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Priscilla L. Walton, Bruce Tucker, *American Culture Transformed: Dialing 9/11*

New York, Palgrave Macmillan, 2012, 179 pages

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- 1 This slim book by two Canadian academics charts the cultural and intellectual transformations in the United States following 9/11, through a sampling of some of the significant heroes and icons created and embraced by the mainstream media during that period. While briefly examining the position of artists and thinkers, Priscilla Walton and Bruce Tucker are mostly interested in mass mediated events and mass cultural artifacts, and more precisely in the contradictory discourses generated around these various objects.
- 2 The book is divided into five parts, and consists mostly of eight extended case studies, grouped in contrasting pairs: those of Jessica Lynch and Lynndie England, cast as heroin and villainess in the media coverage of the war in Iraq; the financial scandals surrounding businesswoman Martha Stewart and Enron immediately after 9/11; the treatment of gender and religion in popular literature, *Da Vinci Code* and the born-again franchise *Left Behind*; and finally the responses generated by “iconic people and events” (xiv) with the funerals of Ronald Reagan and the simultaneous release of Michael Moore’s documentary *Fahrenheit 9/11*.
- 3 The first part of the book, “Heroes, Hype and History,” provides the theoretical framework upon which these analyses rest. Walton and Tucker display the elaboration of their own methodology by intertwining a variety of studies of heroes and stars. They

observe that these icons are “historically located” (5), and, following David Lusted reject the “myths of individuality” and individual genius. Most of all, they bring to the fore the contradictory meanings generated by stars, as a gateway to the complexity of the period which engenders them: “Contemporary heroes must be situated historically and contextually if they are to be read as products of an era, wherein discordant meanings all work to formulate its disparate signficatory field” (8). Having established their methodology, the authors proceed to briefly recount the events of 9/11 before examining the claims of various philosophers surrounding the event: Virilio, Baudrillard, Derrida, Habermas, Butler, and Žižek. These few pages are the weakest of the book, with the authors displaying their unwillingness to engage fully with the texts they mention. For instance, a dismissive discussion of *Welcome to the Desert of the Real* ends with a telling admission: “we leave it to our readers to try to decipher Zizek’s [sic] meaning” (14). Fortunately, the authors are back on firmer ground when discussing two previous academic attempts to make sense of the cultural transformations in the aftermath of 9/11, David Simpson’s *9/11: The Culture of Commemoration* (2006) and Susan Faludi’s *The Terror Dream: Fear and Fantasy in Post 9/11 America* (2007). Following these two writers, Walton and Tucker put forward the idea that the mainstream media moved away from pluralist and complex meanings, replacing them with the “search for a Single Truth” (18), usually based on preexisting paradigms. This first part concludes with an openly subjective overview of artistic projects about 9/11 in and out of the mainstream media, with short notes about the various works, but a disturbing absence of explanation regarding the criteria for the exclusion of various cultural objects, perhaps the main reproach to be leveled at the book. Oliver Stone’s film, *World Trade Center* (2006), would have provided a worthy illustration of Faludi’s argument concerning the gendered representation of 9/11 itself, for instance, but it does not appear anywhere in the chapter.

- 4 The flaws which mar the opening section of the book, the sometimes superficial examination of complex thought and the somewhat arbitrary selection of cultural objects, are not repeated in the various case studies that follow. In all cases a short but convincing summary of the event or description of the cultural object is provided, before an examination of the various reactions and discourses it generated.
- 5 The first of these dual case studies “Spinning and Counterspinning,” examines the way the stories of Jessica Lynch and Lynndie England—the blond American soldier rescued during the Iraq war and the woman who featured prominently in the Abu Ghraib prison photographs—became “exemplar” cases, casting these women in archetypal roles which displaced discussions of more problematic issues, such as domestic poverty, race, American imperialism, and the institutionalization of torture. At its core, the observation echoes that of earlier mass culture theorists, who argued that mass culture necessarily reduces social and theoretical issues to individual stories (Adorno made that point specifically in 1954 regarding television), but Walton and Tucker apply this to the specific situation of the war in Iraq and the then emerging “security state” (57) in the United States.
- 6 The authors then tackle the representation of the business world and its “Corporate complications.” The case of Martha Stewart, the cookbook writer turned CEO, who faced charges for insider trading in 2003 is juxtaposed with the well-publicized account of the Enron debacle. The pages dedicated to Stewart are among the most convincing of the book, as they chart the contradictory discourses surrounding her unlikely

ascension then fall from grace, and the split image created in the media, which pilloried her when the charges were brought only to embrace her again after her conviction. A short “interval” detailing the instrumentalization of a feminist rhetoric to support the invasion of Afghanistan while Stewart was being pilloried as a woman in a justice court provides a backdrop against which the gendered treatment reserved to Stewart is brought in sharp relief. Her “reduction” to her original role as a celebrity homemaker following her many ordeals validates the book’s general claim that “in post 9-11 America, singularity is the name of the game” (80). The analysis of the Enron scandal, while backed by a meticulous and—for this reviewer at least—enlightening summary of the company’s practices, advances the concept of Enron as a “postmodern” company (82-5), which failed when it had to conform to a single truth, defined in this case by the IRS (94). Depicting Enron as a postmodern endeavor is not unusual, and Walton and Tucker bolster their case through a careful description of the mechanisms used by the company to create shifting, discursive notions about its worth and effectiveness. However, while the general trajectory from a plurality of meaning to a single bankruptcy fits into the book’s general structure, it is unclear that 9/11 and the changes it brought were the reasons for the collapse of the society. The company had embarked into an ultimately untenable dissociation between its spin and its financial state, which did not require a terrorist attack to end in disaster. Furthermore Lehman Brothers and the subprime crisis suggest that postmodern capitalism quickly reinvented itself after Enron.

- 7 Dan Brown’s *The Da Vinci Code* and the lesser-known series of Christian novels *Left Behind*, by Jerry Jenkins are then presented as examples of a “counter strain” in American culture. Their existence and popularity serve to point to the gaps on what Susan Faludi called the restoration of “national myth” (quoted p. 95), complete with “strong men and damsels in distress” (95). Walton and Tucker contend that Brown’s novel is more ambivalent, since it uses a feminist gloss but ultimately “refuses a feminist role for both its modern and historical characters” (129). The book is no less contradictory in its treatment of religion as conspiracy, generating both anxious rebuttal by members of the Catholic Church, while “it does not, in the end, rebut Christianity, and even promotes censorship” (117). They then point to the paradox of having a strong and likable female lead in the otherwise conservative and patriarchal *Left Behind*: a form of feminine agency nevertheless strictly removed from political feminism. The series started in 1995 but reached the apex of its popularity after 2001, and promotes a Manichean and possibly violent worldview, a form of Faludi’s national myth, yet one that does not confirm to the Cold War gender roles. While none of these popular books can be called radical, they suggest that complex and self-contradictory meanings could exist in popular fiction after 9/11.
- 8 Finally, the discussion of the serendipitous meeting between Ronald Reagan’s funeral and Michael Moore’s *Fahrenheit 911* is used as evidence of the historical impact of 9/11 and the surrounding emergence of a national mythology. Pointing out the discrepancy between the commentaries at the time of Reagan’s death and his actual policies, Walton and Tucker suggest that the former president was eulogized not as a historical figure but as an icon. The emergence of what historian Sean Wilentz has called the “Age of Reagan” (135) is predicated on the notion that Reagan’s role is that of a moral guide, while the past is reduced to “irrelevance.” The authors find a similar strain in Michael Moore’s documentary, a politicized cultural object which nevertheless simplifies his criticism of the Bush administration by eschewing instances of domestic and

international resistance, as well as the “historical context within which the Bush administration’s foreign policy decisions were formulated” (152). The book ends with the tentative suggestion that the election of Barack Obama may have brought the considered period to a close, precisely by restoring a sense of history: “the intense effort to simplify meanings, to reduce plurality and complexity to singularity, shows signs of abatement and even irrelevance” (155).

- 9 *Dialing 9/11* presents a compelling thesis and a noteworthy overview of the decade following 9/11. Because it focuses squarely on icons rather than events, on Jessica Lynch rather than on the Iraq war, it does not purport to offer a complete depiction of the cultural landscape in that period nor does it engage with some of the major lines of analysis regarding that era. Its analysis of mass-mediated discourses is convincing, clear and well-articulated with summaries of actual events whenever needed. Though some of the examples are more developed than others, none of the four pairings seem forced. The main reproach to be leveled at the book is the lack of explanation regarding the selection and the inclusion of certain popular heroes and cultural objects. Had the TV shows *The West Wing* and *24* been included, for instance, or even *CSI*, the conclusions might have been different. With its clear methodology and its sweeping approach, *Dialing 9/11* is an accessible and overall convincing approach to that recent decade. Its method of sampling however, means that such an overview is best used in conjunction with more thorough approaches of the issues it broached, in order to move beyond the incomplete exemplarity of the chosen cases.

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