A MAN'S GOTTA DO: MYTH, MISOGYNY AND OTHERNESS IN POST-9/11 AMERICA

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ABSTRACT

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In times of distress, the American man is provoked to act upon a narrative that is as old as the land on which he walks. It is a narrative that encompasses three essential elements: the hyper-masculinized hero, the helpless damsel in distress and the villain in the person of a Racial Other and that encourages man to act according to deeply rooted values, of honor, bravery and strength, against the threat. This myth however, supposes the removal of feminine agency which would threaten it, the rejection of all feminized aspects of society and the adoption of a misogynistic and nationalistic worldview. After the 9-11 attacks, this myth was called upon by a nation paralyzed with shock and fear. It rapidly caused a shift in public rhetoric and encouraged men to undertake heroic roles, while reconstructing the traditional femininity characterized by dependence and fragility. It identified a racial “other” which threatened femininity, the country, the American way of life itself and allowed men to act against them. Invisible, universal and timeless, the American myth continues to affect the everyday life and to influence the manner in which people think and act.
A MAN’S GOTTA DO
MYTH, MISOGYNY AND OTHERNESS IN POST-9/11 AMERICA

MYC Wiatrowski

A POPULAR CULTURE MASTER’S THESIS
BOWLING GREEN STATE UNIVERSITY
BOWLING GREEN, OHIO
For Mom
I know this—a man got to do what he got to do.
   ~ 1939, John Steinbeck, *Grapes of Wrath*

Well, there's some things a man just can't run away from.
   ~ 1939, John Wayne in *Stagecoach*

A man has to be what he is.
   ~ 1953, Alan Ladd in *Shane*

A man ought'a do what he thinks is best.
   ~ 1954, John Wayne in *Hondo*

A man must do what he must do.
   ~ 1956, Charlton Heston in *Three Violent People*

A people unaware of its myths is likely to continue living by them, though the world around that people may change and demand changes in their psychology, their world view, their ethics, and their institutions.
   ~ 2000, Richard Slotkin, *Regeneration through Violence*
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# TABLE OF CONTENTS

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Chapter</th>
<th>Title</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>INTRODUCTION. A MAN’S GOTTA DO…</td>
<td>.......................................................................................... 1</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Background</td>
<td>................................................................................................. 1</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Myth</td>
<td>................................................................................................. 4</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Methodology</td>
<td>................................................................................................. 9</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CHAPTER I. HERE IS OUR FATHER!</td>
<td>.......................................................................................... 12</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Colonist as American Hero</td>
<td>.......................................................................................... 12</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Cowboy as American Hero</td>
<td>.......................................................................................... 14</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Revisiting the Masculine Myth</td>
<td>.......................................................................................... 17</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Post-9/11 Men: Reimagining and Reconstructing Masculine Identity</td>
<td>.......................................................................................... 24</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CHAPTER II. MOTHERS IN NEED</td>
<td>.......................................................................................... 33</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Femininity and Motherhood in America</td>
<td>.......................................................................................... 33</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Feminist Threats to the American Myth: The Times, They are a-Changin’</td>
<td>.......................................................................................... 37</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Trauma Culture: The Reconstruction of Traditional Feminine Ideology in Post-9/11 America</td>
<td>.......................................................................................... 43</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Feminism to Blame?</td>
<td>.......................................................................................... 44</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Victimology: Let Us Save You!</td>
<td>.......................................................................................... 47</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Saving Private Lynch</td>
<td>.......................................................................................... 51</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CHAPTER III. BARBRIANS AT THE GATE</td>
<td>.......................................................................................... 55</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Native American as the Ideological Other</td>
<td>.......................................................................................... 57</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Incarnation of Evil: the American Hero vs. the JapaNazi Antagonist</td>
<td>.......................................................................................... 61</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Waking the Sleeping Giant: Captain America</td>
<td>.......................................................................................... 63</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
INTRODUCTION: A MAN’S GOTTA DO…

Background

9/11. September Eleventh. This date marks a time when the American people lost their innocence. For the first time since World War II the American homeland was under attack from outside forces and, for the first time, America had been unable to defend itself. Slightly more than a decade after the tragic events of that day, the time has come to reflect upon and to analyze the reaction to a national trauma. Ten years seems neither too short a time frame as to be callous in examining such a tragedy, nor too long as to have our worldview skewed by the historicity. We remain able to find relevant, objective and still fresh information regarding the subject by looking back now, and we are able to assess the aftermath of the event from a cultural point of view. Though creating an examination of the event in the immediate aftermath of the attacks would have (and indeed has) created a fascinating investigation, looking at the events as recent past offers the best methodology for carrying out a study of the kind I am proposing here, because it gives the researcher an opportunity to look dispassionately at the traumatic American moment, and the national response. It helps to give a distanced, even objective view of how the events of 9/11 coalesced into a cultural movement traversing multiple elements of American life. Examining this American moment retrospectively allows for a more nuanced and deeper understanding of the constant shifts and cultural changes that inevitably followed the event.

Thus, this seems to be the ideal moment to investigate the cultural response of a nation in shock, as well as the evolution of the shift in rhetoric and in lifestyle that began to take place immediately after the attacks on that fateful day. This study is aimed at exploring the American cultural response to the 9/11 terrorist attacks from the point of view of American mythology. More specifically, it seeks to: 1) critically examine an American myth in order to understand its
impact on everyday aspects of life, from politics to media and popular culture; 2) discuss the
symbolic annihilation and removal of feminine agency through a callously misogynistic attitude
which was culturally adopted post-9/11 as a result of the recreation of a gendered American
national identity; and 3) explain and demonstrate the rise of hyper-masculinity as well as the
annihilation of the feminine in all sectors of everyday life as a response to the threat of the
modern age “barbarian.”

One could argue that this cultural shift began the moment of the attacks, became clearly
evident before the end of the attacks on September 11, and was arguably in full force no later
than September 12. Though it is difficult to ascertain which came first, the shift in attitude by
the citizenry or the same shift mediated by television personalities and politicians, what was
clear is that a shift in cultural attitude did take place in response to the terrorist attacks, and
interestingly that shift had less to do with politics or concepts of “national security” per se than it
did with ideas of gender.

More specifically this shift in cultural rhetoric was centered on the shared construction of
individual, and by association national, masculine identity. Implicit in the discourse of
masculine identity is, of course, feminine identity which is constructed both by contrast (i.e. what
masculine is, feminine isn’t and vice versa) as well as through omission, that is to say through
the symbolic annihilation of the feminine. This gendered construction of individualistic and
nationalistic identity which was occurring in the cultural discourse arose on both large and small
scales—taking place both in what we may refer to as mass and folk cultures— and built a
masculine national ego, as Freud may have it.

However, in order for this shift to take place, another set of qualities were required, one
which would run counter to American-ness to a completely different set of cultural beliefs,
wherein Americans are placed in a bipartite system where American-ness is diametrically opposed to a set of Cultural Others (e.g. those who would do us harm, those who do not agree with our policies, etc.). This, of course, is most evident in the case of militant Muslims in the immediate aftermath of the 9/11 terrorist attacks. Yet, soon after the attacks it became obvious that the category had come to encompass those who physically resembled the dominant American stereotype of “Arabs” and, by extension, soon the entirety of the Muslim community.

These ideas can also be extended in terms of the cultural Other. This rhetorical strategy creates an “Us,” in this case a homogeneous national identity wherein the “Us” acts as the faceless Hero within a national pseudo-narrative and is a representative embodiment of the ideals present in the then-contemporary American \textit{zeitgeist}. This is opposed to an idea of “Them,” an Other who is identified as the antithesis of the America-Hero type and represents the Antagonist.

This rhetorical strategy is, of course, nothing new. Creating a hyper-masculine national identity and opposing that against an ideological Other is something that has been studied in several cultural contexts over the past fifty years, often in the context of a fear of miscegenation. Yet examining the American response to 9/11 retrospectively suggests that there was a rapid and radical shift in American ideology as a result of the terrorist attacks, because prior to the attacks this rhetoric was not evident and post-attack it clearly was. The speed at which this shift has taken place suggests to me that, in many respects, the ideological American worldviews, particularly in relation to gender and nationalism, have a default setting of sorts. That is to say the American conceptualization of identity formation that became evident after the terrorist attacks of 9/11 is not a reaction to the event \textit{per se}, but instead something that has been ingrained into us culturally as a fall-back position to which we return in times of national distress. I would posit that there exists a nationally shared mythology that encourages and reinforces a
nationalistic and misogynistic American worldview that remasculates the national ego in times of dire need, and that this mythology, when called upon, is in turn reproduced in American rhetoric, lifestyles, and cultural productions. Remasculinization is “a regeneration of the concepts, constructions, and definitions of masculinity in American culture and a restabilization of the gender system within and for which it is formulated.”

Richard Slotkin’s observation that “a people unaware of its myths is likely to continue living by them, though the world around that people may change and demand changes in their psychology, their world view, their ethics, and their institutions” seems particularly astute in that the American mythology that I assert exists has a direct and immediate impact on the lives of the American people. That is to say, when in times of national trauma Americans call upon and live by these myths. Furthermore, this mythology is extremely hard to reconcile in the modern world, and could be said to bring about a cultural regression, particularly where feminist values and racial tolerance are concerned. Before moving along, it would be beneficial to explain the concept of myth as I will be utilizing it in the context of this work, and to explain how this notion differs from the general understanding of it.

Myth

In his introduction to William Bascom’s “Forms of Folklore”, Alan Dundes asserts that:

Nothing infuriates a folklorist more than to hear a colleague from an anthropology or literature department use the word myth loosely to refer to anything from an

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obviously erroneous statement to an alleged “archetypal theme underlying a modern novel or poem.”

I mention this to note that my definition of myth for this thesis does not entirely fit within the confines of what may be considered a traditional folkloric study, and as a folklorist I must, to some degree, justify this. In the popular parlance myth has the connotation of error. “That is just a myth!” is a common phrase in the contemporary vernacular that labels a story or statement as untrue. However, when I say myth I do not mean it in these terms; that is to say myth is not equivalent to false belief—myths are not necessarily untrue and untrue narratives or statements are not inherently myths. However, while myths may not necessarily imply *false* belief, myths always imply belief. Mircea Eliade, as quoted by Jack Zipes, tells us that “myth narrates a sacred history,” while folklorist William Bascom writes that “myths are prose narratives which, in a society in which they are told, are considered to be truthful accounts of the remote past.” The very nature of a myth implies that they are contextually believed, and are *told as true*. Yet both Eliade and Bascom assert that myths must be narratives, and Bascom further insists on prose narratives. We can consider myths to be sacred narratives, told as true, which explain how the world came to be in its present form yet (and this is where many other folklorists would disagree with me) I would posit that the narrative need not be prose, as explicitly stated by Bascom. I contend that in the context of the American mythology which I will examine myth is not prose narrative, but instead acts as available narrative, which does not

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7 Dundes, 1.
“refer to a corpus of narratives but rather to the process of what gets told and what doesn’t”\(^8\). In the American context the “myth” is not a body of stories with cohesive syntagmatic chains that are told and retold, but instead a set of paradigmatic beliefs that can be inserted into a variety of narratives that enforce the original narrative. Indeed when I say “myth” I mean it in much the same way as Henry Nash Smith, who used the term to connote “an intellectual construction that fuses concept and emotion into an image … [which are] characteristic of being collective representations rather than the work of a single mind.”\(^9\)

In essence this available narrative is a metanarrative of sorts—one that disseminates the “story” of pioneers, frontiersmen and cowboys. It is a narrative that is predicated on what we can describe here as John Wayne masculinity and Doris Day femininity. It is a narrative where the man must protect his family from the barbarians at the gate—the wild Indian of the American frontier. It is a sacred narrative, regarded with awe and a type of secular reverence for the founders and settlers of the America of yesteryear. It is a narrative that reinvents and recontextualizes the American past for the American present and fundamentally explains how our world came to be in its current form.

The available narrative at the heart of the cultural reaction in the wake of 9/11 is less about the act of terrorism than it is about snapshots of the idealized American past—the earliest days of colonial America, the pioneers on the frontier roads traveling across the country, the cowboy heroes of West—all culminating in a variety of very specific ideological cultural beliefs. The American Myth, as I will be exploring it, is more a sacred process of understanding how the world and, by association, how we as individuals have come to be who and what we are in our present form. It is an implicitly shared cultural knowledge predicated on belief. I will show that

This mythology is essential to the American experience, and as such it speaks to the rapidity and ubiquity of its effect on the rhetoric, lifestyles and public worldviews of America in the post-9/11 condition.

This notion of mythology is mentioned by Bakhtin as the concept of “national myth”\(^{10}\). This is a narrative that functions as a method of providing unity and establishes a set of common values which guide a nation. These narratives serve as a national symbol, as a guide which establishes the important common roots of a nation and acts in order to enhance the self-esteem of the population, to encourage or influence its behavior. However, not all myths can become national myths. National myths must be unanimously accepted as part of the national spirit and important enough to be preserved and transmitted further. Most importantly, as mentioned above, they need to be believed.

I believe that it is safe to claim that an idealized version of the American past has become one such national myth. The colonizing and conquering of the West has been culturally retransmitted in an idealistic and mostly distorted manner, based on a simple narrative (the eternal fight between right and wrong and triumph of the first principle), utilizing a shared creation myth as its base.

One of the most important myths shared within a culture is a creation myth. Whether this myth is focused on the physical creation of the world itself or the creation of man, people are always fascinated with their cultural origins and the beginning of their shared histories, particularly if the witnesses to the event are long gone, or there were none such witnesses whatsoever. By extension, the creation of new nations and new societies is often treated in the same vein as these sacred creation narratives. According to Mircea Eliade, the occupation of a

\(^{10}\) Mikhail Bakhtin. *The Dialogic Imagination: Four Essays*. Trans. Michael Holquist (Austin, TX: University of Texas, 2006), 64.
new territory (not necessarily an unoccupied territory, but rather one unoccupied by the people who claim it) is a repetition of cosmogony, because it is still in a larval, initial state of chaos.\textsuperscript{11} He writes:

What is to become “our world” must first be “created,” and every creation has a paradigmatic model—the creation of the universe by the gods … Whether it is a case of clearing uncultivated ground, or of conquering and occupying a territory already inhabited by “other” human beings, ritual taking possession must always repeat the cosmogony … This religious behavior in respect to unknown lands continued, even in the West, down to the dawn of modern times. The Spanish and Portuguese conquistadores, discovering and conquering territories, took possession of them in the name of Jesus Christ. The raising of the Cross was equivalent to consecrating the country, hence in some sort to a “new birth”.\textsuperscript{12}

Taking Eliade’s supposition as true, it seems safe to claim that the discovery, occupation and birth of America and American society (particularly the ideology of American Republican Democracy) has become a creation myth in and of itself, since the history of the events was denatured so as to correspond to a sacred narrative in which the colonists are the bearers of both civilization and religion, while the Indians, the cultural “Others,” needed to either be assimilated or annihilated.

A national myth, however, needs “channels” of transmission. That is to say, it necessitates particular mediums and genres which are able to promote and to establish the national myth as such. In the case of ancient Greece, Mikhail Bakhtin suggests that the channels

\textsuperscript{12} Ibid, 31-32.
of transmission were the novel, the epic and the drama.\textsuperscript{13} For the American mythology to be transmitted and perpetuated, a specific genre has been culturally constructed. Contemporarily this has been largely accomplished through the Western. This genre largely emerged contemporaneously with its source material, in a time when Americans needed a symbol to unite them and transform them into a homogenous nation. According to Stanley Corkin, Western novels became a popular genre at the beginning of the Civil War and remained successful until the rise of cinematography, when film took the place of the novel.\textsuperscript{14}

Being set in the nineteenth century, the Western has “the mythic power to define the past, not simply as a body of material and ideological events that are recognizable and subject to analysis but as a triumphal moment when a compendium of quintessentially American traditions took hold”\textsuperscript{15}. In part the Western as a genre has come to represent and reinforce ideas found in the American mythology. Here the pioneers and settlers of early American are revitalized and reinvigorated for mass communication, and for approximately 100 years this genre remained the predominant form of communication for many of the ideologies which I will be discussing.

Methodology

This analysis seeks to highlight the manner in which national myths are created historically, and how they are reimagined, recreated and function in the contemporary world. In addition, this thesis will illustrate the degree to which a people’s mythology is responsible for shaping their identity, even in a hyper-mediated society in which the individual may arguably be disconnected from direct links with his roots and myths would seem to have ceased to play an important role in his cultural environment. In this regard, one could easily notice that Westerns are not as popular as they used to be, since they have arguably become devoid of both ethical and

\textsuperscript{13} Bakhtin, 64.


\textsuperscript{15} Ibid.
social meaning. Yet, national trauma elicits a response from the population, and once this response is triggered the American people return, almost naturally, to a much more visibly patriarchal society dominated by the masculine Western-hero type. This interesting and dynamic national response, both in term of rhetoric and action, deserves increased attention as it points out the important role that mythology continues to play in the contemporary world, a modern world that, if we were to believe the popular rhetoric, does not believe in myths anymore.

The study is inherently limited by its scope, being the investigation of the national response to a single, shared tragedy. As such, it is impossible to demonstrate that in different conditions and in a different age the cultural response to a threatening event would be the same. Furthermore, the study is limited by the ten-year-period which has passed since the events in question, namely the 9/11 attacks. For the purpose of this study, it would have been beneficial to examine the cultural response, both of individuals and of the masses, from the perspective of direct witnesses. However, ethnography is beyond the purview of this thesis. While examining multiple national traumas (such as Pearl Harbor, the Oklahoma City Bombings, or even various financial crises) could strengthen this analysis, such a project is beyond the scope of this study, but is one I hope to undertake in the future.

This study is focused primarily on examining the pop cultural responses to national trauma but takes its lead from several key figures in cultural studies. Amongst the key theorists whose work I hope to build upon will be: Susan Faludi, Alan Dundes, Richard Slotkin, Meghana Nayak, Edward Said, Blake Allmendinger, Simon Bronner, John Cawelti, Stanley Corkin, Anthony Easthope, and Susan Jeffords. The questions raised by these scholars and the elements explored here are all brought together by their connection to the idea of a national mythology and

the significance of that mythology in everyday life. By applying the American myth to the shift in rhetoric that became apparent in the moments of shock that followed the 9/11 attacks, a rhetoric that is still evident in today’s cultural environment, it becomes easier to illustrate the misogynist trends that have evolved to become increasingly more commonplace in America since that moment and to examine the manner in which these ideological and rhetorical shifts have come to have an impact on the real lives of everyday Americans.
CHAPTER I: HERE IS OUR FATHER!

The Colonist as American Hero

The earliest settlers carried their European mythology to the new world, in a land where the ideals and beliefs contained by their narratives were opposed by those of the natives. According to Richard Slotkin, they “possessed at the time of their arrival a mythology derived from the cultural history of their home countries and responsive to psychological and social needs of their old cultures.” However, as they arrived in America, they needed to adjust to a life in the wilderness. As the author writes,

The evolution of the American myth was a synthetic process of reconciling the romantic-conventional myths of Europe to American experience—a process which, by an almost revolutionary turn, became an analytic attempt to destroy or cut through the conventionalized mythology. Challenged socially and politically by the European society to prove that their decision was worth taking, colonists needed to transform wilderness, to reorganize their environment so as to defeat chaos and demonstrate that their new home was as good as their previous, or as Slotkin explains, even better.

As years passed by, American culture evolved and the joined experience of the generations who shaped the country coalesced, through various authors, into the American myth. These myths were based in large part on narratives centered on the Indians wars, narratives which described the brutal fight for survival in a hostile environment, and reveled in the bravery

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1 From: Nathaniel Hawthorne, “The Duston Family,” American Magazine of Useful and Entertaining Knowledge, May 1836, 396. “Hearing the tramp of hoofs in their rear, [the children] looked round, and espying Goodman Duston [their father], all suddenly stopped. The little ones stretched out their arms; while the elder boys and girls, as it were, resigned their charge into his hands; and all the seven children seemed to say, ‘Here is our father! Now we are safe!’”
2 Slotkin, 15.
3 Ibid. 17
and courage of the men who paved the way for civilization created from the untamed chaos of the New World.

The narrative of the New World was one filled with conquering heroes and adventureres, men who risked everything for a chance to build something. Women, however, occupied an parallel role. While they were basically driven by the same primary motivations to occupy the new lands, their vision of the New World was much more modest. Rather than engaging in enthusiastic descriptions of a new Paradise like their male counterparts did, they dreamt of domestic harmony in a “cultivate garden.” Annette Kolodny suggests that this discordant narrative, split as it was between conquering male heroes and gentle women is why women were never able to achieve a mythic status in the available narrative of American-ness; they were never able to equal the exploits of their male counterparts.

The men thus gave birth to a the myth of American creation, in which they occupied the central place as heroes in both a spiritual fight against the uncivilized Native devil-worshippers and a physical fight against untamed chaos represented by the barbarians and the land itself. This idealized man faced the cruel, uncivilized antagonist in the persona of the Indian and recreated a cosmogenesis by claiming and shaping a world, a new nation and a new future for human kind. He thus became an available archetypal hero within the American consciousness. From the first European landings in the New World, all men looked up to the qualities of these mythic ideals, forging the foundation for a myth predicated on pioneers of the frontier. Generation after generation this narrative of colonist as hero has been reimagined and reconstructed, reorganizing and re-envisioning their attributes, and their deeds, which are viewed as inherently masculine and ultimately heroic.

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6 Ibid.
However, the social and political context of the age was far from being as simple as the narrative line of a typical myth, especially when seen through the lenses of contemporary human values. Indeed, a postcolonial history of the colonization of the land that would become the United States would show that the progression has not always a smooth and straightforward one. Nor has it always been peaceful. A critical analysis of the colonial period in American history raises several questions. Were settlers right to occupy the lands or did the natives have all the rights to defend it? Were the colonists driven by a sincere desire for transformation or did they have economic interests in relocating in the Americas? These questions suggest that the narrative of the American mythogenesis is far more complex than simply the narrative presented of the heroic colonist. The myth however, simplifies it by distorting the reality and transforming it in a simple, heroic story, in which the White European male figure stands in the center.

The Cowboy as American Hero

Narratively speaking, the image of the American settler was soon reimagined and transformed into the figure of the American cowboy. Based on the experiences of the first colonists and driving the concept of the American masculinity even further, the image of the confident, solitary cowboy who works, fights and adventures into the wilderness with no fear and no regret is, in some ways, an even more powerful interpretation of the same paradigmatic structure. Guided by this image, American men started to refer to the brutal attitude of cowboys as a standard of masculinity. President Roosevelt himself “promoted the appreciation of the ‘rougher, manlier virtues’ in traditions such as rough-hewn cowboy and frontier songs, wildlife hunts and boxing matches.”7 Furthermore, Simon Bronner argued that:

The folktype of the cowboy is recognized internationally as an American representation of a manly man and contributes to the normative or some may say, “mainstream”, construction of American masculinity, characterized by independent, competitive and aggressive behaviors and outward signs of physical dominance, and social ganging.  

The image of the cowboy as the ideal American male crosses borders in the guise of the Western, and was key to the continued dissemination of the ideologies inherent in the American myth.

Yet, as with the life and times of the colonial hero, the truth of the matter was far more complex that the narrative allows. Life in the West from a mythic standpoint was largely based on a romanticized version of the cowboys’ lives. In truth, the life of the American cowboy was dominated by labor and isolation. However, there remains an element of truth to the hyper-masculine, overtly sexualized cowboy character in the American mythos. Functionally a cowboy needed to have a certain amount of physical conditioning in order to be able to fulfill his duties, which led to the hard bodied stereotype that will be discussed in more detail momentarily. Their job necessitated a certain amount of isolation, where they were often alone in the wilderness, far from any contact with anyone, particularly women. According to Blake Allmendinger, their work conditions were imposed by the ranchers who preferred, in the nineteenth century, bachelors to family men. Single men had no obligations and could be sent on several months-long cattle drives far away from any human community. Furthermore, they needed lower wages and would often live together in bunkhouses.

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8 Ibid, xiii
However, as opposed to being hyper-masculine, Allmendinger defines cowboys’ situation as a sort of symbolic castration, correlating their activity of castrating bull calves with their own situation:

Geographically isolated and socially cut off, unmarried cowboys were temporarily and metaphorically castrated in that they were forced to abstain from engaging in relations with women for great lengths of time. They were hired because they were already unattached, deprived single men, and they were forced to stay that way or risk being fired for moving to town, getting married and fathering offspring.10

Reading the cowboy as symbolically castrated male offers a subversive reading to the character of the American myth. In examining this seeming paradox, Anthony Easthope applies masculinity theories proposed by French psychoanalyst Jacques Lacan because, as the author explains, Lacan’s theory of castration sees it as a “more radical symbolic event.”11 According to Easthope, “the castration complex is an idea or meaning that arises in the gap between the two sexes, as the masculine which is not feminine and feminine not masculine. The masculine myth aims to reconstruct castration on its own grounds.”12 This paradigm of renegotiating castration as masculine may seem antithetical to the masculine cowboy myth; however it is key to the way Americans are able to reconstruct their identities when culturally emasculated.

Indeed, the castration myth can be more literally interpreted as a fear of being considered a castrated worker because of the restriction from female contact and sexual encounters. Being eager to reaffirm their masculinity, cowboys would often eat the testicles of a bull after castrating

10 Ibid, 6.
12 Ibid, 165.
it. This ritual centered on consuming the bull’s sexual organs was meant to enhance their virility and to increase their sexual potency.\(^\text{13}\) Moreover, these testicles were cooked by cowboys themselves and were not shared with “non-masculine” or effeminate men, a group formed by men such as the cooks, and ethnic ranch hands. This remasculinization process, like others to be discussed later, was predicated in violence or the threat of violence. What made castrated testicles so desirable was the danger involved in the castration of the calf, an activity in which masculine men, like the cooks, did not participate\(^\text{14}\).

The cowboys’ contact with women often was limited to the visits they paid to the brothels and local prostitutes when they entered cowtowns on their free days. According to Allmendinger, cowboys were seen as unscrupulous and often dangerous, particularly to the virtue of women, often resulting in people attempting to “shield” their women from cowboys who represented a threat to their decency.\(^\text{15}\)

Interestingly there is a disconnect between the remasculanization narrative of the cowboy and the heroic cowboy presented in the Western genre. The available narrative, which is later disseminated through literature and film, presents the cowboy as a mythical hero with countless attributes, among which honor and virtue were not lacking. It is the paradigmatic structures of this complicated narrative, informed as it was by the colonial myth, that would lay the foundation for a general myth of American masculinity that has come to be the dominant available narrative in American cultural discourses.

Revisiting the Masculine Myth

Without delving too deeply into the psychoanalytical argument that the twin towers of the World Trade Center represented a national phallus (or in this case twin phalli), and the terrorist

\(^{13}\) Allmendinger, .55.
\(^{14}\) Ibid.
\(^{15}\) Ibid, 6.
attacks of September 11th 2001 were a semiotic cultural castration, (not unlike that of the cowboy) of America at the hands of “Our Enemies,” it is still possible to understand 9/11 as an attack on American Manhood. Indeed, it is possible to see all times of national distress in American history, be they martial, natural or financial, as a siege on the masculine American identity. This is because much of American imagined identity is tied to the concept of American imagined masculinity due to the patriarchal influence that is the foundation for much of American sociological and ideological constructions, as shown previously in the examples of the colonial and cowboy heroes. Indeed, “human traits are [often] ascribed to the nation to put forth a certain image of what it is or should be.”16 To clarify, by imagined masculinity I mean “the set of images, values, interests and activities held important to a successful achievement of male adulthood”17 in America, and this shared conceptualization of the masculine informs and reinforces the patriarchy. For my purposes here, the patriarchy is the “manifestation and institutionalization of male dominance over women and children in the family and the extension of male dominance … in society. [Patriarchy] implies that men hold power in all the important institutions of society.”18 The structures of a patriarchal hegemony, and so of masculine identity, have never truly been absent from American politics or cultural identity and so a threat to America, be it literal or figurative, is implicitly a threat on American masculinity. In times of national crises, such as the terrorist attacks of September 11th, there is implicitly a crisis in masculine identity, one that is met by a perceived necessary reaction to prove manhood on an individual and national level. This allows the male identity of the country to be regenerated, renegotiated, and reclaimed through historical mythopoeic modalities in face of outward threats, the foundations of which are evident in the colonial and cowboy hero types previously discussed.

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17 Jeffords, *Remasculinization of America*, xi.
It is imperative to my argument that I consider how threats to a nation’s physical and/or financial security, such as 9/11 or the Great Depression, can be construed as a threat on masculinity itself, and why it necessitates a response which reimagines masculine ideology. While above I mention that American masculinity and national identity are linked through the historical mode of American patriarchal governance, I readily admit that conflating an attack on one as an attack on the other is somewhat reductive. It is, of course, more complicated than that.

Americans operate in an interesting space wherein the country exists not only as a physically bound landmass, but also as an imagined community wherein the concept of “nation” in the shared social imaginary creates camaraderie through the implicit belief in deep horizontal relationships. In large part the political system in America reinforces the everyman ethos through the communal relationships between individuals and politicians, both contemporarily and historically. We revere the Founding Fathers as everymen who threw off the shackles of their “bondage,” and who embody the colonist heroic ideal mentioned above. However they are also, in many respects, us. Or they are, at the very least, who we culturally aspire to be. We see our contemporary political figures in much the same light. They strive to be “one of us” or at least a semiotically identifiable facsimile, and in return we truly see them as a cultural father figure. We personify our cultural ideologies in the figure of the American President. Wherein he (for the President has always been a he) is us and we are him. Through him all Americans are related, as he is our chosen leader. Alan Dundes described the complex political relationship between the President and the American constituency by saying “[t]here is an unconscious aspect in politics, where we are looking for a hero who will turn out to be a father figure for the

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country.”

In part the community built through Americans, particularly in times of national distress, is created through the communal father figure. In some measure it is our cultural relationship to our political leaders that allows for the U.S. to see itself as more than a community of disparate individuals, as a consented-to hegemonically constructed fraternity, a family headed by our duly chosen father.

This constructed relationship wherein a chosen patriarch leads a national family creates a masculine authority to which we turn in times of national need. When a threat emerges, be it on a small scale or large, this becomes a threat to the “whole family” and necessitates a response by the Patriarch-in-Chief. A threat to the family is implicitly a threat to the father as we have culturally deemed the father the familial protector. Indeed, when the American President is elected, Robin Lakeoff suggests that we elect more than just a leader and a father figure; she says “[Americans] act modern, cool and sophisticated, but underneath, we want a daddy, a king, a god, a hero. We'll take the heel if we can get Achilles, a champion who will carry that lance and that sword into the field and fight for us.”

However this relationship is, again, more complicated than it seems. The heroic Achilles-like father figure we adopt is problematized by the fact that American politicians are not, in fact, warriors. This is rectified through the President’s relationship as Commander-in-Chief of the U.S. Armed Services. As such our political leaders gain a certain amount of masculine rectitude by appropriating the masculinity of the American military. There is a certain amount of compensation present in this portrayal of the political structures of American national identity. R.W. Connell writes that “true masculinity is almost always thought to proceed from men’s bodies—to be inherent in a male body or to

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21 Ibid.
express something about the male body.\textsuperscript{22} Indeed the concept of the strong muscled man is recognized as the dominant paradigm of masculine representation in the hegemonic discourse of traditional American gender roles.\textsuperscript{23} As seen with the character of the cowboy above, this concept of a strong bodied individual and the nature of the male body are indelibly linked in contemporary studies of the masculine to ideas of aggression, power and control.\textsuperscript{24} By appropriating the aggressive physicality of the American soldier (perhaps itself a modern-day cognate for the colonist and cowboy hero, the next step in the reimagining of that ideal), borrowing their bodies both literally and ideologically, political leaders are able to conflate themselves with that form of masculinity. Through this the appropriation they become what Susan Jeffords calls a hard bodied individual, where the military could be said to represent, both literally and ideologically, a depiction of the “indefatigable, muscular, and invincible masculine body”\textsuperscript{25} in the imaginary of the collective American consciousness. In essence what we see is the President becoming a hard bodied national Father-General who protects us in times of distress. When these threats are martial he calls forth “our boys” and sends them off to fight for “our freedoms,” acting as the architect of our protection.

I would be remiss to suggest that this is the only form of patriarchal influence exerted over the American people in a hegemonically constructed way. These political structures, particularly in the form of the President, are merely some of the most visible. The leaders-as-father model extends from the national to regional to local and individual levels—from politics to news media to popular culture. The hard bodied models of masculinity appropriated are not

\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{22} R.W. Connell, \textit{Masculinities} (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1995), 45.
\item \textsuperscript{23} E. Anthony Rotundo, \textit{American Manhood: Transformations in Masculinity from the Revolution to the Modern Era} (New York: Basic, 1993), 222-25.
\end{itemize}
always soldiers either, but are often police officers, firefighters and other servicemen, what we may call culturally masculine heroes (like their predecessors the colonist and the cowboy before them). The cultural rhetoric surrounding servicemen of all varieties eschew the mundane and ordinary, instead building masculine capital through the heroic life which “not only threatens the possibility of returning to everyday routines, but entails the deliberate risking of life itself.”

The risk-based, hard bodied masculinity of servicemen is absorbed into the discursive framework of American-ness. I say servicemen explicitly because this model ignores the female soldier, the female police officer and so on; however, I will address this at length in Chapter 2, “Mothers in Need.”

If there exists a masculine myth which is reclaimed culturally through regeneration and renegotiation in times of national distress then it must have a paradigmatic framework that is both readily recognizable and actionable. That is to say we must understand what this mode of masculine construction is culturally when we see it and it must be easily implemented on a communal level. I argue that the myth of American masculinity extends to us from the sort of patriarchal traditions discussed previously, with these traditions reinforced through our shared stories – both in terms of folklore and popular or mass culture. In these culturally disseminated modes masculinity is paradoxically both highly visible and largely invisible. This perceived invisibility is achieved through the presentation of hegemonic hard bodied masculinity as both normal and universal. Indeed, Easthope suggests that patriarchal masculinity sees itself as “natural, normal and universal” and that the power of its myth consists of controlling everything that is not masculine, both within the individual, and in the society as a whole.

However the prevalence of the performance of the “unmarked” category makes the invisible

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27 Easthope, 166.
marker simultaneously highly visible, at least to those who choose to look for it. Much of the
group power of American masculinity comes from the supposition that it is ubiquitous and that it is
natural, in short that it is the unmarked norm. Yet in times of national distress, the apparent
unmarked normality of masculinity is challenged and so the invisibility or assumed
unmarkedness of masculinity is no longer sufficient. The fact that the patriarchal order is
repeatedly challenged and renegotiated suggests that there must exist a model for the
regeneration and reclamation of nationally shared masculine ideals.

As previously discussed, the predominant American model often used is focused on a
repetition of a father figure motif which simultaneously appropriates a traditional model of hard
bodied masculinity. However, Susan Jeffords writes that the traditional visible mode of
masculine ideology “represents itself as a ‘separate world,’ one that poses survival—finally the
survival of masculinity itself—as depending on the exclusion of women”. 28 While I agree with
Jeffords to an extent, I would modify her assertion to state that traditional masculine modes
require the exclusion of feminine agency. That is to say women physically can, and indeed must,
be present in traditional modes of manhood. In this form of masculinity the female is presented
as antithetical to the male, so masculinity is conceptualized as directly oppositional to femininity.
It is only through this juxtaposition of male and female that masculinity can be constructed, after
which women—and their associated traits—are removed as agent. This removal of agency
forces women to be, as Laura Mulvey would put it, the bearers, not makers, of meaning. 29 In
short, visible hegemonic masculinity may be best described as a culturally conceived identity
created through the juxtapositional exclusion or domination of the feminine as agent. In part it is
this comparative and hyper-masculine modality that allows for the reclamation of American male

28 Jeffords, Remasculinization of America, 168.
agency in times of national distress. As shown previously, this modality has a precedent in the removal of agency from colonial women when juxtaposed against their colonist hero counterparts and in the cowboy/prostitute model mentioned previously.

Post-9/11 Men: Reimagining and Reconstructing Masculine Identity

When threats to national security are put forth the masculinity of our leaders and our country is challenged. In the case of 9/11 the masculinity of Hero-Father (George W. Bush – and in turn the nation) is challenged, as the attack suggests that the patriarch is unable to keep his “wards” safe. There is a challenge to the myth of American masculinity, and so that challenge must be met by reinventing and rebuilding the myth to suit the cultural needs. From the literal and figurative rubble of an attack on America it becomes necessary to rebuild order and reimagine how such events were able to take place. Susan Faludi writes: “[a] culture forges myths for many reasons, but paramount among them is the need to impose order on chaotic and disturbing experience—to resolve haunting contradictions and contain apprehensions, to imagine a way out of darkness.”

Post-9/11 America became a “nation … struggling to make sense of … terror in the homeland, a terror that its [men] had not been able to check at the familial front door. This was the experience that a national myth was called to address—by remaking its shame into triumph.”

Reclaiming the myth of American masculinity requires a fallback position from which to begin, a sort of cultural reset point that allows the failed form of masculinity to be augmented, not scrapped all together. To “imagine a way out of the darkness,” as Faludi puts it, necessitates the reestablishment of an immediately recognizable masculine ideology that is grounded in a sense of historical cultural normalcy. Yet, to be clear, this recognizable narrative is not predicated upon what we would call actual history. History alone is

31 Ibid.
not enough to allow a nation to rebuild ideologies from chaos; history “can explain the present in terms of the past but it cannot provide an indication of how to act in the present based on the past, since by definition the past is categorically different from the present. Myths however, can use the setting of the past to create and resolve conflicts of the present.”

This reestablishing of normalcy from a pseudo-historical mythogenesis occurs in multiple ways, including an amplified form of the cultural “father” ideology, and a hyper-exclusionary rhetoric surrounding women, yet it is arguable that both of these previously mentioned approaches are couched in another form of cultural affirmation, primarily that “[t]he means by which normalcy can be affirmed and protected is through violence.”

By affirming and protecting normalcy through violence on a cultural scale in the national zeitgeist I do not mean to suggest that a purely physical form of violence is necessarily thrust into the limelight, though this too does occur. There also exists the presence and reappropriation of violent rhetoric that is used on a massive scale ranging from the official (political), to the mass (popular texts), to the folk (individuals and small groups). The concept of a rhetorical reimagining and reclaiming of a cultural identity through violence is not new to the American imaginary. Many unofficial folk narratives reinforce a rhetorical strategy of masculine violence, as do available narratives. It is here we find the resurgence of the colonial and cowboy hero archetypes. Historical folk-hero figures such as Daniel Boone have become a fixed part of the American social consciousness because they recapitulate a concept of the “American spirit” that can be tied to Herbert Hoover’s ideal of rugged individualism. In Regeneration through Violence Richard Slotkin explores the use of violence in American rhetoric, culture and history, and examines how it is integral to the construction of what he calls the American mythogenesis.

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33 Corkin, 160.
Slotkin argues that in the rhetorical narratives that shape the American mythogenesis “the founding fathers were not those eighteenth-century gentlemen who composed a nation at Philadelphia. Rather, they were those who … tore violently a nation from implacable and opulent wilderness—the rogues, adventurers, and land-boomers; the Indian fighters, traders, missionaries, explorers and hunters who killed and were killed until they had mastered the wilderness.” As a result of many of America’s foundational ideologies being based on this myth, the means of “regeneration ultimately became the means of violence, and the myth of regeneration through violence became the structuring metaphor of the American experience.”

It is important to note that the methodology of regenerating cultural myth through violence is predicated on the agency and actions of men, and the heroic structures which they adhere to. As shown in the exploration of the colonial hero above, women are symbolically annihilated as agent, and the action falls to men. Slotkin focuses clearly on the founding fathers and a variety of hero archetypes in his exploration of the American mythogenesis; and in the violent regeneration of the myth of American ideology what is ultimately being reimagined and reclaimed is the myth of American masculinity. There exists a relationship between the heroic ideal and the culture that admires those men who embody that ideal—a type of hero worship where those who become cultural idols such as the founding fathers are “used as role models for people to identify with.” In the reimagined post-9/11 version of this myth the reimagined American mythology breaks down the elements of the mythogenesis described by Slotkin, and applies them to more popular heroes. The news media celebrated (and continues to celebrate)

34 Slotkin, 4.
35 Slotkin, 5.
36 Feathersome, 61.
37 I use the term “popular heroes” here not in the sense of being regarded with favor or admired through the prevailing opinion of the general populace (though this is certainly true in a post-9/11 context), but in terms of being heroes of the people, members of and representing the general populace.
the most masculine of our “ordinary heroes,” servicemen who put aside their ordinariness, and are “thrust into a situation of extreme physical danger in which they show extraordinary courage such as risking or sacrificing their lives to save other people.”38 Indeed, journalist Peggy Noonan, in speaking about how the 9/11 attacks brought this form of masculinity back to the center stage, writes: “[a] certain style of manliness is once again being honored and celebrated in our country since Sept. 11 … I am speaking of masculine men, men who push things and pull things and haul things and build things, men who charge up the stairs in a hundred pounds of gear and tell everyone else where to go to be safe. Men who are welders, who do construction, men who are cops and firemen.”39

In the immediate aftermath of the terrorist attacks on September 11th this reconstructed adaptation of the American hero myth presented an augmented version of the hard bodied masculinity discussed earlier, which was summarized so succinctly by Noonan. This reconstituted mythology publicly focused on a very specific set of hyper-masculine idols, primarily in the form of the Fire Department of the City of New York. Susan Faludi writes:

In the end, the character actors who won the 9/11 hero sweepstakes, hands down, were the New York City firemen. They had arrived to save others. Their uniforms and the direction they were heading in provided a clear demarcation between them, the heroes, and the World Trade Center office workers, the victims. The secretaries and financial brokers ran down the stairs; the firemen ran up—343 of them to their deaths. And conveniently for the mythmakers, the Fire

38 Ibid.
Department of New York, more than any other urban fire agency in the nation, was male.\textsuperscript{40}

The FDNY becomes the personification of the masculine heroic life ideal mentioned previously, where their actions directly threaten the possibility of their returning to everyday routines and directly entail them deliberately risking their lives to save the lives of others. Yet, when reality didn’t entirely conform to this risk-it-all hyper-masculine narrative for this form of courageous masculinity, the “truth” was rewritten to fit the narrative, and the narrative altered to fit the truth. Media outlets became “busy airbrushing the emotions of helplessness and fear out of firefighters’ eyes and praising their ‘courage’ to cry as a sign of unshaken manhood.”\textsuperscript{41} The cultural narrative is regenerated to accommodate the reality of the situation, yet simultaneously the reality of the situation is altered to fit the narrative.

After the invasions of Afghanistan and Iraq the narrative again shifts, moving away from the heroes who were the immediate responders, and focuses on the masculinity present in a different servicemen hero narrative embodied by the American soldier, a narrative of violence centered on the character of the hunter hero. In describing how cultural mythology is regenerated through violence, Slotkin writes:

\begin{quote}
[t]he hero of the hunter myth is representative of that spirit in us which demands that the frontiers of our knowledge and our control (the two go together) be ever extended into the unknown wilderness of the natural world, of the yet unrealized possibilities of our destiny. His starting point is the commonday [sic] world, that
\end{quote}

\begin{thebibliography}{9}
\bibitem{Faludi} Faludi, 65.
\bibitem{Faludi} Faludi, 73.
\end{thebibliography}
part of reality which we know well and over which we have established our
dominion and power.\textsuperscript{42}

The American military comes to represent this heroic ideal, where our servicemen leave
our ordinary world after reestablishing control. They leave the relative safety of American
shores post-9/11 after having “secured the borders,” and so through their journey to secure
democracy they come to represent a national extension into the “unknown wilderness” of the
Middle East. Key to understanding the narrative of the hunter-hero archetype in the reclamation
of American masculinity is the fact that “the myth of the hunter…is one of self-renewal or self-
creation through acts of violence.”\textsuperscript{43} By asserting dominance over other countries in order to
preemptively protect ourselves we violently renew the myth of the protector father and begin to
come full circle in our mythogenesis. Using this martial servicemen as hunter hero narrative as a
means of masculine myth regeneration causes “the military, as a traditional way in which the
nation is built and strengthened, whether through conquest, defense or warfare, [to function]
metonymically for the nation.”\textsuperscript{44} The American military becomes America itself. The nation
and its military become indistinguishable in the creation of cultural identity in a post-9/11
context; and since the military is composed of male bodies and masculine elements it comes to
code the nation as masculine.\textsuperscript{45} It is important to note the intensely violent nature of the military
regeneration of national identity as it associates that masculine ideal with the identity of the
father. If we code the nation as masculine and suggest that the nation and military are
indistinguishable in this narrative, then we can say the violence of the military (whether justified
or not, supported by all citizenry or not) is recognized as the violence of the American people.

\textsuperscript{42} Slotkin, 551
\textsuperscript{43} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{44} Reeser, 173.
\textsuperscript{45} Ibid, 174.
Psychoanalytically we could then suggest that the martial response to the attacks of September 11th in the form of the invasion of Afghanistan and later Iraq represent a public demonstration of aggression. This separates and disassociates the nation from the feminine ideology of the mother and transfers identity onto the masculine identity of the father where a national form of violence proves successful masculinity.46

These psychoanalytical methodologies for examining the reimagining of national identity through masculinity construction lead us back to the cultural father figure ideology that is part of the foundational American mythogenesis. As American media and rhetoric began to shift toward this hyper-masculine, violent form of identity reconstruction, so too did the political landscape. The attacks of September 11th sparked a search for a reimagined cultural father, a guardian of the homestead, a manly man, but “one particularly suited to protecting and providing for the isolated American family in perilous situations … A frontiersman whose proofs of eligibility were the hatchet and the gun—and a bloody willingness to wield them.”47 The American President, George W. Bush, came to embody this frontiersman masculine construction in the post-9/11 popular consciousness. In writing about President Bush’s proclivity to do hands-on work at his ranch, journalist Dave Shiflett says:

Unlike his father, [George W. Bush] truly is of Texas, and in Texas guys clear brush, along with riding the fence lines in search of broken wire and shooting the lurking coyotes that lust after spring calves. The swinging of the ax and the singing of the chainsaw delight this type of soul, and this is exactly the kind of disposition one would hope for in a wartime president … First and foremost, clearing brush is an aggressive act. “Do I dare disturb the universe?” asked poor

47 Faludi, 148.
Prufrock, patron saint of the Sensitive Man. “Let me get my saw and show you how,” is the brush clearer's response.48

This revitalized frontier myth is both a form of cultural nostalgia, reliving the culturally reinvented narratives of our founders, while also uniquely forward looking. By reimagining our cultural and political leaders in the recognizable motifs of the past, we displace meaning, looking backward to the glory days of the pioneers and western settlement while simultaneously looking forward to the personified form of American centrality in geopolitics and global marketplaces. This lived myth allows historically centered mythologies to resonate in a contemporary cultural climate and allows the nation to cope with the stresses and contradictions inherent in a post-9-11 world. In a cultural moment we are able to look at our political leaders reliving the shared myths of the past and say, as the popular media repeated again and again, “here is our father, now we are safe!”49 The presence of Bush as frontiersmen in the popular consciousness provided a calm reassurance to the American public at large; and it became not only acceptable but customary to understand the president in the context of frontier settler, as a cowboy father figure. Americans begin to recognize that “the hand that swings the ax, it seems, fits nicely on the tiller of the ship of state.”50 So in part the reconstruction of American masculinity comes full circle, from an imagined mythogenesis that is culturally shared to a violently reimagined and lived form of that masculinity in times of national distress. Culturally we recognize and embrace a hyper-masculine reconstruction of our national narratives after shared trauma. However, this is only a small part of rebuilding masculine identity.

49 Hawthorne, Duston Family, 396.
50 Camille Paglia, amongst many others, observed that after 9/11 there was something refreshingly brutish about the president's bearing (Shiflet, Bush vs. Brush, 29). Shiflett, Bush vs. Brush, 30.
As mentioned before, the exertion of patriarchal influence over the American people through a hegemonically constructed narrative is not the only means by which masculinity is reimagined and reclaimed in times of national distress; they are, however, perhaps some of the most visible, particularly with regard to George W. Bush post 9/11. Traditional modes of masculinity that are narrativized also require the exclusion of feminine agency. As mentioned earlier women physically can, and indeed must, be present in most of the narrative structures that form the corpus of texts which reconstruct masculine identity after nationally traumatic events. The juxtaposition of male and female is one of the primary means by which masculinity can be understood, after which women—and their associated traits—are removed as agent. That is to say, post-9/11 we begin to see the literal and symbolic annihilation of women as agent. This reassertion of a national patriarchy in the cultural rhetoric exists to help restore the normalcy in America from a political and ideological perspective.
CHAPTER II: MOTHERS IN NEED

In the first chapter I posited that the creation of traditional masculine modes in the metanarrative that is the American myth requires the exclusion of feminine agency. Paradoxically I asserted that women physically can, and must, be present in these traditional modes of manhood. In this form of masculinity the female is presented, however she is not presented as an agent, but as an idea that exists only as that which is antithetical to the male, and so masculinity is conceptualized as directly oppositional to femininity. It is only through this juxtaposition of male and female that masculinity can be constructed, and the narrative bears this out to an extent. The colonial hero and his drive for adventure and taming of the wilderness is juxtaposed against the colonial female, the cowboy hero juxtaposed by the lack of the female and the exploitation of women through the brothel/prostitute model.

However, if I am to make the claim that women are presented in this narrative without agency and are only visible in order to reinforce masculine ideology, I must further explore how women are presented in the American mythology. Specifically, in this chapter I intend to examine how women are removed as agent and relegated to the roles of mothers in need of protection. Placing women in the maternal position juxtaposes them against the patriarchal men described in Chapter I and functions to literally and symbolically annihilate them as agents in the protection of nationalistic identity, marking them as objects to be protected, signifying them as important (in terms of Motherhood), yet also demarcating them as possessions in many respects.

Femininity and Motherhood in America

As briefly discussed in Chapter I, women crossed the Atlantic for essentially the same reasons as men: economic considerations and the noble ideal of “creating” a new world by transforming wilderness. However, their portrayal in the mythology, and their apparent role in
the new world was completely different from that of men. Far from heroic, they dreamt of a
domestic paradise, in the “garden readymade.”¹ It would seem as though a gendered fear of
wilderness and of the hostile environment kept women from adopting the same enthusiastic
attitude for the adventurous as that of their male counterparts, though this admittedly ignores the
heavily patriarchal and often religious European communities from which most of them
emigrated. However, many of the narratives surrounding women seem to express their anxiety
and fright over both their isolation and the potential threat represented by the native men.
Nevertheless, much like their male counterparts, they were willing to confront these anxieties in
order to establish a new home for their families and themselves, one that would fulfill their
dreams of an earthly paradise.

In her diary, Elizabeth House Trist reported feeling “oppress’d with so much wood
towering above [her] in every direction and such a continuation of it.”² However, despite these
feelings, Trist did manage some degree of agency. She managed to exert some degree of power
by journeying along the Mississippi River, accompanied only by two family friends including
another woman. Yet while she was able to exert some control within the narrative of her life, she
was limited by the necessity of being accompanied by at least one male counterpart. According
to Kolodny many of the narratives around early American women encouraged a type of
femininity wherein women confronted their fears, providing a model of femininity that, though
fearful, was not paralyzed by the wilderness that was the untamed America. Women too, it
would seem, were eager to push the envelope of the American frontier, like the colonial and
cowboy heroes that dominant the American mythology. However, the active type of femininity
which was present in this type of narrative was impeded by the role of women in European and

¹ Kolodny, xiii.
² Kolodny, 10.
early American tradition. As the available narrative that is the American myth would come to take shape, women’s roles would largely be relegated to that of damsel in distress. It would be interesting to consider how a more actionable woman in the mythos would have fundamentally altered the structure of American rhetoric. Kolodny writes:

Had women’s fantasies been in control (rather than men’s), westward migration might have taken a different course. Too many possible differences immediately suggest themselves. To begin with, relations between white and whites and the native inhabitants might never have become so brutal, and white anxiety about intermarriage between the two populations might not have grown so fierce.”

However, in early American discourse, women were removed of all agency, both literally, in terms of historic practice, and symbolically. More than heroic conquerors, like their male counterparts, they were the victims of “Indians” (in the case of white women, particularly within the American myth) or victims of white men (particularly when we discuss native or African women, though this is largely ignored by the American myth). Alternatively they were confined to the domestic space, where they were safe and could be protected (or so the narrative implies) while their men were out conquering new worlds and new enemies.

Many of the “traditional roles” that women performed were carried over from Europe, where the roles had largely been perpetuated generation after generation. These roles did not simply fade in the New World, but rather, were reimagined and reinforced by the unorganized space that the settlers found upon their arrival. Gone were the farms and town and cities of the European landscape, supplanted by an untamed wilderness spread wide before them. While the heroic nature of the masculine mythology suggests that this provided a form of stimulation for the men, who saw a new quest before them and new lands to conquer, within the narrative

3 Kolodny, 11.
women were beset by a different set of concerns. Within the narrative women were pushed aside as burdensome, largely because the attributes that were set on them through this careful juxtaposition of genders, for instance that of nurturing a family, were not immediately vital in the untamed spaces of the New World.

Indeed, the patriarchal perception of femininity implied by this narrative was one of dependence, weakness and domestic grace. As mentioned previously this model of femininity emerged, not as an independent mythology in and of itself, but actually as a set of paradigmatic elements which had been established in order to conform to the mythological masculine model. That is to say, the feminine had been constructed so as to sustain and to emphasis masculinity, not as to create an actionable model of femininity. The feminine is seen, according to Marie-Louise von Franz, through the eyes of men only (what Jung called the anima, or man’s model of femininity). This idea is again explored though what Laura Mulvey called the male gaze, further suggesting that women are only ever constructed though the anima. Whether we are discussing the matter aesthetically or through a complex semiotic system, it becomes apparent that the ideal feminine model in the available narrative of the American mythos is a form of femininity women are constructed only as an object against which the men are juxtaposed.

Von Franz posits the influence of such narrative paradigms, writing that: “women are influenced by the man’s anima projections. For instance, they behave in a certain way and then notice that the man reacts in a bewildered, or a shocked manner, because their behavior does not fit with his anima image.”

Taking the narrative structures of dependence, weakness and domestic grace and placing them in a widely available narrative through which we continue to operate shows the power of the American mythos, particularly as the feminine ideal is largely

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5 Ibid, 3.
constructed as that which is antithetical to the male. Von Franz points out how young girls learn to take advantage of their fathers’ anima from an early very age. Thus they respond to their fathers’ projection of what is feminine, offering affection such as hugs or crying in order to conform to their gendered expectations, offering testament to gendered performance as a learnt social behavior. This available narrative that largely propagates from the colonial female ideal creates a model of women that presents a fragile, helpless creature, in need of a courageous man to protect her from the wilderness of the world outside.

Separate from the female associations of weakness and fragility, femininity in this narrative has always largely been tied to their perceived biologic function, that is to say giving birth. The role of motherhood was of significant import to the early heroic myth, wherein the heroic male conqueror must protect the wife and children from the world outside, the wilderness and the barbarians both pressing against the gates of civilization. The role of the mother was to nurture and train the children; to prepare young boys to become heroic conquerors and to prepare young women to replicate themselves and become mothers who would perform the same functions ad nauseam. The narrative for women, as presented here, largely necessitates that they be powerless, agentless mothers who need to be protected by the patriarchs against whom they have been constructed.

Feminist Threats to the American Myth: The Times, They are a-Changin’

While the perception of womanhood has been inevitably and incontestably related to motherhood, and while the narrative elements suggest that they are also tied to nurturing, dependence and ultimately weakness, there has been a complex shift in the portrayal of women over the last century, largely due to economics and the necessities created in war-time America, particularly since World War I.
Rebecca Jo Plant, in her work on modern American motherhood, creates a concise image of the pre-war clash of ideologies as it relates to American women, asserting that the traditional mode of womanhood, as was typically envisioned in American culture, was changing. She wrote that:

Throughout the 1920s and 1930s, traditional and modern conceptions of motherhood vied for dominance within mainstream American culture. Traditionalists did not think of motherhood as a job that women performed or a role they assumed, but rather, as a sacred estate they entered—a calling that would demand their attention and energy throughout their adult lives …

Modernists envisioned motherhood in far less exalted terms. Mothers, they insisted, were simply female individuals—some admirable, some not—who had been through a biological experience.⁶

As First Wave Feminism culminated with the women’s right to vote in 1920 there were some elements of the masculine mythology that had come to face challenges. As Plant mentions, some women had begun to deny their place in the American Myth, refusing to be placed on a pedestal for, or limited by, what they considered a primarily biologic function of their bodies. They refused to let the fact that they were capable to giving birth, that they had within them the capacity for motherhood, determine who, or rather what, they would be.

However, within the narrative of American-ness (and beyond, dating back to its European roots) motherhood had been the primary marker of femininity in cultural discourse. The dominance of this marker had come to be an available narrative, ingrained in the *zeitgeist* of the American people, and as such many were not eager to let it go. In this respect, Plant shows that

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for many women “American motherhood was almost like a branch of government, charged with reproducing the populace and upholding the nation’s guiding principles.”7 Furthermore, they had created a new addendum to the American myth that cast the role of motherhood as a nobly heroic one, risking their lives not in the protection of the family or the conquering of the wilderness, but in the generation of the people. In this respect women became the foundation of democracy, the origin point from which the nation’s people and so the foundation from which democracy itself sprang forth. Indeed this new female–centric narrative which reimagined and reinforced traditional conceptions of the feminine suggested that “from their perspective, the male counterpart to the mother was not the father, but the soldier, who similarly risked his life for the greater good of the nation.”8 In a time when what could be called “true heroism” was forbidden to women, this gender specific reimagining of the narrative, while not altering the structure of the myth, sought to create a space in which women could find value in their performance of their roles.

Nevertheless, this heroic interpretation of the American myth was not recognized by men; instead the anima still directly impacted the very real lives of women. It was the masculine perceptions which shaped the dominant cultural viewpoints; and masculine ideologies saw pregnancy as a sign of women’s weakness and a mother’s love, particularly when too attached to a young son, a threat to masculinity itself. This resulted in available narratives which encouraged boys to distance themselves from their mothers in order to achieve the supreme stature of a real man. No “mama’s boy” could become truly masculine as the myth of American masculinity simply would not allow it. Yet, paradoxically motherhood itself was important to men. As an institution, motherhood was a necessary part of the juxtaposition which allowed for

7 Plant, 5.
8 Ibid.
the creation of the masculine myth. Women as mothers would come to represent the backbone of the society, which allowed men to be the protectors of the homestead, though as the wilderness disappeared this protection came less in the form of physical protection than in financial supporter, though truly both still applied. In other words, the narrative necessitated that men symbolically, and in some cases literally, confine women to the domestic sphere and limit their value to that of mother and caregiver, allowing the masculine myth to move forward relatively unhindered. First Wave Feminism presented a direct threat to this ideology as the principles represented by this feminist paradigm shift suggest that women need not be relegated to simply being full-time mothers, but could be productive members of society, and even engaged citizens. This train of thought both implicitly and explicitly attacked the traditional model of masculinity as it suggested that men would need to abdicate the responsibility for being the sole supporters of the family.

The women’s movement of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries represented the first time in American discourse when the institution of motherhood was questioned on a large scale and began a time of slow but radical change in the ways femininity was addressed in American dialogues. The narrative of the American myth was facing a tacit challenge, and women started to refuse to “be saved,” preferring instead to speak for and to save themselves.

The feminist wave that swept America was, to a certain extent, the result of the continued pressure from the traditional, patriarchal culture which continued to tie women to the safety of the domestic realm, far from the threats of savage Indians and an untamed wilderness. However, as these threats were disappearing, and new challenges began to emerge, the manliness of American men could not be as easily demonstrated, and so as feminism rose, so too did the response by men, a response that reinforced and continually stressed a woman’s place in the
domestic sphere, a response that continued a narrative of subjugation through dialectic juxtaposition.

Indeed this response, like most forms of cultural expression, moved its way into the realm of material and popular culture. It has been argued that the rise of popularity of the Western genre can be attributed, to a certain degree, to a cultural response to the intense feminist efforts that characterized the age and caused a certain amount of consternation as to whether or not men were able to perform their traditional, heroic role. Indeed, Lee Clark Mitchell, in analyzing the construction of masculinity in the Western, wrote:

The emergence of the western coincides with the advent of America’s second feminist movement and … the genre’s recurrent rise and fall coincides more generally with interest aroused by feminist issues, moments when men have invariably had difficulty knowing how manhood should be achieved.9

The rise of femininity, and even more the rise of feminine agency, posed a direct threat to the masculine ego, which was culturally mitigated by the Western, a genre which reimagined, reinforced and enhanced the American myth by adopting the cowboy as the new colonial hero, as discussed in Chapter I, and portrayed men as heroes conquering the untamed land and fighting the savage barbarians in the form of those same Native Americans against which the colonial hero battled. Women, in this adaptation of the myth, existed either as damsels in distress, much as they had been previously, or as prostitutes who were controlled by men, used by men and had limited agency as actors within their narratives. Occasionally these two paradigms of femininity would intersect, resulting in the prostitute with the heart of gold who must be rescued from her world by the conquering hero. “The West” therefore became a symbol, one which represented what it meant to be a “real man.” The values of masculinity (such as honor, bravery, strength,

aggressiveness) were reasserted in juxtaposition to feminine values (such as nurturing) as essential for survival. Moreover, this mythic narrative places manliness as essential for the survival of women who, as shown above, are inevitably in need of rescue by (and from) men, situating the values of women through the lens of the masculine anima because the narrative necessitates it. Of course, if there are no longer wild lands to tame and there is no one to protect, there can be no heroism.

The transition from an agrarian society to an industrial one during the last half of the nineteenth century, compounded by World Wars I and II during the first half of the twentieth century, saw a shift in the practical lifestyles of women. The value of a woman was augmented beyond the domestic sphere and her juxtaposition against men, as women, out of necessity, began entering the workforce en masse. Women began to enter spheres of activity that had, by and large, been the domain of men. The natural evolution of this was the Second Wave Feminist movement wherein women implicitly rejected man’s model of femininity and argued for the right to place career above family life if individual women so desired. The constant evolution of women’s rights throughout the twentieth century resulted in incremental steps toward a sort of feminine independence which posed a serious threat to masculinity. Feminine agency, particularly in the workplace, which had largely supplanted the conquering domain of the heroic myth, meant that men were left with nothing to protect and with no one in front of whom to demonstrate their masculinity. This isn’t to suggest that complete women’s liberation has actually happened, nor that a battle in ideology didn’t exist prior to the twentieth century, but the removal of feminine agency, while not reversed, was at the very least more vocally part of the cultural discourse throughout the twentieth century. As a consequence, the American myth started to fade in terms of visibility. Films had previously centered on male leads and their
actions now began to focus on the male body as sexual object. As the twentieth century drew to a close psychoanalysts began encouraging men to discover their feminine side and the American the rise of the metrosexual man, the ultimate effeminized male, came to the fore in popular culture.

Of course, patriarchy had not disappeared, nor had the masculine domination of the cultural sphere, the political sphere, the financial sphere nor the home sphere waned in strength. Nevertheless, masculinity had begun to be questioned and to be highlighted, thus becoming far more overtly “visible.” As Simon Bronner suggests in his exploration of the masculine myth, becoming visible and becoming highlighted was the greatest danger for the narrative of American masculinity, because visibility causes it to lose its most powerful qualities: that masculinity is essential, that it universal and that it is self-understood. ¹⁰

Trauma Culture: The Reconstruction of Traditional Feminine Ideology in Post-9/11 America

In the immediate aftermath of the 9/11 attacks, femininity suffered two traumas. First, in the time after the attacks, feminist discourse suddenly became ostracized. The argument that feminism and feminist ideals made for a stronger individual and a stronger culture were shunned by the culture at large. This rhetoric was largely couched in terms of creating an alternative version of masculinity, one that clashes with the American mythos and that relied heavily on the American myth, but approaching it from a subversive angle. It should come as no surprise that the discourse around femininity post-9/11 was focused more on the male form than on the female. Where traditional forms of maleness are self-sufficient, action-oriented and anti-feminine, as we have seen, the form presented in post-9/11 rhetoric was one of an emasculated male. This narrative portrayed an American male who is reliant on others, with an especial reliance on women, and is coded as feminine through, amongst other things, a lack of agency.

¹⁰ Bronner, 168.
From a culturally dominant point of view this “wussification” rhetorical device, while reductive, eschewed positive portrayals of non-traditional masculinity—coding this form of maleness as epicene based on the perception of “contemporary” man’s reliance on women and his refusal to act—in favor of a more traditional masculine representation that is largely isolated, predominantly independent and solely male. Feminism, and the feminist ideal, became a sort of cultural punching bag, the root cause of the problem in the American man. Feminist ideology was targeted as an “enemy” to the country’s security in the immediate aftermath of the attacks. The patriarchal society which still theoretically privileged the American myth focused its failure not internally but externally and could not tolerate feminism. The terrorist attack on September 11th, the narrative told us, is what happens when men are too close to their mothers; this is what happens when feminists get what they are after. The reaction to the attack was twofold, however. The first and most immediate reaction was to strip the feminine markers from American masculinity; to suggest Americans had grown soft, and to rectify that by reinvigorating the masculine ideology presented within the traditional model of the American mythology. This symbolic annihilation of the feminine was only the first step though. The second was to literally remove elements of female agency from American culture. The American hero, so we were told, had returned, and a cultural victim was needed to justify his fight, and so too the American woman compelled to return to her traditional role.

**Feminism to Blame?**

As stated above, the lack of vigilance which caused 9/11 placed blame largely on feminists. It was the feminists, so the discourse went, who were ones who had softened the American men, who had castrated them symbolically, preventing them from exercising their
function of “protectors.” As Eurocentric mythology tends to imply, when men fail, women are to be blamed.

Indeed, this gendered blame game is heavily present in Western culture. From Eve’s sin which caused the fall of Man, to Rebecca who cut Samson’s hair, leaving him powerless, to witches in the European and American tradition, the Western masculine mythology which has informed the American myth has consistently portrayed women as a both a potential threat to the society and the cause of cultural problems. While the rhetoric surrounding women in the aftermath of 9/11 wasn’t as strictly cause and effect as the transgressions of Eve, who caused the expulsion from the garden, or witches, who were blamed for bad crops, feminism was still made indirectly responsible for the disaster. This influence of feminism, which was responsible for a great many strides toward true equality in the late twentieth century (though never actually coming near to reaching such a thing), was held accountable for the failure of men. Paradoxically the failure of men to protect the homeland caused men to insist that they would reclaim their rightful role as defenders of the land. In other words, men proclaimed that feminism as an ideology (though admittedly the narrative fails to adequately explain what feminism is and ignores anything beyond the perceived influence on masculine identity) was defeated as a productive line of thought. Within the rhetoric was an implicit thought that terrorist attacks had somehow proven that women could not fulfill manly roles, nor could their influence on men effect positive results. Instead the narrative which emerged from the rubble of the Twin Towers and the Pentagon was one which emphatically stated that only the men, and real men at that, had the power and the ability to protect the homeland and defeat the enemy.

Susan Faludi suggests that in the days and weeks after September 11th, such rhetoric was rampant on the airwaves of the American media and in the mouths of American politicians. She
offers seemingly endless examples of how feminism suddenly not only became unpopular, but was overtly ostracized by a remasculinized America. She quotes military historian Martin van Creveld writing for Newsday, stating: “Now that the peaceful life can no longer be guaranteed … one of the principal losers is likely to be feminism, which is based partly on the false belief that the average woman is as able to defend herself as the average man.”\(^{11}\) It became clear that a remasculinized America was the predominant cultural response. John Tierney wrote in the *New York Times*: “Since Sept. 11, the ‘culture of the warrior’ doesn't seem quite so bad to Americans worried about the culture of terrorism.”\(^{12}\) In an America where the culture of the warrior was the order of the day, feminism no longer fit into the national narrative and, as Faludi writes, “to the old rap sheet of feminist crimes—man hating, dogmatism, humorlessness—was added a new ‘wartime’ indictment: feminism was treason.”\(^{13}\) Going so far as to label feminism “treason” clearly illustrates the severity of the attack on feminism; stripping feminist ideologies of their power and creating a rhetoric that removes markers of femininity from American masculinity.

However, this symbolic annihilation was not enough. Women, particularly those with strong feminist voices, began to be erased from the media. Outside of the strict confines of academe it became very difficult for feminist voices to find a space in which express their own opinions, particularly with regard to the attacks. In the very serious matters of terrorism, crises and war, men were designated the cultural experts. Madeleine Bunting suggests that this erasure of feminist voices was not only deliberate, but also easy. She describes the complete removal of feminine voices from the media, writing that “despite significant advances in the number of women in the media, the crisis has exposed how many of them are in the softer areas of news,

\(^{11}\) Quoted: Faludi 61.
\(^{12}\) Quoted: Ibid.
\(^{13}\) Ibid.
such as features and domestic stories.”¹⁴ It then became simple to remove their voices from the matter of terrorism, removing their agency in matters of national security and saving that sphere for men. Men were projected as more “serious” journalists, and were seen as the appropriate voices to disseminate the events as they unfolded in the days and week after the attack. Not only were they seen as more “credible sources,” after the 2001 invasion of Afghanistan and the 2003 invasion of Iraq they also became part of the heroic mythology structure in the American consciousness. Men dominated the overseas reporting of the conflicts, and it was largely men who to put their lives in danger by transmitting from the front, just as it was men who were the bearers of news from Ground Zero.

*Victimology: Let us Save You!*

Even more interesting than the removal of feminism and the female voice from the public arena was the annihilation of female agency as a whole. In the aftermath of the nation’s trauma the reappropriation of the man-as-warrior model narrative implied there must be a reconstruction of traditional femininity as well, a reimagining whose role was that of attending the needs of her children and of her hero-husband. In this time of distress, the role of American women largely became that of victimized mother-wife (with the modification of the occasional grief stricken widow) in whose name violence and violent rhetoric could and would be justified. Men became the source or action, while women became the perfect grief stricken victims.

Betty McLellan points out how this dynamic gendered relationship functioned in the rhetoric of the post-9/11 moment. She writes, “[w]omen and children were among the victims … and … featured among the mourners. But every other role in this tragic drama was played by

men … The perpetrators were men (as far as we know), the ‘experts’ interviewed on TV are men, most of the commenters … are men.”

McLellan suggests that women were once again narratively forced into the mythological role of fearful, weeping damsels in distress. Women were largely removed from the public conversation unless it was in the form of the victimized mother-wife. Gone from the public eye were the brave and proud women of the NYPD and FDNY who responded to the attacks on the Twin Towers. These actively engaged participants, these heroes who emerged in a time of great distress, were eliminated in the cultural discourse. Laura Shepherd explains that the annihilation of women’s agency happened on multiple levels and reinforced traditional ideologies of the American masculine myth:

Virtually the only female faces in the media at the [time were] the victims; women are cast as passive … The polls seem[ed] to bear out some of the oldest gender stereotypes … how little boys play war games and bomb their Lego buildings while little girls look after babies … This feminized passivity could also be seen as another mechanism for silencing dissent … This casting of north American women as passive, and in need of protection, contributes to justifications for a violent American response.

Shepherd touches on an idea already present in the myth, which has been briefly touched upon already: within the narrative of American masculinity, the juxtaposition of the image of the helpless woman against the heroic conqueror is necessary in order to justify masculine superiority and violent responses to cultural Others.

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However the discourse of the narrative, particularly after the invasion of Afghanistan in 2001, did not focus exclusively on the American woman who needs protection and security. Indeed, Shepherd argues that the justification of invading the Afghan nation was based, in part, or rescuing the women of the “barbarians” who were being unfairly subjugated by their oppressive men, who happened to be the enemies of America. Shepherd writes that “[t]he representations of Afghan women, congruent with the accepted image of Mohanty’s ‘average third world woman,’ can be read against the dominant representations of the US self-as-nation as a marker of US superiority, social advancement and civilization.” This reasoning allows for a certain amount of moral justification within the narrative, particularly when we consider the myth of American masculinity in conjunction with the invasion of Afghanistan, and again in 2003, the invasion of Iraq. After securing our women and their safety, the narrative needed to shift in these cases to protecting women (and children who are coded as feminine through maternal association) from the “barbarian horde.”

In returning to the American woman, the reduction of women’s place in the cultural discourse to their traditional role as implied by the American myth meant symbolically and literally annihilating their existence from all but the domestic sphere. As mentioned above, heroic women, who risked their lives side by side with men, such as female first responders in New York and Washington D.C., were never showcased, or even mentioned among the heroes of the day. The women who were presented within the cultural discourse were presented with a sort of women’s heroism; those who responded to the tragedy through what could be considered support roles. Shepherd states that women:

> were discursively permitted to mother, care, shop and support, all behaviours [sic] associated with a very traditionalist model of gender. As part of the response to

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17 Shepherd, 9.
the events, blood donation centres [sic] were set up to enable citizens to give blood; one report cited Nancy Conrad, who “wanted to be there to help, to help the victims … but I couldn’t do anything, so the least I could do was give blood.”

Thus true heroism was reserved for the masculine domain and women were presented in support roles, where they could be shielded from the dangers of the world.

Susan Faludi also commented on this removal of female agency from the public discourse in the post-9/11 moment. Female heroism was further distorted into a supporting role that created a model of femininity that performed service for those who offered cultural protection. Faludi writes, “the one example of female heroism offered [in popular discourse] was a cameo of two women in the line of traditional feminine duty: they were elementary school teachers who ‘did their best to appear calm and look after their kids.’” Faludi quotation of elementary school teachers offers an interesting insight into the cultural rhetoric of that moment. Women, whose domain is that of the home and children, could still only “do their best” to maintain their domain, which suggests that in a time of national trauma they were only serviceable in their duties as the men of the nation were more preoccupied with defending the homeland. While men were encouraged to redefine themselves in a hyper-heroic way evoking the colonial conqueror of yester-year, women were encouraged to “do their best” to maintain the only cultural sphere left to them.

The ideologies presented in the American myth came to be embraced on a large scale within the American cultural discourse. Women were “required” to demonstrate their need for

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18 Ibid, 7.
19 Faludi, 30.
protection while men were required to show that they were able to provide it to them. Mothers began to form community groups and watch the daily “Terror-Alert” updates. These women showed their anxiety over terrorism and even, in extreme cases, over Islam. These “security moms,” as they came to be called, performed their role as victimized mother-wife on a daily basis, conforming to the mythology of the demure feminine object which needed protection from the barbarians at the gate. These women largely came to represent an image of American feminine helplessness, though the narrative avoided any mention of how many of these women were active agents in the protection of their families.

Furthermore, in the aftermath of 9/11 there was an interesting increase in career-minded women who reconsidered their work-first mentality and decided to place having and raising a family over their previous career goals. Faludi writes that this ideology was reinforced by popular discourse, saying “[t]he media [was] particularly fond of pressing the you'll-have-no-one-to-call hot button. It was unclear which the press regarded as the greater grounds for panic: that a single person would have no spouse to speed dial or no mate to conduct the posthumous publicity campaign.” Soon after September 11th women began to realize their mistake in refusing to get married and have children, and desperately tried to repair it and adopt a domestic role en masse. Stories of such repentent women were easy to find in the popular rhetoric of the time, constantly and consistently reinforcing the ideology presented in the available narrative that was the American myth.

**Saving Private Lynch**

While much had occurred to symbolically and literally remove feminine agency in the post-9/11 moment, the most publically visible case was that of U.S. Soldier Jessica Lynch. Few

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20 Faludi, 118.
21 Faludi, 120.
22 Ibid.
other experiences of the post-9/11 period are able to illustrate better the complex shift in attitudes related to gender role discourse than Jessica Lynch’s case. In the early stages of the 2003 invasion of Iraq the then nineteen-year-old private and her unit were ambushed by Iraqi forces, where she suffered injuries and was eventually captured and hospitalized in Nasiriyah. There she remained for nine days before becoming the first American POW successfully rescued since World War II. Her capture, and subsequent rescue, made headlines around the country and was treated as front page news. While Lynch was a soldier, she truly existed in a strange liminal space wherein she was not truly a soldier, but a woman soldier. Rather than be treated as an actual soldier in American discourse “she is described in such a way to be the antithesis of the warrior hero—she is portrayed as the traditional female archetype, even as she was a military supply clerk, injured in combat, became a POW, rescued from behind enemy lines.” Her gender, and the narrative created around her gender, was decisive for the success of her story in the American popular rhetoric. A young female private, she was portrayed in such a way as to reinforce the American myth and to emphasize the heroism of the men who rescued her. Faludi suggests that her story was the one that everyone had expected, indeed that it could have played out no other way. The narrative that became the Jessica Lynch story was one of a little, helpless maiden who was captured by the evil barbarians and rescued by American heroes from the “jaws of the evil.”

In order for Lynch to be transformed from the soldier she was to the ideal American woman it became necessary for her identity to be recrafted into one that was “civilized, sexualized and victimized.” She was humanized in the press not as a soldier, but as a young

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24 Faludi, 166.
25 Howard and Prividera, 92.
girl whose stories of childhood were endlessly repeated in the mainstream press and emphasized her dreams and aspirations as a youth.\textsuperscript{26} However it was important that she was also sexualized. It is difficult to discuss a woman in mass American rhetoric without the mention of physical appearance, and Lynch’s youth and aesthetic qualities transformed her in an ideal victim-woman of the twenty-first century: blonde, young, toned and sexually attractive. Yet this sexuality also provided an additional opportunity for her to be victimized; her sexual vulnerability was largely exposed in the media, as journalists suggested that she might have been raped during her imprisonment. In fact this story was repeated so frequently that it came to be accepted as fact. The official biography of Jessica Lynch includes an account of her rape, though Lynch fought against including such a story as she steadfastly refuted that any such thing had happened. However, her male biographer, Rick Bragg, was adamant that the story be included, and this was perhaps the ultimate form of removing her agency as a woman; since “Sleeping Beauty couldn't bring herself to remember [the trauma of her rape], so her male rescuer would remember for her.”\textsuperscript{27} Ever the victim, Lynch was portrayed as helpless even at the moment of her rescue, an event which ignored the facts of her capture and captivity and juxtaposed her as a damsel against the heroism of the men who would save her. The entire operation of her rescue was video recorded by soldiers and after the rescue Major General Victor “Gene” Renuart personally provided the press corps with what amounted to the Lynch video's narration:

\begin{quote}
As the team entered the hospital room, they found Private Lynch in a hospital bed. The first man approached the door and came in and called her name. She had been scared, had the sheet up over her head because she didn't know what was happening. She lowered the sheet from her head. She didn't really respond yet
\end{quote}

\textsuperscript{26} Ibid, 93.
\textsuperscript{27} Faludi, 190.
because I think she was probably pretty scared. The soldier again said, “Jessica
Lynch, we're the United States soldiers and we're here to protect you and take you
home.”28 

This narrative largely ignored the fact the Lynch was a soldier, but instead reimagined her as a
scared child hiding beneath the sheets to protect her from the wilderness outside. It is the
entrance of the masculine hero-warriors that offers her salvation, and simultaneously removes
her agency as actor in both the event of her rescue and the event of her capture. No longer a
wounded warrior, Lynch was reductively relegated to the role most often reserved for the
American woman: that of victim who would be rescued by the masculine hero.

The case of Jessica Lynch, and its visibility in the American discourse in the years
immediately after the terrorist attacks of 9/11, allowed for the myth of American masculinity to
be played out more fully than perhaps any other event in the post-9/11 moment. Men were
finally able to rescue a woman from the hands of the enemy and reaffirm their stature as heroes,
not unlike the Native American captivity narratives of the colonial period and cowboy heroes of
the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. It is these narratives, wherein the hero rescues the
woman from the clutches of the Other, that have come to represent the key model of masculinity
in American discourse; and while understanding the relationship between masculinity and
femininity in American discourse allows for an understanding of the construction of an
American mythos, it is equally important to understand the ways in which the narrative envisions
the cultural Other and juxtaposes that construct against American masculine ideologies.

28 Quoted in Faludi, 167-168.
CHAPTER III: BARBARIANS AT THE GATE

In his seminal study *Morphology of the Folktale*, Vladimir Propp describes the form and function of typical Russian fairy tales. Propp understood that despite a seeming variety in fairy tale narratives, there was inherently a pattern that each of these narratives adhered to. In studying the Russian fairy tales, he noted that all of the narratives could be broken down into thirty-three functions. As part of this detailed and structured analysis Propp describes a *Dramatis Personae* featuring several key character archetypes; one such important character in the creation of these narratives, the villain, he describes as functioning only to struggle against the hero in some way. While we must consider that Propp is speaking about a specific set of narrative guidelines in a very specific cultural context, it has long been practice to apply these narrative structures to texts outside of Propp’s purview. In order to be functional in the Proppian structure, the American myth needed three basic components. The first two of these are the hero and the victim, which have already been addressed in Chapters I and II of this work. However, while touched upon in previous chapters, perhaps one of the most vital components in the narrative, particularly in its use in time of national trauma, is the antagonist.

From the arrival of the first American colonists, the man as a conquering hero protected the homestead, including the helpless women who were linked so indelibly with that domestic space, from the ever present and ever dangerous wilderness beyond the gates, and its native barbarians. The First World people in the Americas became the natural opponents in this narrative, the “Others” that did not fit into the Europeans’ idea of “civilization.” Their religion, their customs and their appearance quickly demarcated them as clearly “Other,” though this

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narrative ignores far too much of the complicated historical relationship between First World Nations and European settlers. However, the myth of American masculinity casts these native peoples in the role of Other who performs an alternative form of masculinity, a kind that is unacceptable and must be transformed or eliminated in order to accomplish the conquest and transformation of the wilderness. As alluded to in previous chapters, the Native peoples became standard bearers in the popular representation of the barbarian at the gate whom the brave, masculine American hero must struggle against in order to protect the homestead and conquer the wilderness. However, after all but eliminating the Native American as a true “threat” near the end of the nineteenth and beginning of the twentieth centuries, the American narrative easily found replacements for this archetypical enemy. The narrative, in addition to creating masculinity through the exclusion of feminine agency, also represented a duty of protecting the land, the women and the children from the wilderness and the barbarian as essential to creating American-ness; a lack of an identifiable “Other,” would have caused the American myth to falter.

From the Native Americans, to the British, to African Americans, to Nazis, to Russians, to Vietnamese and to Arab terrorists, the available American mythology never wanted for “cultural others” against which Americans could juxtapose their masculine heroes. This seemingly constant state of comparative alarm and hyper-vigilance allowed men to maintain a dominant place within a martial American society, and to perpetuate the traditional values of patriarchy and masculine superiority. It is this constant, threat-based comparison that the American mythos, which would come to be personified in John Wayne’s particular brand of masculinity and a Doris Day demure femininity, was able to nourish and use to reinforce a male power fantasy which permeated all aspects of a now gendered society.
The Native American as the Ideological Other

As mentioned above, the portrayal of the “Indian” as an evil force to be struggled against dates back to the arrival of some of the first colonists in the Americas. Virtually everything about the native peoples was antithetical to the traditions found in European civilization, particularly in the English colonies that would lay the foundations for America. The native peoples were pagan, from a Christian point of view, while Englishmen (with the emphasis on the men) were predominantly adherents to various denominations of Christianity. The native peoples lived in and amongst the wilderness, seeking to operate largely in harmony with their surroundings. The Englishmen sought to conquer, dominate and control those vast untamed lands. The natives appeared as barbaric: speaking different languages, wearing different clothes, and holding to customs that were shocking to the American settler. Certainly not least amongst the factors that set the native peoples apart were their apparent aesthetic differences in terms of physical appearance. However, perhaps the most important detail that established the native man as “the enemy” in the narrative of the American mythology was the fact that he was there first.

Yet the colonists did not view themselves as invaders, a key part of the paradigmatic structure of the available American myth. The colonial hero was able to offer an ethical reasoning behind their domination of the land and its people as they claimed moral superiority over the natives through the perceived religious and civilizing purpose of their mission. By using the mythology they had brought from the old continent, settlers envisioned themselves as a civilizing force and as religious messengers fighting for the right “cause” of converting and enlightening those poor savage barbarians.

The portrayal of the native man, both in colonial times and in the reimagining of the narrative for the cowboy hero, focused on the uncivilized and brutal nature of the heathen man.
Not unlike what would be seen later in Afghanistan, the moral superiority of claiming liberation and bringing enlightenment to First Nation tribes was seen as a noble endeavor perfect for the American man. Moreover, the native people and their connection to their lands, their communion with nature as the narrative would have it, was seen as a proof that the “Indian” was more similar to a wild beast than to a human being, and in need of being tamed, controlled and, if that failed, killed to protect the colonial family.

In the later portrayal of this mythos through the Western genre, the Indian’s savagery is often accentuated as much as possible. John Cawelti stresses the nature of the Indian as beast in these representations, saying “the most important racial other in the Western was the Indian … Mythical Indians rode bareback while the cowboy had an elaborate saddle and harness, implying a relationship of control rather than similarity [as in the case of the Indian].”\(^{2}\) Unlike the cowboy who controlled his horse with the technology of civilization, the Indian was more similar to the animal he rode, a beast riding bareback. Furthermore, Cawelti argues that the brutal treatment of the Indian in the Western genre, and so in the available American myth, was justified by the alleged barbarism of the racial other, a narrative which culminated with the identification of the Indian as a kidnapper and rapist.

From the seventeenth century until the close of the Western frontier in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries American Indian captivity narratives, which described the experiences of people, predominantly young white women, who had been kidnapped by Indians, were an exceptionally popular genre. These narratives spoke to a cultural anxiety that native people would carry off settlers in the night and reinforced the American mythology that saw a need for the masculine hero to protect his family from the barbarians that surrounded the untamed lands. These narratives, as Faludi argues, were one of the first large scale

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\(^{2}\) Cawelti, 77.
manifestations of narratives of distorted truth that reinforced the ideologies present in the American myth.\(^3\) A part of these narratives, like those of Jessica Lynch discussed in Chapter II, focused on the physical torture and abuse that white women would suffer at the hands of their savage captors. In truth Native Americans rarely abused their female captives\(^4\) and the vast majority of first-person narratives of women who escaped or were rescued from Indian captivity bears this truth out (again, not unlike Jessica Lynch). Regardless of the truth of the situation, the American mythology portrayed these abductions and abuses as objective truth, searing this tale of barbaric hordes at the doorstep into the American cultural consciousness.

One of the most widely read accounts of an Indian captivity narrative was that of Cynthia Ann Parker, who was kidnapped from her family during a Comanche raid when she was only nine years old. Once captured, the girl grew up amongst the natives and upon reaching womanhood she married a native and together they had three children. Her fate was well known to the other settlers, and her extended family often thought there was a hope to rescue her. Throughout the years, some attempts at negotiation were made, but the narrative suggests that the Indians would “rather die than give her up.”\(^5\) Years later, the now thirty-four-year-old woman was “rescued” during an attack against the Indian settlement where she had lived. Many of those killed in the attack were women, but the massacre was labeled as “a great victory” and was celebrated in the press as a heroic rescue of an innocent woman.\(^6\) However, like so much of the American myth, the narrative that is part of the popular discourse rides the very edge of truth. Among survivors of the raid was Cynthia, who was recognized as a white woman come home, though returned with a half-breed infant daughter. While the narrative portrayed in the popular

\(^3\) Faludi, 200.
\(^4\) Cawelti, 77.
\(^5\) Gregory Michno and Susan Michno, \textit{A Fate Worse Than Death: Indian Captivities in the West, 1830-1885}, (Caldwell, Idaho: Caxton Press, 2007) 36.
\(^6\) Faludi, 203
discourse was one of triumphant return and victory over the barbicans who had taken her, “the ride back … was not a triumphal return for Cynthia Ann. Several times she tried to escape.”\(^7\)

Her story fueled the American mythology that portrayed women as helpless victims of the barbarian Indian who needed to be protected by the heroic American man. This narrative, and others like it, offered white Americans the moral justification they needed in order to continue the never ending battle against the ethnic Other who threatened their lives and culture. The narrative of Cynthia Ann, and others like her, alleged that she suffered sexual and physical abuse, torture and incomprehensible mental torments. Faludi notes that “newspaper stories told tales of the whippings and torture she had supposedly endured at the hands of the “heathen savages” and that her arms and body “bear the marks of having been cruelly treated.”\(^8\)

In the events leading up to her “rescue” it became clear that there was a narrative being played out amongst the Americans who would seek to save her. The Texas soldiers and public who were familiar with her captivity could not tolerate the idea of a white woman being happy among Indians. The idea seemed alien to them, and they assumed that clearly she had been tormented by her captors into compliance with their way of life. Indeed, the narrative focused on how the heroes who would ultimately come to save her were limited by the necessities of their position:

Soldiers who saw her in the hands of the Comanches [sic] chaffed at not being allowed to attack the Indians and attempt a rescue. The fact that the Indians could take white women and force them into “a fate worse than death”, and that some

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\(^7\) Michno, 36.

\(^8\) Quoted in Faludi, 203.
would not care to return to the white society, stoked the underlying racial and sexual tensions of the frontier folk.\(^9\)

Despite what could likely be called “objective truth” with regards to Cynthia Ann Parker’s feelings about her situation, the colonial hero narrative maintained and reinforced a distorted version of the story. This retelling of the American myth would propagate forward in the unconscious available narrative of American-ness and have deep, lasting impacts on the culture of twenty-first century men; indeed, the congruencies between narratives of Parker discussed here and those of Lynch discussed in the last chapter can hardly be coincidental.

The Incarnation of Evil: the American Hero vs. the JapaNazi Antagonist

Moving the narrative forward, World War II, perhaps more than any other conflict in American history, parallels the trauma of September 11\(^{th}\). In both instances the population suffered a national trauma, and as a result there was a rise in the American myth narrative, and a reemergence of the American soldier as a true representation of the masculine hero. In both instances American males were able to claim a moral high ground, placing themselves in the position of the “good guys” because they had not been the aggressor. Furthermore, the narrative of the American myth required the construction of a new antagonist against which American masculinity could be juxtaposed. The German and Japanese forces provided just such an enemy: one that was powerful, racially different (less so for the Germans; however the cultural differences could accommodate for this) and utterly evil in the popular consciousness. Reenacting the mythological fight against the barbarian hordes at the gate, the masculine American hero was called upon to protect his land and his people from outside aggression.

The Nazis and the Japanese offered significant opportunity for racial othering, and were easily identified as “evil,” in the context of the narrative of American-ness fulfilling the

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9 Michno, 36 emphasis added.
archetypical void left by the Native American. This replacement was made simpler in the case of the Germans, who were less ethnically distinct from the white American ideal than would be strictly desirable within the myth, by the Nazi regime and its systems of value, which were laden with ideologies that were antithetical to values treasured by a democratic America, values which tied them more closely to the visually distinct Japanese than other white Europeans. Franz Capra offered several films of “educational” propaganda targeted at the American soldier. In one such film, the narrator explains: “Yes, in these lands [Germany and Japan] the people surrendered their liberties and threw away their human dignity … Each system was alike in that the constitutional law-making bodies gave up their power.”

Furthermore, as McLaughlin argues, Capra and other American propagandists drew upon the American myth of masculinity to clearly establish boundaries and delineate between “Us”, the American hero and our allies, and “Them”, the axis powers who threatened our way of life. Capra skillfully makes his points by creating a bipartite model wherein “Us” is strongly associated with light, Christianity, freedom, democracy and historical progress, while “Them” is associated with the binary opposites: darkness, the suppression of religion, militarism, the denial of human freedoms, fascism and historical regression. It is in this way that the masculine myth is reimagined for a World War II trauma era where the masculine American hero is juxtaposed against the ideological and racial Other. It is through the culturally desirable qualities associated with American masculinity, and the threat to those qualities through their polar opposites, that heroism is defined.

The sort of American propaganda that was created during World War II, predominantly through media such as film and radio broadcasts, was meant to recreate and retransmit the American myth for a wide audience, and to clearly demonstrate to Americans not only who the

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10 Quoted in Robert L. McLaughlin and Sally E. Parry. *We’ll Always Have the Movies: American Cinema during World War II.* (Lexington: University of Kentucky, 2006), 13.

11 Ibid.
Other was, but also who “we” were, and why it was worth fighting against the Other. Furthermore, the attack against Pearl Harbor, like the attacks on the World Trade Center and the Pentagon sixty years later, represented a literal and symbolic violation of the home land; an invasion into the domestic sphere, the sphere of women in the American mythos, and so created an ideology that was not unlike that associated with Cynthia Ann Parker. A cultural interdiction had been violated by enemies from the outside, and so the order must be set right by the masculine hero. The Other who had violated the sacred boundary of the homestead didn’t require an entirely new narrative during the Second World War. The available narratives already fixed the representation of Nazi Germany and Imperial Japan in the popular consciousness of American cultures: these forces, through their actions, had come to represent the primordial evil against which the America-type hero was meant to fight.

Waking the Sleeping Giant: Captain America

In addition to the propaganda created during World War II, the American myth was recreated in the popular texts of the day (not unlike the Western genre or the American Indian captivity narrative in previous generations). One of the more important and popular reincarnations of the masculine American myth during the war period was Captain America, the comic book character who represents the ideal American hero, with all the values that the American myth encompasses. The hyper-masculine Captain America was one of the most popular figures in popular culture during the war, and he was often portrayed fighting America’s enemies, notably knocking out Hitler on the cover of the first issue of Captain America Comics in March of 1941. The Captain is time and again juxtaposed against Nazis and Japanese soldiers in order to display his representation of culturally important values in American discourse, namely morality, courage and hard work.
Perhaps most important to the Captain America character, and his significance as an interpretation of the American myth, is that he is equipped with the same “essence” that completes the image of the real American man: his reluctance to fight. That is to say that the American myth does not encourage an overtly aggressive concept of masculinity; instead it encourages what could be called morally justified violence. This idea is supported by Jason Dittmer, who notes that “Captain America contributes to the American geopolitical narrative by being ultimately defensive in nature. Indeed, a conceit of the American geopolitical narrative is that America only acts in the name of security, not empire. Steve Rogers in 1940 is a reluctant warrior, but not a reluctant patriot.”

Like the colonial and cowboy heroes before him, Captain America never truly starts the fight, but he certainly does not step back from it. This idea is central to the American mythos; the role of the man is to tame the wilderness and protect the homestead; ostensibly to defend. This is not unlike the Western genre where heroic cowboys are often portrayed as men of honor who intervene in a fight to protect the innocent, or are provoked. However, Captain America’s semiotic imagery is even more focused on cultivating this myth. Unlike the colonial hero or the Cowboy hero whose symbols were often firearms, Captain America carries a shield symbolizing his duty as a defender of the land and its people.

Digging further into this representation, Dittmer points out the relationship between Captain America and the cultural Other. He explains that, unlike Superman, who had an Alien origin and who was in some ways the ultimate American immigrant, an Other who had been adopted by his newfound home, Captain America is a native; he is of the people and therefore he

is perfectly crafted to represent a reinterpretation of the American myth.\textsuperscript{13} The Capatin represents the ultimate ideal in American patriotism and unlike other characters, such as the aforementioned Superman, he is a product of the American military. It is because of his official relationship to the American government that his actions and ideological worldview can be seen as a proxy for the American military, and for American foreign policy.\textsuperscript{14}

This Captain America as official American military proxy paradigm which was created during World War II saw a resurgence in popularity after the 9/11 attacks. This narrative was refined for new audiences and saw the Captain return home to fight yet another ideological and racial “Other.” As in the case of Pearl Harbor, Westerns and the colonial narrative, the masculine hero of the American myth did not start the fight: he is, instead, clearly provoked. Captain America is an embodiment of that symbolic American hero in pop cultural discourse, and therefore his return to prominence after 9/11 should not be considered at all surprising. Neither was his new opponent, the antagonist in the reemerging American myth, particularly shocking.

\textit{Hajji Pilgrim: Muslim (Terrorists) as the New Native American Other}

The militant, fundamental Muslim as villainous ethnic other predates the attacks on America in September of 2001 by several decades. As early as 1980 Edward Said wrote of Muslims in American discourse:

So far as the United States seems to be concerned, it is only a slight overstatement to say that Moslems and Arabs are essentially seen as either oil suppliers or potential terrorists. Very little of the detail, the human density, the passion of Arab-Moslem life has entered the awareness of even those people whose

\textsuperscript{13} Ibid.  
\textsuperscript{14} Ibid.
profession it is to report the Arab world. What we have instead is a series of crude, essentialized caricatures of the Islamic world presented in such a way as to make that world vulnerable to military aggression.\textsuperscript{15}

Culturally speaking Americans had acknowledged the Muslim fundamentalist and the Muslim immigrant as dangerous archetype in the popular discourse as early as 1979 with the Iran Hostage Crisis, an ideology which was reaffirmed by the Iran-Contra Affair of the mid- to late-eighites; and as Said points out, it was a predominant stereotype of the late twentieth century. Elements of this character taking on significance in the American myth were present during the Persian Gulf War of the early 1990s. However, this latest in a long line of cultural and racial “Others” who posed a threat to American security was only truly reenvisioned as a hyper-masculinized villain against which the masculine American hero must rise after the terrorist attacks of September 11\textsuperscript{th}.

As America was symbolically emasculated by the 9/11 attacks, the Muslim individual, regardless of age, nationality or political affiliation, became the perpetrators of that cultural castration. While there was some debate as to which countries may have been responsible for the attack, and where these men could be located, what grew to matter most in the narrative were the key elements that have been repeated in the American myth since the colonial age: that they were men and that they were outsiders. In other words, the cultural other who represented a threat was not so much al-Qaeda or their leader Osama bin Laden, at least in terms of the American myth, as it was the Islamic Man. It became unimportant where the hijackers of the four planes had come from, and was even less important what their goals were. What mattered most what that they were racially and ideologically other, that they could be distinctly demarcated from the masculine American hero and could easily assume their place as a

replacement for the Native American in the available narrative. As mentioned in Chapter II, the non-terrorist women and children of Afghanistan and Iraq, countries now labeled the home of terrorists, were represented in the media of the day as being oppressed, enslaved, and in dire need of being saved. Even those who were unrelated to terrorism, who were merely Muslim women, had this narrative imposed on them. According to Shepherd:

> The representations of Afghan women, congruent with the accepted image of Mohanty’s ‘average third world woman,’ can be read against the dominant representations of the US self-as-nation as a marker of US superiority, social advancement and civilization. This in turn marks ‘the enemy’ abroad as inferior, backward and uncivilized.\(^{16}\)

The popular rhetoric of the time focused the America mission not only on protecting and avenging the homeland, but also on saving the helpless wives, daughters and sisters of the barbaric Islamic antagonists. As with earlier narratives about Native Americans, the remasculated American society claimed the moral high ground by setting out to free Afghan women and bring democracy to Iraq. Within the American mythology it was necessary to expand the battlefield due to the lack of a centralized antagonist. Unlike the Cynthia Ann Parker narrative there were relatively few concrete objectives to capture, and thus the War on Terror was born, and nations were unwillingly aligned into an ethnically distinct “Axis of Evil” that would serve as a new enemy against which to juxtapose the American male.

While officially the enemy was personified by the Islamic Extremist, with Osama bin Laden as the ultimate villain, in practice all Muslims, and those who looked Muslim, suffered from a sudden shift in the American cultural discourse. Political speeches, television programs and newspaper articles aimed to reinforce American patriotism and sense of national-self, which

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\(^{16}\) Shepherd, 8.
was accomplished in much the same way as it had been during World War II: by making clear what was American and what was not. President George W. Bush clearly pointed out the differences between “Us” and “Them” in his 2003 State of the Union Address, thus identifying the threats to the country and allowing ordinary citizens to do the same. Throughout the speech, he variously referred to Saddam Hussein, Afghanistan and Iraq, linking them, perhaps erroneously when taken in the context of September 11th, to “terrorism” and “terror.”

The President’s address made clear the elements of the American mythology which would play an important role in throughout his administration, and beyond. Through his speech, he not only gained support for broadening the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, he also helped to reimagine and reconstruct masculinity for Americans, who enthusiastically embraced the idea of war in this new, remasculated environment. Men were no longer simply fathers or sons. In post-9/11 America they had been recast as warrior-heroes who would battle back the advancing barbarian hordes in the name of justice and defense of the homeland. At last, it would seem, the paradigmatic structures which shaped a reemerged American mythos had been formalized,

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CONCLUSION: ... WHAT A MAN'S GOTTA DO

I began this thesis with the goal of exploring the existence and significance of an unspoken but underlying and understood American mythology that has existed and been reimagined throughout American history. In the previous chapters, I showed how this mythology has functioned historically, and how it reemerges in times of national distress, particularly in contemporary society. Central to this American myth is the creation and maintenance of a masculine hero figure, a culturally idealized “real man” who embodies quintessentially American values and establishes the ethos of the nation as a masculine one.

As the mythology plays out as an available narrative which is reinterpreted culturally over time I found it necessary to split the focus of this study into chapters that each focus on one element of the myth: the hero, the victim and the antagonist. As should be evident by this point, traditional models of femininity and otherness in the context of the American mythology are recreated and maintained to serve not as markers in and of themselves, but as a means for propping up the idea of a masculine hero. This is not to say that femininity and otherness are not exceptionally valuable in the creation of this mythology. Each of the personae that are crafted within the myth play an essential structural role to the narrative creating a tripartite narrative model where each paradigmatic element reinforces the others and the lack of any one of the persona causes the narrative to fall apart: in lack of a victim, the hero has little purpose as he would have no homestead to defend. The lack of a hero renders the existence of a victim meaningless if there is to be no rescue. In the lack of an Other acting as antagonist, he would have little to defend the homestead from. Moreover, for the American myth to reemerge, certain circumstances must occur. One of the primary ways in which these circumstantial requirements are met is to place femininity in a precarious position where it must be defended by an idealized
version of the masculine hero. Often within the American *zeitgeist* femininity is seen as being under attack when national traumas, such as September 11th, occur. As shown in Chapter III, within the cultural narrative the Other must be seen as what could be called culturally deviant, if not expressly wicked from a culturally dominant point of view, and the enemy must be perceived to have attacked first. I have shown how the reemergence of this narrative in the post-9/11 moment encouraged an understanding of pre-9/11 masculinity as culturally emasculated and insisted on a cultural remasculinization. Chapters I and II explored how the remasculinization process necessitated, in part, the removal of feminine agency. I have argued that this occurred in order to have femininity and feminist ideals replaced with an artificially created hyper-masculinized national ego.

While much of the American myth is rooted in European mythology, it has been transformed through time and necessity so as to satisfy the conditions of the New World. While not to suggest the American mythos doesn’t draw from the heroic traditions present all over the world in a Jungian sense, in practice the American myth is a cosmogony that helped the process of American settlers transforming the New World into a “New Home”; this mythology is created in such a way as to be flexible within the American consciousness, so that it can be adapted to the needs of the people in times of national trauma. Though colonial settlers named the American shores an “Eden” and saw it as their own paradise, those pioneers simultaneously perceived that vast wilderness as chaotic and dangerous, and aspired to conquer and organize it.

This narrative would come to dominate the cultural discourse through much of American history. When called upon, the elements of this American narrative were utilized by the population to bring order out of chaos and to create a national identity in times of crisis. The fact that women have existed predominantly as a symbol in need of protection within the narrative
struggle between civilization and chaos, between man and wilderness, is problematic. However, while the narrative of the American myth trivializes women as active agents in the construction of America, it does not suggest that they are unimportant. This is not to justify the rampant misogyny that is evident throughout much of American discourse; however it does suggest how we can understand the ways in which misogyny is engrained into the American zeitgeist. We must understand the woman’s place in this mythic narrative before we can begin to strive toward true gender equality, for as Richard Slotkin says “[a] people unaware of its myths is likely to continue living by them, though the world around that people may change and demand changes in their psychology, their world view, their ethics, and their institutions.”

The fact remains, even though the development of traditional American femininity was a way of to reinforce patriarchal order, women were nonetheless important to the mythic narrative: in their absence, there could be no masculine heroics as there would be no “victim” to save, no innocent to protect. Much like the tales of medieval knights of European traditions, the American myth portrays women as “damsels in distress.” As shown previously, in the numerous captivity narratives in which this myth was relayed, the portrayal of the suffering of women who had been abducted by Indians (even if such torments never truly occurred) reinforced the available myth of American femininity.

However, in the aftermath of 9/11 it was imperative to remove the feminine agency from the masculine world. Had women been allowed to continue on the road toward equality, how could the narrative be implemented allowing men to feel strong enough to protect the women? Hence, it was necessary for the woman to remain an image of innocence and helplessness. As stated in Chapter I, the image of the American woman was the embodiment of all the things

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1 Slotkin, 18.
antithetical to men, completing a bipartite model of gender roles which reinforced traditional power structures in both public and private spheres.

As feminist ideologies became more preponderant throughout the twentieth century, there was a reciprocal decline in the metanarrative of heroic masculinity in the discourse of everyday life, though it was still often presented in pop cultural discourses as a way of reliving a fading ideology. However threats to the American way of life were never distant. During the period of feminist growth the American Myth was frequently called upon to reassert a national identity for there were two World Wars, several additional wars and conflicts, economic upheaval, and attacks on the American homeland. This constant upheaval triggered consistent smaller push backs against feminist worldviews; however as each new threat faded feminist ideologies were able to ever so slowly gain more and more ground in the national discourse. As the power and influence of feminist thinking grew, the result was an interesting mix of masculinization of the society and female agency.

In the hyper-mediated age of the attacks on September 11th, feminism was given a distressing knockout punch. In one moment of intense trauma the national ego once again tilted toward the American mythology that is so ingrained in the cultural zeitgeist of the United States. It transformed men (particularly, but not exclusively men of action such as firefighters, police officers, soldiers, and journalists) into warrior-heroes and it removed female agency to the extent that no heroic deed of a woman would be showcased and no female experts were consulted in any field related to “serious” matters. It also transformed women into victims even though in terms of sheer numbers they were not as affected as men by the attacks. Even though far more men than women were killed on September 11th, women were largely held to be the victims of the day. It reassigned them to their traditional spheres of the domicile—where they would be
focused on children and family life, religion and humanitarian concerns, while serious business was left in the hands of men.

The most problematic issue with the resurgence of the American mythology in the post 9/11 moment is how the message became hyper-mediated in the context of the internet age. With 24 hour news cycles, endless streams of social media and a constant interconnectivity the American myth has entered into an endless feedback loop that augments the signal with each revolution. The surprisingly rapid rise of fundamental Christianity in American politics along with the growing partisanship and an increasingly conservative American right can be traced in part to the reemergence of the American myth in the post 9/11 moment. While there are certainly other factors involved, the hyper-conservative movement of the past ten years has given rise to political movements such as the American Tea Party which advocates a return to strict interpretations of the American Constitution and places the founding fathers upon a pedestal, as discussed briefly in Chapter I.

As part of this rhetoric we see the logical conclusion of the symbolic and literal annihilation of the feminine in the post-9/11 moment in the so-called War on Women and women’s reproductive rights which has amplified the rhetoric in the popular discourse exponentially since the 2010 midterm elections. Several U.S. states have passed or are considering laws that will restrict women’s access to feminine health care, contraceptives and abortion services. This targeted misogynistic attack seeks to exert patriarchal control over women and limit what they can and can’t do with their own bodies, going even further than the American mythology by symbolically annihilating them from the domestic sphere as well. The assault on women’s control over motherhood removes their agency even in that sacred realm and puts the control over the protection and creation of the family unit in the cultural patriarchs’
hands. In the wake of 9/11 an argument arose that “American people are valuing life again and realizing that we need policies to value the dignity and worth of every life.” This line of reasoning is couched in a patriarchal worldview informed by the American mythology and reinforcing ideologies of moral superiority. Taken to its logical conclusion in a way that it never has been before, the American mythology seeks to strip all agency from women in order to maintain national security and moral superiority. Though I readily admit that the topic of women’s health is far more complicated than it would appear here, the fact of the matter is that the cultural rhetoric is informed by a hyper-mediated version of the American mythology that reemerged in the wake of 9/11. Though our world is changing, and we change with it, we continue to live by our myths, perhaps now more than ever.

I have sought to show how myths link people to their past, and to one another, and how these myths are reimagined in times of national trauma and reverberate into the present. Though we live in times when people have lost their innocence and myths seem to have lost their influence in the world, in actuality they shape the world around us, the way we think, the lives we live and the everyday life all around us. The American myth, as fixed as it is fluid, as ubiquitous as it is unique, is a myth of masculinity making. It is a myth that has been shaped by the experiences and necessities of the New World and the many generations of men and women who have lived in, conquered and altered its landscape. It is who Americans are as a people, at their core; and it is only in acknowledging it for what it is that we can ever hope to change it. Americans can no longer afford to be a people unaware of their myths. While these myths have some value, they retard the growth of the civilization and we can no longer afford to live by them. Hopefully this work can contribute to the larger corpus of texts which seek to shed light on the American mythology. By exploring how this narrative has worked historically and how it

2 Faludi, 22.
reemerges in times of national trauma we can begin to see the myth for what it is: the American past. If we acknowledge that, then perhaps we can begin to truly move into the future.
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