 2006) and *World Trade Center* (Oliver Stone, 2006), so far the only big-budget filmic representations of the events of September 11, 2001. Moreover, the first responders of 9/11 have been transformed into consumable business commodities by being constructed as tokens of patriotism and authenticity in a growing 9/11 'industry,' a flourishing market catalyzed by the ten-year anniversary in 2011.[2] The search for "9/11 heroes" in the various product classifications on the website of the online store *Amazon* in February 2014 resulted in a listing of a multitude of diverse items, ranging from comic books featuring the heroes of 9/11 (such as the Marvel publication *Heroes*), specifically engraved "American heroes coins," calendars (such as "A Tribute to the Heroes of 9/11"), CD copies of the charity event "The Concert

[2] Questions of personal and collective identity, history, memory, absence, and materialism merge and create an industry of commemoration, which becomes a powerful actor in the cultural assimilation and narrativization of 9/11, functioning along capitalist lines of creating a feeling of subjective potency through consumption in order to create a coherent national identity. September 11, 2001 has quickly been turned into a commodity generating a "9/11 industry." As explored by Frank Lentricchia and Jody McAuliffe, this is exemplified by the resignification of the site of the collapsed Twin Towers as a tourist attraction. Installing a viewing platform at the site of the so-called "pile" is an instance of commodifying 9/11, since Ground Zero gets staged to "connect tourists to their history at a site that perfectly conjoins terrorism, patriotism, and tourism" (104), turning the site into a tourism commodity which integrates consumers in the circle of the developing 9/11 culture. For Elaine Tyler May, the increased presence of the American flag in the aftermath of 9/11 is an immediate indicator of a growing "market for patriotic consumer goods" (46). Discussing the proliferating market of 9/11 memorabilia, Bill Brown certifies the emergence of a post-9/11 "[c]ommodity nationalism" (33), interpreting the evolution of a "market in high-end 9/11 collectibles" as a peculiar "commodification of affect" which, in opposition to other collectible kitsch items, is characterized by the very "absence of irony" (36). As Brown holds, the individual is integrated into a collective US identity by the logic of consumption which works with the fallacy of expressing one's individual agency and self-determination through market choices (38).

for New York City," t-shirts honoring the Fire Department of New York City, commemorative flags, collectible stamps, posters, or toys. Most significantly, heroic masculinities are turned into instrumentalized commodities in the struggle over the maintenance and perpetuation of cultural and ideological hegemony.

Both commodities and individuals are products and producers of social meanings and social practices and, thus, integrated into a society's perpetual re-construction of power structures. The male hero represents the epitome of this link between commodification and individuality, which explains the integration of heroic icons (most notably, the firefighters and police officers) into the fabrication of the dominant narrative of 9/11 by government officials. The narrative of heroism created by one of the photographic archives of 9/11 exemplifies this. Joel Meyerowitz' nine-month photographic documentation of Ground Zero, which has evolved into the World Trade Center Archive that has toured various national and international cities, offers a telling self-description: "Shortly after September 11, 2001, Meyerowitz began to create an archive, [. . .], of the destruction and recovery at Ground Zero and the immediate neighborhood. His color photographs succinctly convey the magnitude of the destruction and loss and the heroic nature of the response" (*JoelMeyerowitz.com*). Thus, stressing the "recovery" and "heroic nature of the response" after mentioning the distressing terms of "destruction" and "loss," the project itself already crafts a narrative of progress and heroism. The pictures of the ensuing publication, *Aftermath: World Trade Center Archive*, display this tendency by lacking any images of victims, focusing on the reconstruction works, and, primarily, on the male workers at the pile. Photographic representations and discursive framings merge to create a powerful plot of sacrifice, endurance, and heroism—embodied almost exclusively by men. In the absence of heroic men, however, women functioned as their metonymic placeholders. Due to the tragic loss of lives on 9/11, the focus quickly shifted to the so-called "9/11 widows," who, in the words of Faludi, "became even more essential buttresses to the post-9/11 mythmaking process" (94) and were frequently featured in talk shows, documentaries, or public appearances of politicians (56–63). Heroic masculinities, both in their embodiment through the first responders and rescue workers at Ground Zero and through their physical absence (requiring a metonymic representation), are turned into commodities to enforce a tight-knit ideological narrative that has been constructed out of the disparate elements of September 11, 2001.

This book is a study of representations of heroism in the new millennium, analyzing cultural negotiations of notions of identity intersecting in and focalized through heroic figures at a distinct historico-cultural moment.

Thereby, it is based on two premises: First, aesthetic objects reflect the discourses of self-understandings of (groups within) a society at a particular historico-cultural moment. Second, the hero figure is a contingent construction that is embedded in specific (cultural, economic, political, or social) contexts and participates in the perpetual articulation and negotiation of concepts of individual and collective identities—by embodying as well as producing social meanings and social practices. My focus on representations of heroic masculinities in the post-9/11 decade does not posit that the events of September 11, 2001 themselves are, in any essentialist way, linked to gender or represent a watershed moment for US masculinities. Rather, I suggest that the narrative of 9/11 turned into a gendered narrative as well as a narrative of gender. This narrative has quickly crystallized itself to be mostly a discourse of heroism, and the heightened level of discussions of masculinity in the aftermath of 9/11 has led to an increase of cultural products representing and negotiating US heroic masculinities. Hence, while 9/11 did not "change everything" or initiate a "crisis of masculinity," it has functioned as a catalyst, intensifying negotiations of US heroic masculinities not only in public discourse but, noticeably, in culture. Besides the surge in popularity of superhero narratives, particularly in film, in the post-9/11 decade, there is one iconic figure that stood out in the increased discussion of heroism's conflation with masculinity in the early post-9/11 years.

The figure of the firefighter instantaneously became the primary embodiment of male heroism in the aftermath of 9/11, quickly spilling over from public discourse into the field of cultural production. This transition was realized by direct representations of the events of September 11, 2001 focusing on firefighters, such as the documentaries *9/11* (Jules and Gédéon Naudet, 2002) and *Twin Towers* (Bill Guttentag and Robert D. Port, 2003) or the feature film *The Guys* (Jim Simpson, 2002, based on a 2001 off-Broadway play of the same title). Soon after, parallel to processes described as displacement and condensation in Freudian terms, the figure of the self-sacrificial male firefighter was projected into different settings, moving gradually from the film genres of action/drama to (romantic) comedy. Thereby, from a heroic individual sacrificing his life for the common good, the firefighter is first transformed into a caring paternal figure (fulfilling the parenting roles of both father and mother) to, then, represent an eligible partner, helping post-feminist career women rediscover their femininity through motherhood.[3]

[3] The drama *Ladder 49* (Jay Russell, 2004) relocates its action to the deteriorating city of Baltimore and deals with the personal and professional life of a fictional firefighter who, in the end, heroically decides to sacrifice himself in order to spare his colleagues

Alongside this marked presence of the self-sacrificial firefighter and omnipotent superheroes throughout the post-9/11 decade, however, there has been a proliferation of complex concepts of "everyday"/non-professional/human heroic masculinities. Hence, in the immediate aftermath of 9/11, the figure of the firefighter has functioned as an impromptu concept of heroism confirming hegemonic masculinity. Yet, ensuing developments throughout the decade—such as the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq, the institutionalization and enforcement of Homeland security, violations of human rights at the Guantamo Bay Detention Camp and Abu Ghraib Prison, or the 2006–2007 subprime mortgage crisis—appear to have led to an increased level of self-reflexivity as well as rather complex and critical representations of male heroism. At the same time, however, in academic discourse, the emergence of a "master narrative" of negotiations of gendered heroism is observable. 9/11 is interpreted as an event causing an overall cultural backlash that promotes white male hegemony through recourses to established narrative formulas and heroic figures accused of perpetuating sexist, racist, and exceptionalist notions of US identity. May's early cultural assessment of 9/11's reinstallment of traditional concepts of "heroic men and dependent women" (49) is echoed in Stephen J. Ducat's 2004 argument that 9/11 "provided America with an opportunity for cultural remasculinization" and "facilitated the revivification of 'heroic' manhood" (227). Faludi argues that, as a staple answer to (real or imagined) threats to American hegemony, the post-9/11 cultural landscape routinely instrumentalizes "the same consoling formula of heroic men saving threatened women" (215), particularly through appropriations of the captivity narrative. In his 2009 *9/11 Culture*, a study of the repercussions of 9/11 in US culture throughout the new millennium, Jeffrey Melnick identifies an increasing "post-9/11 father-fantasy" (136)—a regressive conservatism based on a culturally constructed discrepancy between a "present [of] deeply unsettling evidence of unmanned and/or ab-sent fathers [and] the gender certainties of the past" (128).

their life-threatening efforts at rescuing him. In the disaster action film *Poseidon* (Wolfgang Petersen, 2006), an ex-mayor of New York City and former firefighter sacrifices himself to help a group of individuals (including his daughter and her fiancé) to escape from a sinking cruise liner (whereby both the character's link to NYC and his professional background as a firefighter are distinct changes of the original novel and its first film adaptation). Homosociality and paternal qualities are highlighted in the comedy *I Now Pronounce You Chuck and Larry* (Dennis Dugan, 2007), whose title characters are two NYC firefighters that marry for insurance purposes to guarantee that widower Larry's children are taken care of in case of a fatal accident during work. In *The Accidental Husband* (Griffin Dunne, 2008), a successful but unhappy career woman leaves her intellectual fiancé for a NYC firefighter and finds her bliss in their marriage and in motherhood.

Fathers, Warriors, and Vigilantes: Post Heroism and the US Cultural Imaginary in the Twenty-First Century grew out of the discrepancy between this notion of an overall (white) "masculinist" backlash in post-9/11 US culture and my jarring personal reception of many of the texts decried as perpetrators of conservative identity politics for the recuperation of white male hegemony. By revisiting and re-examining three of the most present and debated figures deemed conservative in the contemporary cultural landscape of heroism—fathers, warriors, and vigilantes—I illustrate the complexity of current negotiations of identity to highlight the progressive and, at times, subversive qualities of popular US literature and visual culture and to argue for moments of empowerment and agency via resignification in and through the act of reception. Through its focus on texts that explicitly engage with the theme of heroism, this study analyzes fictional/fictionalized heroes in texts revolving around a notion of economic, epistemological, infrastructural, legal, military, or social crisis that not only personally affects the respective white male hero but, at the same time, the larger collective within which he is embedded. Understanding both whiteness and masculinity as relational concepts, my analyses always interrogate the construction of white heroic masculinities in relation to the texts' female and/or non-white characters and, in addition, reflect upon other sociocultural parameters that intersect within the figure of the hero. Thereby, my selection of aesthetic objects comprises popular texts of the post-9/11 decade—that means critically and/or commercially successful narratives which have been received and discussed by diverse audiences in a variety of ways and, thus, regardless of having been approved or dismissed, have become part and parcel of conceiving US heroism in the twenty-first century. Not least, my focus on paternal, soldierly, and aging heroes does not suggest a narrative that connects these heroic types with each other in any causal or chronological relation. Rather, given their status as emblems of traditional notions of hegemonic masculinity, I decided to illustrate contemporary US culture's dual potential by engaging with these prominent post-9/11 hero figures.

My understanding of the hero as a focal point for the embodiment and production of social meanings and social practices, and hence, for negotiations of individual and collective notions of identity, is based on an anti-essentialist notion of this figure. Ideas and ideals of heroism have continuously changed throughout the centuries, as pointed out by Marshall W. Fishwick, who stresses that "[h]eroes must act their ages" (10). From shifting heroic types and typologies throughout centuries and different cultures, we can deduce that—no matter whether it is configured as a superhero, an antihero, or an everyman—the concept of the hero is a contingent cultural

construction and, as such, mutable and in flux. Still, regardless of these variations, the hero is consistently regarded as representative of a culture. For modern times in Western societies, this understanding has been established by the nineteenth-century philosopher Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel.

Hegel declares the autonomous hero of the classic epic/tragedy as both the epitome of individualism and the representative of a culture's universal ideal(s)—a quality lost in bourgeois/nation-state societies with institutionalized law (239–41). Thereby, Hegel's concern is primarily with representations of heroism, which he most prominently pursues in his *Lectures on Aesthetics*, particularly in his elaborations on the "Heroenzeit" ("age of the heroes;" 243–52), which he relates to Greek antiquity and its mythic heroes. Hegel's understanding of the hero figure, establishing its modern conceptualization, stresses the hero's self-reliance whose actions—solely motivated by his/her character and free will—put in execution what is just/virtuous and moral. Classic heroes are not subordinated to law but, rather, embody and create the laws and virtues of a society through their being and their actions (243–44). Key notions that pervade Hegel's definition of heroism are autonomy ("Selbständigkeit"), morality, virtue, justice/righteousness, fortitude, and accountability. Describing the heroic individual as the "self-contained concrete tip of the whole" ("in sich konkrete Spitze des Ganzen," 253) and the embodiment of an "individual totality" ("individuelle Totalität," 255), it is the quality of coherence/integrity, of a "self-awareness that understands one's existence only in substantial unity with the moral whole" ("Bewußtsein von sich nur als in substantieller Einheit mit dem Ganzen" 247) that defines the reciprocal relation between the hero and the collective he is embedded within and, thus, representative of as its epitome. This heroic individual is intrinsically linked to the mythic times of pre-bourgeois societies without (nationalized) institutionalized laws; the emergence of the bourgeois society and the (nation-)state herald its demise through the "insurmountable power of the bourgeois order" ("unüberwindliche Macht der bürgerlichen Ordnung" 252), which curtails heroic agency.

Josef Früchtl explicates Hegel's stance on the relation between the hero and the civil/bourgeois individual (71–83) and clarifies that the establishment of the civil/bourgeois society and the constitutional state abolishes heroic self-reliance (78–79). Summarizing Hegel, Früchtl hence concludes that the hero exists in mythic times and through/in the medium of art (79). However, Früchtl points out that Hegel concedes the existence of heroic types in civil societies, both in common times through philosophers and during exceptional states of wars and revolutions, which unsettle and test a society's order and legal system and, thereby, allow for heroic agency (80–81). Thus, in Hegel's definition, as Früchtl aptly recaps, "[a] hero is whoever

artistically embodies the unity of individuality and universality in mythic or violent times" (67, my translation).[4]

Regarding reflections on heroism in US intellectual history, the most prominent philosophical treatise is found in Ralph Waldo Emerson's 1850 *Representative Men*. As indicated by the title, which mirrors his gendered, exclusively masculine, framing of heroism, Emerson, parallel to Hegel, regards heroes as representative figures that serve as exemplary individuals through their intellectual and moral qualities, defining them as extraordinary individuals "who in their characters and actions answer questions which I have no skill to put" (*Representative Men* 3). While being a "superior" person (*Representative Men* 4), the hero "must be related to us, and our life receive from him some promise of explanation" (*Representative Men* 3). Emerson repeatedly stresses the hero's function of being a role model to follow—a notion that stresses the cultural significance of hero figures during crises or, as Emerson calls it, "times of terror" ("Heroism" 259). However, while Emerson's concept of heroes appears to be essentialist ("[h]e is great who is what he is from nature," *Representative Men* 3), his elaborations conceive heroism as a performative and ultimately unavailable construction.[5] In line with Emerson's transcendentalist premise that everything in nature, including humans, corresponds to the Over-Soul, heroes are representative beings in the sense that their individualism has to be transcended in order to access the values they embody (21). In his conclusion, Emerson departs from Hegel, acknowledging heroism's relationality as a contingent performance embedded in particular contexts, and develops a more democratic understanding of heroism:

> As to what we call the masses, and common men;—there are no common men. All men are at last of a size, and true art is only possible on the conviction that every talent has its apotheosis somewhere. [. . .] The heroes of the hour are relatively great; of a faster growth; or they are such in whom, at the moment of success, a quality is ripe which is then in request. Other days will demand other qualities. (*Representative Men* 19)

[4] "Auf die Frage, was ein Held sei, antwortet Hegel: Ein Held ist, wer künstlerisch die Einheit von Individualität und Allgemeinheit in mythischen oder gewalttätigen Zeiten verkörpert." (Früchtl 67)

[5] "There is however a speedy limit to the use of heroes. Every genius is defended from approach by quantities of unavailableness. They are very attractive, and seem at a distance our own: but we are hindered on all sides from approach. [. . .] It seems as if the Deity dressed each soul which he sends into nature in certain virtues and powers not communicable to other men, and, sending it to perform one more turn through the circle of beings, wrote, '*Not transferable*,' and '*Good for this trip only*,' on these garments of the soul." (*Representative Men* 16–17; emphasis in the original)

This "opening-up" of the hero figure, then, is only the beginning of a continuous revision of the Hegelian understanding of heroes—manifesting itself through processes described as the increasing democratization, pluralization, and performativity of heroism by Früchtl in his outline of the overall cultural development of the hero figure throughout the nineteenth and twentieth centuries (96–116).

Parallel to its prominent presence in intellectual history, the figure of the hero has been a basic subject in American cultural studies from the very formation of the field. In one of the seminal texts of the Myth and Symbol School, (gendered) concepts of heroism are posited to be deeply engrained in US cultural history. Here, R. W. B. Lewis identifies the "American Adam" as the primary representation of US heroic masculinity:

> The new habits to be engendered on the new American scene were suggested by the image of a radically new personality, the hero of the new adventure: an individual emancipated from history, happily bereft of ancestry, untouched and undefiled by the usual inheritances of family and race; an individual standing alone, self-reliant and self-propelling, ready to confront whatever awaited him with the aid of his own unique and inherent sources. [. . .], the new hero (in praise or approval) was most easily identified with Adam before the Fall. Adam was the first, the archetypal, man. His moral position was prior to experience, and in his very newness he was fundamentally innocent. The world and history lay all before him. And he was the type of creator, the poet par excellence, creating language itself by naming the elements of the scene about him. All this and more were contained in the image of the American as Adam. (5)

Newness, individuality, morality, innocence, and creativity are identified as the characteristics of the US hero, whose fate in the new continent is framed in a particular genre—the adventure story. Endowed with morality and innocence, he is portrayed as a fortunate individual whose subjective agency (symbolized by the act of naming) is enhanced by the power of a new beginning in an, allegedly, a-historical and de-contextualized setting.

With the advent of postmodernism and a new generation of revisionist scholars, however, these exceptionalist and ethnocentric views on US heroism are challenged, particularly regarding the understanding of the hero as a virtuous, integral, or exalted figure serving as a blueprint for notions of identity to be emulated:

> When history is translated into myth, the complexities of social and historical experiences are simplified and compressed into the action of representative individuals or "heroes." The narrative of the hero's action exemplifies and tests the political and/or moral validity of a particular approach to the use of human powers in the material world. The hero's inner life—his or her code of values, moral or psychic ambivalence, mixtures of motive—reduces to personal motive

> the complex and contradictory mixture of ideological imperatives that shape a society's response to a crucial event. But complexity and contradiction are focused rather than merely elided in the symbolizing process. The heroes of myth embody something like the full range of ideological contradictions around which the life of the culture revolves, and their adventures suggest the range of possible resolutions that the culture's lore provides. (Slotkin, *Gunfighter* 13–14)

A prominent representative of the ideologically critical approach, Richard Slotkin establishes the hero as a symbolic figure that embodies, and hence reflects and produces, a variety of contradictory ideological positions. Heroes are thus re-conceptualized as complex constructions that play a key role in ideological struggles realized through cultural negotiations.

This academic revisiting of the hero figure is indicative of the overall critical treatment of heroes in post-1960s US society, particularly fuelled by the Vietnam War as well as the numerous social movements and their, respective, political and cultural reverberations. Most notably, this increasing "deposing" of the hero is reflected in the emergence and growing popularity of the figure of the antihero, who originated in the avant-garde margins of cultural production and gradually became a prominent icon of mainstream popular culture. From its early manifestations (such as *The Catcher in the Rye*'s Holden Caulfield) to iconic roles in 1950s melodrama (embodied by a new generation of male method actors), this trend ultimately dominates US narrative film during the heyday of the so-called New Hollywood era—casting outlaws, drop-outs, sociopaths, or prisoners as failing, imperfect, or disillusioned heroes. In addition, while 1980s action films promote notions of omnipotent and larger-than-life white male US heroism, post-1960s US culture is likewise characterized by the growing diversification of the hero figure along both race, gender, and sexuality lines—as in blaxpoitation films, revisionist Westerns, the proliferation of female heroes in the action genre, or the surge of gay super-heroes in comics. Thus, the search for a metanarrative of US heroism throughout the late twentieth century is futile.

Building on earlier critical approaches to heroism within American studies, this study applies a poststructuralist cultural studies approach that uses race, class, and gender theories complemented with concepts from reception aesthetics. This allows me to put forth the concept of 'post-heroism' for a more nuanced understanding of the contemporary US cultural landscape, breaking up the binary differentiation of embodiments of heroism into heroes and antiheroes by suggesting a third figure, the 'post-hero'. Thereby, as with any neologism predicated on a modifier, the prefix 'post-' requires qualification. For this, I revert to Ramón Saldívar's definition of the controversial term of postrace, as his explications pinpoint the very dynamics that, for me, operate in post-heroism. In Saldívar's understanding, the prefix

'post-' is a conceptual and not a chronological marker (575); to speak of postrace aesthetics/societies does not posit that race has become irrelevant as a category but, much to the contrary, that "it remains a central question" (574). Yet, there is a profound shift in the conceptualization of race in the form of a renunciation of the traditional reductionist Black/white binary of US racial discourse (575) that acknowledges and answers the need for "a new racial imaginary [. . .] to account for the persistence of race as a key element of contemporary American social and cultural politics" (575). Hence, when Saldívar describes postrace to cause a "conceptual shift to the question of what meaning the idea of 'race' carries in our own times" (575), I deduce that 'post-' entails a surge of self-reflexivity as well as a heightened awareness about contingencies and power, the significance of narrative, and growing levels of differentiation.

Post-heroes, in the tradition of antiheroes, display distinct emotional, intellectual, interpersonal, or physical ambiguities, flaws, limitations, and shortcomings. At the same time, they incorporate classic heroic traits—such as perseverance, some binding moral code/ethos, physical strength, or care for the protection of defenseless/oppressed people—while lacking the limitless cynicism, weltschmerz, or enduring isolation that pervades the anti-heroic imaginary. Still, the notion of failure becomes an integral part of the post-hero's adventurous journey, denying him a completely successful accomplishment of his "mission," as in dying while saving his family, by ending but not winning a war, or by metamorphosing into a nostalgic cultural artifact. Aside from these markedly ambivalent ends of the respective narratives, which diverge from the mainstream heroic quest's staple happy ending, the notion of failure, that means of not living up to an abstract notion of coherent and omnipotent heroism, also informs a second level of signification, as post-heroes embody a pronounced notion of (corporeal) vulnerability. In my selection of paternal, soldierly, and aging heroic types and texts, this quality of vulnerability manifests itself in shifting tropes, such as bodily illnesses and the threat of disintegration ('maimed fathers'), the exploitative commodification of fragile bodies into expandable sites of labor ('corporeate warriors'), or the inevitable corporeal change and transience that accompany all course of life ('aging vigilantes'). Thus, vulnerability follows from deviations from hegemonic masculinity—that means from the male hero's difference regarding normative notions of able-bodiedness, class, and age, respectively. Heroes have always been figures incorporating conflicting ideological positions; the degree of complexity and instability marking post-heroes (all of them protagonists of widely received texts) indicates an increased mainstreaming of marginalized identities and of notions of ambivalence, inadequacy, and failure in contemporary US culture.