Negotiating Masculinity and Trauma in Early Post-9/11 Fiction and Media Coverage about the FDNY: Case Studies of 9/11, American Ground, and Rescue Me

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Abstract

After the 9/11 attacks, the world reacted in shock. Never before had the U.S. been attacked so close to the heart of the nation. As the dust settled, a dominant narrative took hold of the country. This narrative cast America as a victim on the geopolitical stage, and through this narrative America's leadership committed itself to overcoming its victimhood and becoming the hero by waging a war on terror. One of the earliest symbols used in this narrative was the FDNY - these brave firemen, who had rushed into danger to help civilians as the tower collapsed, came to symbolize both the national trauma and the heroism of the U.S.

Many works have been written which analyze this narrative from many different angles, with the main takeaway being that this narrative succeeded in mobilizing the population of the U.S. towards war. Due to this heavy focus on this dominant narrative and the road it paved to war, some elements have not received their due attention in academic literature. This thesis will focus on two of these elements. This thesis focuses not on the impact of this dominant narrative on geopolitics, but on the impact of these narratives on its protagonists: the "heroes" of the FDNY.

This thesis traces the changes in narratives surrounding these firemen with particular attention to the presentation of masculinity and trauma in these narratives. To discuss these narratives, this paper focuses on three publications: the documentary *9/11* by the Naudet brothers, the book *American Ground* by William Langewiesche, and the FX TV show *Rescue Me*. In these cultural objects, the masculinity of the FDNY firemen is presented very similarly, but the authors situate that masculinity completely differently in a gendered power order. All three narratives also address the impact of that "situating" on the trauma suffered by firemen after 9/11. This thesis finds that each of these narratives objectifies firemen in different ways and that this objectification causes further difficulties in providing firemen with mental health support.

Introduction

In the aftermath of the terrorist attacks on September 11th, 2001, first responders – and especially firefighters of the Fire Department of the City of New York (FDNY) – obtained a special status. For many Americans, 9/11 created a clear image of what "good versus evil" entailed. Obviously, the "good" consisted of the roughly three thousand innocent (American) people whose lives were abruptly taken while they were enjoying the merits of life in the West, while those adhering to the radical ideology behind the attacks signaled the evil opposite. At the very end of both spectrums, there is a more specific subject that can be identified as the ultimate example of that which is good and that which is evil. On the evil end of the spectrum, there are those who masterminded and actually carried out the attacks, and were so adamant in their hate of the West that they were willing to sacrifice their own lives for it. On the other hand, exemplifying ultimate goodness, are those that were willing to risk their lives to save that of the good and innocent victims of the attack – the first responders, and especially the firefighters of 9/11. Their brave and selfless efforts during and following the attacks have led them to be designated as the true heroes of 9/11.

On the one hand, the universal admiration of FDNY firefighters may be seen as a logical public response to tragedy, as the firefighters had – whether successfully or in vain – risked their lives to save that of loved ones, and in the midst of all the rubble continued to look for possible survivors. In this sense, they have symbolized strength and hope in times of tragedy, something to hold on to amidst all the grief. Yet, on the other hand, from the day that the attacks occurred, there has been a leading narrative that was shaped by politicians – and most prominently by then-president George W. Bush – and news media. In the immediate aftermath of the attacks on the World Trade Center on 9/11, the media centered the men of the FDNY as frontline heroes. How did these first 9/11 narratives reconcile the concept of the traditional male hero with the trauma suffered by these heroes? Did the focus of these narratives shift over time, as the traumatic effects of 9/11

became manifest?

Scholars, such as Susan Faludi, have identified a return to traditional masculinity in popular media in response to 9/11. This traditional masculinity values the nuclear family with the father as the patriarch combined with a return to "Cold Warrior" male heroism.[1] Central to this is the image of the Western hero or sometimes the superhero as a male figure that protects female or feminine victims. After 9/11, the man that fights (and wins) is again the quintessential man. Even though this image often concerns military men, this version of manhood is not strictly relegated to the military. As such, in the return to traditional masculinity after 9/11, the first subjects to be turned into heroes were the firefighters of the FDNY who attempted to rescue the victims of the 9/11 attacks. Even though they never saw combat or fought anyone, the nature of the attacks allowed them to be framed as the first men who resisted evil.[2]

While Faludi and others describe the return to traditional masculinity in the context of U.S. popular media, an investigation into the particular workings and representations of masculinity in the FDNY requires special attention to their cultural and historical context. This study investigates the way in which a masculine response to trauma is reflected in a number of cultural objects concerning the FDNY after 9/11. Fire departments in the United States had even before 9/11 been known as "hypermasculine" environments, where nearly all firefighters are male and particular aspects of masculinity come to the fore.[3] For the FDNY specifically, then, there may never have been a "return" to traditional masculinity as described by Faludi. However, the question remains open whether the representation of this masculinity in the FDNY did change to reflect a return on the national level to cultural values centered on male (military) heroism.

Masculinity studies has been criticized as focusing too much on categorizing the experiences of men in order to create terms which explain what men are feeling and why they act

[1] Susan Faludi, *The Terror Dream: Fear and Fantasy in Post-9/11 America*, 1st ed. (New York, NY: Metropolitan Books, 2007), 4.
[2] Elizabeth Goren, "Society's Use of the Hero Following a National Trauma," *The American Journal of Psychoanalysis* 67 (2007), 37.
[3] Faludi, *The Terror Dream*, 79.

the way they do.[4] When in further research these terms do not fit entirely, new terms are created to again explain men's feelings and actions from a theoretical bird's-eye view. Andrea Waling argues that masculinity studies should go beyond a modernist approach and could benefit from lessons learned through poststructural approaches to feminism which focus on agency.[5] Gottzén et al., however, show that poststructural approaches to men and masculinity studies have actually existed since the 1980's.[6] Even though men and masculinity studies may not be as modernist as sometimes claimed, Waling's suggestion to focus on agency is particularly useful for this research project. First, in researching the representation of masculinity in FDNY firefighters in cultural objects, we should wonder to what extent the FDNY or its individual members were in control of that narrative. Second, when popular media returned to traditional masculinity, we should wonder how and to what extent firefighters in the FDNY have agency in their own lives and, in particular in working through the mental and physical trauma of 9/11, adhere to or renegotiate their masculinity. Gottzén et al. also argue for a framework of "minor masculinity". Researching masculinity, they argue, should be careful to take into account the specific context of the study in terms of space, culture, history, etc. As such, masculinity studies can produce a more balanced view of masculinity that resists the tendency to create hierarchies.[7]

Thus, this paper does not do away with frameworks such as hegemonic masculinity when they are useful in describing both the ways in which firefighters negotiate masculinity and the way in which the representation of this masculinity in the FDNY is used to negotiate masculinity on a national stage. However, the critical perspective of this paper is that frameworks (like hegemonic masculinity) should be applied within the specific context of the research subject, in this case the FDNY after 9/11. The strength of this approach, combined with a focus on agency drawn from

[4] Andrea Waling, "Rethinking Masculinity Studies: Feminism, Masculinity, and Poststructural Accounts of Agency and Emotional Reflexivity," *Journal of Men's Studies* 27, no. I (2019), 89.
[5] Waling, "Rethinking Masculinity Studies," 89-90.
[6] Lucas Gottzén, Ulf Mellström, and Tamara Shefer, "Introduction: Mapping the Field of Masculinity Studies," in *Routledge International Handbook of Masculinity Studies*, ed. Lucas Gottzén et al., 1st ed. (London, UK: Routledge, 2019), 3.
[7] Gottzén et al., "Introduction," 6.

poststructural scholarship, is that it allows this study to not only look at the cultural objects and representation of masculinity in the FDNY, but also to go beyond (fictionalized) representations and make use of research into the real conditions at the FDNY after 9/11 and gain insight into the changes in gender considerations in that environment.

The issue that has the most potential to study firefighter's agency in constituting their own views on gender, masculinity, and related behavior is the issue of trauma. Discussing trauma in relation to 9/11, however, must be done carefully. Both popular media and academics were quick to describe the 9/11 attacks as something akin to a "national" trauma, an event which defied explanation or representation.[8] This conception of trauma is related to Cathy Caruth's conception of trauma as it relates to individuals.[9] Caruth, in formulating her trauma theory, argues that trauma is not the repression of a shocking experience, but of an experience for which there was no preparation and which the conscious mind could not defend.[10] As such, the experience is imprinted onto the unconscious mind before the conscious mind could create a rationalized narrative that makes the experience a logical and understandable event.[11]

The 9/11 attacks have been described as such an experience by many commentators. The event, a foreign nation attacking the heart of the United States, was something that nobody could see coming, and that the collective psyche had no time to prepare for. Slavoj Žižek criticizes this view in *Welcome to the Desert of the Real*. He posits that Hollywood's pre-9/11 focus on narratives which explore the possibility and effects of an attack against America on American soil shows that the American public was subconsciously expecting and thus prepared for the (possibility of) 9/11.[12] Lucy Bond, in "Compromised Critique" further argues that the idea that 9/11 is inexplicable was created and reinforced by this focus on collective trauma, calling it the "overextension of the

[8] Lucy Bond, "Compromised Critique: A Meta-Critical Analysis of American Studies after 9/11," *Journal of American Studies* 45, no. 4 (November 2011), 738.
[9] Cathy Caruth, *Unclaimed Experience: Trauma, Narrative, and History*, 20th ed. (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2016), 6.
[10] Caruth, *Unclaimed Experience*, 6.
[11] Caruth, *Unclaimed Experience*, 4.
[12] Slavoj Žižek , *Welcome to the Desert of the Real* (London, UK: Verso Books, 2002), 12-13.

attribution of trauma to national, even universal, levels."[13] The view that 9/11 was a shocking event corresponds naturally with the idea of a "national trauma," because trauma is often imagined as an event that the mind cannot comprehend. As many critics have pointed out, though, 9/11 is quite comprehensible as a geopolitical event. Thus, the sensation of trauma as an incomprehensible event is conflated with 9/11 as a geopolitical event. This is, at most, a simplified extraction of Caruth's conception of cultural trauma. While the experience many Americans had watching the planes hit the towers on their television sets could definitely be described as unprecedented and unexpected, there is a huge difference between trauma experienced by the people present at the World Trade Center that day and the Americans far away who experienced a moment of uncertainty and insecurity in a broader, political sense. By consistently referring to the event as shocking, traumatic, and incomprehensible, the event was elevated to the level of a national trauma.

This paper is not directly concerned with the representation of 9/11 as a national trauma, but with how this representation affected the members of the FDNY who were individually traumatized in the attack. Christina Cavedon points out that collectively traumatic events (or their possibility) have been used in America's history to reinforce a narrative of resilience.[14] This narrative of resilience is closely related to American myths of heroism and masculinity. Jacob Farnsworth notes that America's cultural reliance on heroes causes the public to reject the possibility that their heroes take immoral action.[15] As such, living up to these standards of heroism becomes even more impossible and can impact the recovery from individual trauma. Even though the idea that 9/11 was a national trauma has been strongly criticized, personal trauma must still be understood as something that relates to the cultural and political context of the person who underwent the traumatic event. This paper is therefore specifically concerned with the way in which the hypermasculine culture of New York firehouses and its representation in various media

[13] Bond, "Compromised Critique," 738.
[14] Christina Cavedon, *Cultural Melancholia: US Trauma Discourses before and after 9/11* (Leiden, NL: Brill/Rodopi, 2015), 12.
[15] Jacob K. Farnsworth, "Dialogical Tensions in Heroic Military and Military-Related Moral Injury," *International Journal for Dialogical Science* 8, no. 1 (2014), 25.

exacerbated these issues.

To investigate the place of masculinity and trauma in 9/11 narratives, each chapter of this thesis will contain a different case study. These cases are cultural objects produced in the aftermath of 9/11 which deal directly with both masculinity in the FDNY and the trauma of their experience. The first chapter will study the documentary *9/11* produced by the Naudet Brothers, which contains footage shot during the event itself. This documentary shows the place of trauma and emotion in the highly masculine environment of the FDNY. The second chapter will study William Langewiesche's article *American Ground*, which details the cleanup efforts at Ground Zero. The article details the conflicts between separate groups involved in these efforts which had strong gendered undertones. The third chapter will study the FX series *Rescue Me* created by Dennis Leary. Leary's proximity to the FDNY in his personal life gave him much more access than other authors to firemen's experience and his show explores - in both tragic and comedic narratives - the effects of 9/11's trauma on the deeply macho environment of a New York firehouse. These case studies consist of completely different forms of media - a documentary, a journalistic article and a fictional TV series. Though the forms and their intent are different, these case studies were chosen because each creates a clear and distinct narrative concerning masculinity and trauma. These cases, studied in chronological order, will allow this thesis to map the narrative shifts that take place concerning 9/11's heroic firemen and their efforts to overcome trauma.

This thesis shows that even though the masculinity of the FDNY firemen is presented very similarly in all three cultural objects, the authors situate that masculinity completely differently in a gendered power order. All three narratives also address the impact of that "situating" on the trauma suffered by firemen after 9/11. This thesis finds that each of these narratives objectifies firemen, albeit in different ways, and that this objectification further complicates firefighter's working through their trauma.

Chapter 1: The Representation of Masculine Identity in FDNY Firefighters in *9/11*

1.1 Introduction

This chapter will study the documentary *9/11*, which situates its protagonists - the FDNY - as the heroes in an extremely violent and destructive event. This documentary uses footage from its earlier purpose in following a new firefighter of the FDNY, which is then suddenly combined with the element of trauma that struck the department. This documentary, however, is far from the first narrative that places heroic male figures as its protagonists. Centuries of war literature has done the same thing. The wars of the twentieth century, in particular the Vietnam War, saw a change in the focus of war literature. The focus of the stories was no longer on the glory of war, but on the social and psychological formation of the protagonist.[16] This turned the focus of the narrative from heroism to victimhood. This new focus on victimhood coincides with a number of cultural developments in the 20th century, such as the acceptance of psychiatry as a real field of medicine, the importance granted to the memorialization of the victims of the Holocaust and the rise of feminist and civil rights movements which demanded focus for the victims of history.[17] However, rather than replacing heroism, the focus on victimhood supplemented the already existing heroic narratives, creating protagonists which, while generally considered victims of war, were also able to display (traditional male) heroism in their victimhood.

1.2 Heroes and Victims in 9/11 Narratives

The 9/11 attacks are of course very different from, for example, the Vietnam War, in the sense that during that war almost the entire young male population was drafted to fight for American interests abroad. Instead, the first heroes that were identified on September 11th were the firefighters of the FDNY, whose members had made a deliberate choice to take on a dangerous profession. It is no

[16] Jacob K. Farnsworth, "Dialogical Tensions in Heroic Military and Military-Related Moral Injury," *International Journal for Dialogical Science* 8, no. 1 (2014), 38.
[17] Farnsworth, "Dialogical Tensions," 47.

wonder, then, that in the attempt to make sense of the 9/11 attacks, the FDNY were appointed as the first heroes of the story.

Elizabeth Goren, who worked as a therapist in a New York firehouse after 9/11, also argues that the FDNY firefighters were a perfect fit when people were in search of heroes. She believes that "the firefighters were chosen as the appointed heroes because they represented a symbol that combined the personifications of society's complex and conflicting emotions surrounding 9/11".[18] According to Goren, what made the firefighter the appropriate candidate for heroization was its representation of "catastrophic loss, victimization and trauma felt by the collective," but at the same time the "courageous refusal to accept defeat in the face of death and defeat".[19]

Even though America knows a strong tradition of casting soldiers as their heroes, for a brief moment in time it was the FDNY that was put on center stage. Beyond the selfless nature of their jobs and their actions on the day of the attacks, there is another reason for the heroization of the FDNY. In the case of America's foreign wars, the American public could follow the developments through various media. The Gulf Wars taking place at the end of the 20th century were fought abroad and dominated by the US and their coalition because of the incredible firepower they could bring to bear, and so the public had relatively little to fear. The 9/11 attacks struck at the heart of American society, and they were witnessed in real time by thousands of residents in New York and by the rest of the country as the images of the attacks were repeated endlessly on television screens. This is what leads Goren to render 9/11 a "traumatic moment for the society as a collective."[20]

During the first months after the attacks, as firefighters worked hard to clear the rubble and search for survivors, the FDNY was at the center of enormous media attention. The result of this was that people sent large supplies of "teddy bears, letters, food, flags and other objects" to the

[18] Goren, "Society's Use," 37.
[19] Goren, "Society's Use," 38.
[20] Goren, "Society's Use," 40.

FDNY following the attacks.[21] The FDNY firefighters were positioned at the heart of the American imagination as both the ultimate heroes and victims of 9/11. They were the ultimate heroes in their steadfast refusal to give up searching for survivors. They were the ultimate victims due to the great loss of those who had "entered the building as people fled them."[22] The exceptional position of the firefighters has ensured the mass production and consumption of FDNY teddy bears, commemorative coins, and other souvenir items containing FDNY emblems.[23] Sturken points out that while an FDNY teddy bear may provide comfort, the symbolic value of the firefighter surpassed that of mere comfort and reassurance. To illustrate this, she refers to the famous picture of FDNY firefighters raising the American flag amidst the rubble of the collapsed Twin Towers, taken by Thomas E. Franklin. She explains that "the Franklin image did not emerge in isolation but is itself a reference to one of the most famous images of American history, of American soldiers raising the U.S. flag on Iwo Jima during World War II."[24] The iconic nature of the Iwo Jima picture has ensured it to be associated with "a set of codes," that is reproduced in later images inspired by the original image.[25] While the photographed firefighters believed that the picture represented an "indicator of hope at a moment of despair," Sturken claims that "the hope of the gesture was quite quickly transformed into a discourse of revenge in which the photograph has largely been interpreted as one of defiance."[26] The constant reproduction of the Franklin image in cartoons, magazines, and merchandise – and its explicit reference to the Iwo Jima image – has had the effect of "reinscript[ing]" the firefighters as soldiers, and "fusing [them] into a narrative of U.S. military victory."[27]

Because of the strong American tradition that chooses military heroes as the main protagonists, it is no surprise that the strength shown by the FDNY on the day of the attacks and

[21] *Marita Sturken, Tourists of History: Memory, Kitsch, and Consumerism from Oklahoma City to Ground Zero (Durham, UK: Duke University Press, 2007)*, 167-168.
[22] Sturken, *Tourists of History*, 167.
[23] Sturken, *Tourists of History*, 170.
[24] Sturken, *Tourists of History,* 167-168.
[25] Sturken, *Tourists of History*, 169.
[26] Sturken, *Tourists of History*, 169.
[27] Sturken, *Tourists of History*, 169.

during the following months is interpreted by the American public as a showing of aggressive strength. The set of codes present in the Iwo Jima picture must be interpreted as a set of masculine codes, with a focus on military strength, defiance against the enemy and ultimate victory. The firefighters who were photographed may have interpreted their picture as an indication of hope, but the already existing masculine coding of Iwo Jima prevented a wider American audience from sharing that interpretation. While the firefighters working inside the barriers of Ground Zero were still coming to terms with the losses their department had suffered as they continued on their emotionally charged mission of recovering victims' remains, the American public seemed to "move on".[28] Even though Bush's political rhetoric, and thereby perhaps a big part of society as well, quickly turned from grief to revenge, which required a return of focus on true military heroes, it is important to investigate the continuing use of the FDNY and their trauma in American media.

1.3 From Boy to Man in Nine Months: the Story of Tony in 9/11

In the case of the picture that recalled victory at Iwo Jima, the masculine coding is hidden in a long historical tradition. In other media, there is a much more obvious presence of masculinity. One of the first films published in this regard was the documentary film *9/11* by French directors Jules and Gédéon Naudet. It was broadcast on March 10, 2002 on CBS, barely half a year after the attacks. The Naudets had planned to make a documentary about a probationary firefighter's path to becoming a fully-fledged member of the FDNY – or, as Gédéon puts it in the film, to show how "a kid […] becomes a man in nine months."[29] As the voice-over in the film repeatedly emphasizes, "nobody expected September 11th," yet, what was supposed to become a documentary about the fire department's day-to-day activities turned into a close-up account of the department's dealing with disaster. According to the opening statements to the documentary, the film provides "an eyewitness account of one of the most defining moments of our time," and will tell "the story of

[28] Goren, "Society's use," 47.
[29] *9/11*, directed by James Hanlon, Gédéon Naudet and Jules Naudet (Goldfish Pictures, 2002), 00:04:40, DVD.

how New York City's bravest rose to their greatest challenge."[30] The documentary covers the period from just a few months before the terrorist attacks to a few months after the attacks, including the department's involvement in the rescue and recovery efforts. The constant references to a "before" and "after" show that what the makers identify as the firefighters' "greatest challenge," has forever changed the fire department, just as much as it has "defined" and thus changed the course of American history. The opening statements, then, already imply that the firefighters of Engine 7, Ladder 1, come to stand for the American nation.

For their documentary, the Naudet brothers had originally intended to create a documentary about what it is like to become a New York firefighter. The protagonist, Tony, is introduced in one of the early scenes of the documentary. In this scene, The Naudet brothers visit the Academy that prepares rookie firefighters for their job.[31] A video fragment shows how the new "probies" attend bootcamps, training sessions, and lectures. The probies pay close attention as more senior FDNY members speak with raised voices about what it takes to be a fireman, while images are shown of young, badly burnt firefighters. Hanlon emphasizes: "This job is no joke." Despite the risks and possible hardships that come with the job, "Antonios Benetatos, Tony, for short," as he introduces himself, decides that he is up for the challenge. He explains his motivations for entering the Academy: "This is my first job. It sounds cheesy, but I want to be a hero. This is the thing where you can be."[32] The image that both Hanlon and Tony paint of the occupation of firefighter highlights challenges and risks of the job and the idea that it requires perseverance and courage to be a successful firefighter.

1.4 Heroism and the Masculinity of Danger and Risk

Significantly, the filmmakers held on to the original idea of Tony being the protagonist despite the dramatic turn of events during the process of filming the documentary. Their decision to frame their

[30] *9/11*, 00:00:15.
[31] *9/11*, 00:04:25.
[32] *9/11*, 00:06:26.

film around the question of whether Tony would be ready for the "challenge" of 9/11, from the outset makes the film more a hero narrative – in the way that it follows Tony on his quest to becoming a hero – than an informative and objective account of the events as they unfold, as might be expected of a documentary.

The film follows Tony's journey into manhood. At some point in this journey, it will be up to Tony to prove that he fits the masculine ideals the filmmakers show in the first part of the film. He is shown the dangers of the job, and told that courage and a willingness to face risks or sacrifice himself is a necessity. These expressions of masculinity are derived from traditional gendered notions of war. In *War and Gender*, Joshua Goldstein describes masculinity as "an artificial status which is typically constructed around a culture's need for brave and disciplined soldiers."[33] It is important to note here that the connection between firefighters and the military that is evident in the documentary is already shown in scenes that were shot before the events of 9/11. While the addition of "talking heads" and editing was of course done after the attacks, this does indicate that the ideals of warlike male heroism were very much present in the FDNY already. The events of 9/11 on the one hand magnified these ideals, but also added a dimension of revenge. Vengeance as an element of heroic masculinity is much more foreign to firefighters than it is to soldiers, as firefighters deal with a force of nature against which revenge cannot be had.

Yet even without this element of revenge, the heroism associated with the military is also associated with being a firefighter. Throughout the film, the most common portrayal of masculinity is in the descriptions of courage in the face of overwhelming danger. The danger is made visceral from the start, not just through the lectures for the probies, but also in a scene where Tony and the other firefighters have a funeral for a probie who passed away on the job. James Hanlon states that as a firefighter "you do your job, you risk your life to help people."[34]

This valorization of dangerous work in the FDNY supports what is described by R.W.

[33] Joshua S. Goldstein, *War and Gender: How Gender Shapes the War System and Vice Versa* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2009), 283.
[34] *9/11*, 00:13:24.

Connell as "hegemonic masculinity."[35] The concept of hegemonic masculinity seeks to explore the gender politics that take place within masculinity, in which different versions or performances of masculinity are ranked in a gender order. In this gender order, there are dominant and subservient masculinities.[36] This gender order can change and is constantly renegotiated. In the United States, for instance, "clean" work often occupies a higher position in this masculine gender order than "dirty" work.[37] By valorizing dangerous work and risk-taking, communities such as the FDNY can elevate their position in this gender order. This negotiating of gender order was investigated in a study that compared the framing of masculinity by firefighters and correctional officers. The study found that firefighters employ a discursive practice in which they focus on the dangerous aspects of their task rather than dirty or mundane aspects.[38] This is exemplified by what the authors call a "common aphorism," where firefighters state that "it takes a different type of person who wants to run into a burning building when people are running out."[39] This discursive practice shifts the focus on the elements of the job that hardly anyone else would be willing to do and which require exceptional courage. In the days following 9/11, this phrase was often repeated in media coverage of the event.[40] It even appears in the documentary, where one of the firefighters relates what he heard others say: "Can't believe y'all are going up and we're coming down."[41] This discursive practice is also clearly present in the rest of the documentary, especially in the first part where the documentary sets the stage for its protagonist, Tony, to become a man. Here, becoming a man is defined by the capability and willingness to take on dangerous work. This sets up the narrative for the second part of the documentary, which shows the firefighters' response to the 9/11 attacks.

While the first part of the documentary intends to show what it takes to be a firefighter

[35] R. W. Connell, *Masculinities*, 2nd ed. (London, UK: Routledge, 2020), 37.
[36] Connell, *Masculinities*, 37.
[37] Shelley Pacholok, *Into the Fire: Disaster and the Remaking of Gender* (Toronto, CA: University of Toronto Press, 2013), 37-38.
[38] Sarah J. Tracy and Clifton Scott, "Sexuality, Masculinity, and Taint Management Among Firefighters and Correctional Officers: Getting Down and Dirty With 'America's Heroes' and the 'Scum of Law Enforcement,'" *Management Communication Quarterly* 20, no. 1 (August 1, 2006), 19.
[39] Tracy and Scott, "Sexuality, Masculinity," 19.
[40] Tracy and Scott, "Sexuality, Masculinity," 19.
[41] *9/11*, 00:38:23.

(and thus to be a man), the second part shows what it is like to *be* a man. After the first plane hits, the documentary shows the situation inside the first tower when the firefighters arrive. The documentary first shows the confusion felt by the firefighters as they discuss what they should do, but soon enough Chief Pfeifer takes charge. He states that: "My main concern was we had 20 floors of people above… and we had to figure a way to get them out."[42] The chief stays calm and directs everyone towards the proper action. This element of stoicism and calm leadership is present throughout the film.

While in this situation it was definitely necessary for a calm voice to lead the FDNY in its efforts to rescue the people in the building, the association of masculinity with calm rationality and leadership speak to broader societal issues. Stoic attitudes, while essential in Chief Pfeifer's case, have been shown to constrain men in their ability to admit to vulnerabilities or dependence on others.[43] This is especially the case for men in a leadership position.[44] The documentary shows male leadership in other situations as well, such as when the firefighters return to the firehouse after the collapse of the towers.[45] Even though the situation is completely different and no longer calls for a leader who can make quick decisions in the same way, the stoic attitude remains the same. The leaders focus on the next task, by asking firefighters to sign their name if they are willing to go back to work. It is later shown that a Deputy Chief had called and said that there were already too many people standing around without a job to do, and to not send any more people out from the firehouse. Even unintentionally the documentary reveals some of the problems caused by the hypermasculine environment of the firehouse. The valorization of courage and willingness to self-sacrifice by firemen in this case limited the capability of these firemen to adequately respond to the situation. In some cases, this went as far as firemen ignoring orders to stay away from Ground Zero.[46]

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[42] *9/11*, 00:29:05.
[43] Lucas Gottzén et al., "Masculinities, War and Militarism," in *Routledge International Handbook of Masculinity Studies*, 1st ed. (London, UK: Routledge, an imprint of the Taylor & Francis Group, 2019), 469.
[44] Gottzén et al., "Masculinities, War," 469.
[45] *9/11*, 01:25:14.
[46] *9/11*, 01:27:54.

Additionally, these stoic attitudes can cause firemen to develop an inability to engage with their health in a positive way. In order to adhere to the gendered norm of stoicism, some men feel that they need to ignore their (mental) health problems or "grin and bear it."[47] Issues of masculinity and help-seeking will be discussed further in chapter three.

Another repeating element in the story which is closely related to masculinity and the military, is that of the masculine community or "brotherhood." Susan Jeffords argues that these ideas of masculine community are part of what rehabilitated the image of the veteran for narrative purposes which require military heroes after America's defeat in the Vietnam War.[48] This sense of brotherhood is clearly represented in the documentary. Throughout the documentary, firemen refer to each other as "brothers" and state that this is what keeps everyone going: "And the only thing you have, really, the only thing that kept it all together was us as a group, as a body, as a firehouse."[49] While this sense of community is obviously helpful to a group of people facing dangerous situations that require reliance on others, it is often expressed in terms derived from military brotherhood. Throughout the documentary, such military-coded language appears implicitly and explicitly, forging a connection between the FDNY and America's military heroes of past and present.

1.5 Emotional Expression and Trauma

Researchers have often pointed out the apparent contradictions that appear when discussing masculinity, especially in (hyper)masculine military environments where physical or psychological trauma is present.[50] While masculinity in military environments is conceived of as courageous, stoic and unemotional, men in these environments can show emotion when it is related to trauma or grief, for instance due to the loss of fellow soldiers. These contradictions can often be explained by

[47] Kate Reed, "Beyond Hegemonic Masculinity: The Role of Family Genetic History in Men's Accounts of Health," *Sociology* 47, no. 5 (October 1, 2013), 908.
[48] Susan Jeffords, *The Remasculinization of America: Gender and the Vietnam War* (Bloomington , IND: Indiana University Press, 1989), 15.
[49] *9/11*, 01:36:27.
[50] Gottzén et al., "Masculinities, War," 470.

returning to the concept of hegemonic masculinity. Different conceptions of masculinity, such as a conception where men are required to show emotional support and caring to others, are also present in firefighting communities.[51]

In the military, because of a shifting focus towards global peacekeeping rather than warfarce, the gender order is slowly shifting towards a position where conceptions of men as "tough but tender" take precedence over aggressive hypermasculinity. The issues with the shifting gender order in hegemonic masculinity for the purposes of this research are twofold. Firstly, the positions that shift down are often subsequently attributed to an "Other," which creates new oppressions through a reconstitution of the gender order.[52] This Other is somewhat present in the documentary, when firefighters sporadically talk about vengeance and war and when the documentary shows some of Bush's speeches in response to the attacks. There is no clarity over who these terrorists are exactly, but in the time right after the 9/11 attacks the terrorists are often coated in terms of hypermasculine aggression and misogyny.[53] Secondly, the shifting gender order in the masculine hegemony ascertains that the feminine cannot gain an equal footing. Rather, feminine qualities which become more important in the masculine gender order tend to become masculinized.[54] Femininity is then always relegated to a position below most masculine gender norms in the gender order, which can cause men in masculine environments such as the FDNY to have difficulty employing their skills that are considered to be either feminine or less masculine.

We can see this dynamic play out in the documentary through the portrayal of trauma. The Naudet brothers are very careful in their portrayal of trauma in the documentary. It is quite noticeable that the Naudet brothers, when they appear in the documentary, tend to describe their emotions and experiences, whereas the firefighters tend to describe their actions. The moments in which the firefighters show emotion or speak in emotional terms are scarce. The focus of the latter

[51] Pacholok, *Into the Fire*, 45.
[52] Gottzén et al., "Masculinities, War," 473.
[53] Gottzén et al., "Masculinities, War," 473.
[54] Gottzén et al., "Masculinities, War," 473.

parts of the documentary is mostly on the actions of firefighters, and trauma is more often hinted at than openly discussed.

One example of Jules describing the scene in more emotional terms occurs when he is with the fire department inside the tower. When he describes the sensations of the event, he says: "You don't see it, but you know where it is. You know every time you hear the crashing sound that it's a life which is extinguished. It's not something you could get used to. And the sound was so loud."[55] He later describes the way the firefighters were reacting: "I was seeing the look on the firefighters. It was not fear, it was… 'What's going on?' Disbelief. That made me panic a little bit. That made me panic."[56] Here, Jules steers away from describing the firemen's faces as showing fear, couching it in the term "disbelief." When describing his own feelings, he has no issue admitting that he felt panic. Both the Naudet brothers and the firefighters, however, steer clear of language that could indicate that the firefighters faltered in their courage. The only exception to this is when the firemen get the order to evacuate the building. A firefighter said: "For the first time, I looked in someone else's eyes and saw fear… which you don't see with firemen. You start to feel your anxiety build up. Take a deep breath, and you say: "It's gonna be alright. Let's keep going. I got brothers ahead of me, brothers behind me. We're in this together. And we're gonna do what we have to do."[57] When the firefighter does admit to observing fear, it is immediately qualified as exceptional and further couched in masculine language. He refers to acting on a stoic attitude to just keep going and to his ability to rely on his brothers, his masculine community, to do the same.

After the collapse of the buildings, the documentary switches focus to the situation inside the firehouse where the firefighters are slowly returning. This is where the firefighters had time to rest, which is also the first moment in which the firefighters could start to come to terms with what had just transpired. It is only a short while that the documentary shows the reunion of these firemen

[55] *9/11*, 00:39:26.
[56] *9/11*, 00:47:21.
[57] *9/11*, 00:54:22.

and their reactions to it.[58] They cry, hug, and express their shock. The documentary then soon moves on to the dramatic and emotional reunion of the Naudet brothers themselves. This is followed by some conversations between firefighters describing their experience, which is now mostly devoid of emotional language. They also speak about the death of Father Judge, the Fire Department's chaplain. This event is also discussed in mostly factual and descriptive language:

> Firefighter in firehouse: "We carried out the chaplain."
> Other firefighter: "He's dead?"
> Firefighter: [nods head] "It exploded, it just blew us all in."
> Other firefighter: "The Fire Department chaplain?"
> Firefighter: "Yeah. Old guy. He had no pulse, nothing."[59]

In most scenes where firefighters are either talking to the camera or to each other, the language is generally clear of emotional terms. Even when they do describe emotion, they tend to state that the situation was "very emotional" rather than identifying the specific emotions. Terms such as fear, sadness and grief are avoided. This lack of emotional language creates a stark contrast between the firefighters and the Naudet brothers. When the firemen speak, they mostly speak in masculine coded language which avoids emotions other than anger, while the French brothers speak much more openly about their emotional experience, with Jules stating that they "cried like babies for about ten minutes."[60] When the firemen do express or describe emotion, it is mostly done in service of the narrative.

The documentary attempts to build suspense around the disappearance of Jules and Tony, and uses the emotional moment of the return of the firemen to the firehouse as a way to set the mood. While Jules acts as one of the talking heads from the start of the documentary, Tony is only shown as a talking head *after* he is shown returning to the firehouse as one of the last firefighters, which only increases the created suspense. The suspense is also enhanced because the filmmakers offer an opportunity for the viewer to empathize with the feelings of uncertainty and eventual relief

[58] *9/11*, 01:18:17.
[59] *9/11*, 01:24:25.
[60] *9/11*, 01:21:34.

at the return of the brother Jules and, especially, the hero of the story, Tony.

The last part of the documentary shows the process of firemen digging through the rubble to find survivors and talking about what they went through. The firemen are shown to be throwing themselves into their work, and the language of their descriptions is again coded with masculine terms like the risk being worth it, relying on "the guys" or "brothers." However, there are two people who diverge from this norm: Captain Dennis Tardio, who does speak towards the trauma of the event, and Tony, who progresses further into masculine expressions of aggression and vengeance.

Throughout the documentary, there are only a few hints towards the psychological trauma experienced by firefighters. This documentary focuses on the immediate aftermath of the firemens' experience at the site of the 9/11 attacks, so perhaps the deeper trauma that was recorded in members of the FDNY was not yet felt at this point.[61] However, the hinting towards trauma shown in the documentary evidences that it was present, but that the producers of the documentary chose to mostly leave it out of their film. Dennis Tardio describes what is, in essence, survivor's guilt: "I can't believe we all made it out. How did we make it out of that building? 30 seconds, another two flights higher. Why am I alive and so many others are dead?"[62] While there is no explicit statement of trauma, he does express a deep sense of guilt. Later in the documentary, he is filmed with the now emptier skyline of New York where the towers used to be. As he points to that empty space, he says: "I don't see them. It's hard to believe they're not there. They're not there. It did happen, right? It's not something that I'm going to close my eyes and open them again and I'm going to see the tower, right? It's not there."[63] He openly expresses his inability to believe that this event has actually happened, sharing that his mind is having difficulty accepting and processing the reality of what has happened. By expressing his trauma in these implicit terms, Tardio also comes to represent a more

[61] Quinn M. Biggs et al., "Acute Stress Disorder, Depression, and Tobacco Use in Disaster Workers Following 9/11," *American Journal of Orthopsychiatry* 80, no. 4 (October 2010), 586.
[62] *9/11*, 01:22:27.
[63] *9/11*, 01:36:07.

communal or national trauma that is felt by all Americans.

If Tardio, in a small way, represents the American sense of national trauma and victimhood related to 9/11, then Tony represents the American sense of heroism and desire to take action. As his transformation from boy to man is now complete, he serves as the quintessential masculine hero. This is made explicit near the end of the documentary, when Tony says: "A lot of guys don't know if they're gonna do the job any more. I know it's either this or the army now. And I like saving lives, I don't like taking them. But after what I saw, if my country decides to send me… to go kill… I'll do it now."[64] Tony has become a man, and he is ready to avenge the harm that has been inflicted upon his country and firehouse.

1.6 Conclusion

Taken in its entirety, it is the narrative thread of Tony "becoming a man" that defines the portrayal of masculinity in the *9/11* documentary. He states himself that his desire to be a hero is what made him want to be a firefighter, and throughout the documentary he is shown to be taking action and stepping up and into danger. At the end of the documentary, Hanlon states: "In the beginning, [Jules and Gédéon] said, 'Let's make a documentary about a boy becoming a man during his nine-month probationary period.' It turns out Tony became a man in about nine hours, trying to help out on 9/11. You know how you can tell? He's not bragging about it."[65] Tony has completed his journey of becoming a man, which is evidenced by his stoicism and his silence about the events that transpired.

Besides investigating an already masculine environment, the documentary also provides a framing that re-enforces the masculinity of its subjects. The documentary constantly reinforces the drive felt by the firemen to keep going and their desire to help and protect others despite the risks they put themselves in while doing so. It thereby paints a brightly positive picture of heroic

[64] *9/11*, 01:52:24.
[65] *9/11*, 01:58:02.

masculinity that is clearly connected to a more military heroic masculinity. Tony becomes a man when he steps up and heads out into danger. As he describes his experience, it becomes clear that he was sadly not really able to help anyone. But when he returns, he has still transformed from a boy to a man.

Shown throughout the documentary is a hypermasculine response that masks the insecurity felt in the moment. Firemen constantly repeat that they have to "just keep going" or "just keep digging." Even when given direct orders to stay away, the only way in which these firemen know how to deal with the insecurity of a sudden attack on the nation's most populated city is to stoically and heroically keep working and throwing themselves into danger. The next chapter will study an author who has a much different take on the FDNY's activities, especially in the aftermath of the attacks. The second chapter's case study focuses on a series of *Atlantic Monthly* articles that were later compiled into a book titled *American Ground*, in which William Langewiesche investigates the cleanup efforts and became infamous for his criticisms leveled against the FDNY. Throughout the piece it will become clear that the author has his own ideas on hegemonic masculinity and places firemen on a much lower "rank" than most of America did after the attacks. As one of the first open critics of the FDNY, he cleared the way for many more to do the same and renegotiate American masculinity in the process.

Chapter 2: *American Ground* and the Casting of the Traumatized in the Creation of Political Narratives after 9/11

2.1 Introduction

As the dust settled from the events of 9/11 and the nation recovered from the shock of the attack, the initial shock and grief made place for anger (even though this may not have happened as quickly as Bush suggested in his speech on September 20th,2001)[66]. This anger, fueled by the onslaught of images reminding the American public of the tragedy, was instrumental in mobilizing the public will towards the Bush administration's goals.[67] While the previous chapter focused on the direct aftermath of 9/11 and the celebration of firefighters as the "victim-heroes" of this melodrama, the following chapter will analyze the diverging paths of the firemen of the FDNY and the rest of the nation. While the nation moved on to attempt to resolve their trauma through revenge and victory against evil, the FDNY struggled to come to terms with their loss amongst the ruins of the World Trade Center.

This chapter will further discuss the history of the use of heroism and victimhood, and the way these concepts intersect in the melodramatic narratives that serve to legitimize war and violent state action on the one hand, and the narratives that detail the experiences of those wars on the other. It will then describe the use of masculine rhetoric in President Bush's speeches and declarations and the way his focus shifted more and more to the military. This chapter will then return to the struggles of the FDNY and their changing place in the melodrama of 9/11. This is done through a reading of *American Ground: Unbuilding the World Trade Center* by William Langewiesche, which tells the story of the enormous project of cleaning up the rubble at the Trade Center site. Langewiesche's story occupies a unique place within the broader melodramatic

[66] George W. Bush, "Address to a Joint Session of Congress and the American People," transcript of speech delivered at the United States Capitol, Washington D.C., September 20, 2002, https://georgewbush-whitehouse.archives.gov/news/releases/2001/09/20010920-8.html.
[67] Elisabeth R. Anker, *Orgies of Feeling: Melodrama and the Politics of Freedom* (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2014), 111.

narrative that illustrates how hierarchies of masculinities changed in the aftermath of the 9/11 attacks.

2.2 Melodrama and War in America

While the history of war literature in the 20th century shows a focus on the personal victimhood of its heroic protagonists *after* they've experienced war, the U.S. government has used a similar focus on victim-heroes in its mobilization of the country *towards* war. According to Elizabeth Anker, melodramatic narratives have often been used by the U.S. in legitimizing their aggressive policies towards other parts of the world. She uses the example of Eisenhower's speech, which creates a clear delineation between the American "free world" and the USSR's communist threat which seeks to destroy that freedom. The good, freedom-loving Americans are victimized in this narrative simply by virtue of being under attack by the evil forces of communism, which will require heroic sacrifices from the American people.[68]

This melodrama served to reinforce the belief in American exceptionalism, which has always been at its strongest in times of war, in particular World War II and the Cold War. Bond adds that "the discourse of exceptionalism performs its most potent work in periods of sociological transition and moments of national crisis."[69] When the Cold War was coming to an end in 1989, this meant the disappearance of an evil Other against which to define the virtue of America; there was suddenly no national crisis to rally the country around. While the latter half of the 20th century had already seen and continued to see aggressive American military intervention in the Middle East, the "evil" dictatorial regimes the interventions targeted did not pose a real, visceral, direct threat to the American population.[70] While the Bush Sr. and Clinton administration could still count on a general belief in American exceptionalism and continued support for the military, at the end of that decade

[68] Anker, *Orgies of Feeling*, 97-98.
[69] Lucy Bond, *Frames of Memory after 9/11: Culture, Criticism, Politics, and Law* (London, UK: Palgrave Macmillan , 2015), 55.
[70] Bond, *Frames of Memory*, 55.

issues of national security were not a high priority for the national election.[71] This situation lasted until September 11, 2001, after which George W. Bush would no longer have an issue, or even require a debate, when wanting to increase military spending.[72] What the administration of Bush Sr. and Clinton had lacked in their attempts to galvanize support from the American people, had now been delivered to Bush Jr. This allowed the tradition of war narratives focused on a battle between good and evil, where exceptional America is represented by protagonists cast as victim-heroes in this struggle, to make its grand reentry into the American cultural and political sphere.

We must be careful, however, that in attempting to describe the 20th century narratives of war, heroism and victimhood in the 20th century and beyond, we do justice to the complexity and diversity of the voices of the past. While often the ideal of heroism was conjured up in war literature, and also through government action in the use of posters, speeches, films, and other forms of advertisement, heroism is not the only ideal commonly associated with war in the history of Western culture. This is, perhaps, where the sole focus on melodramatic narratives falls short, and we should pay attention to not just the narratives that are used to mobilize for war, but also the narratives that result from war. We must also wonder why the American citizens were so ready to hear the melodramatic narrative and accept it as truth. Yuval Noah Harari shows that narratives about war often go beyond the idea of warfare as a heroic or courageous act, ascribing to war a deeper story; it reveals the "truth" of the world to its participants.[73]

Harari shows that besides the narrative of disillusionment that often follows the revelation of the harsh realities of war, there is also an element of positive revelation, which separates the veterans from those who haven't seen the truth and thus cannot understand.[74] Think back, for instance, to Hanlon's statement in the *9/11* documentary: "I mean, looking back, we were

[71] Derek S. Reveron and Judith Stiehm, *Inside Defense: Understanding the U.S. Military in the 21st Century* (New York, NY: Palgrave MacMillan, 2013), 100.
[72] Reveron and Stiehm, *Inside Defense*, 101.
[73] Yuval Noah Harari, *Ultimate Experience: Battlefield Revelations and the Making of Modern War Culture, 1450-2000*(Houndmills, Basingstoke, UK: Palgrave Macmillan, 2008), 303.
[74] Harari, *Ultimate Experience*, 303.

all just… we were kind of innocent, especially Tony."[75] These narratives of disillusionment are more and more frequently raised to the level of the nation, where according to Harari "people speak today about 'national trauma,' about an entire nation 'maturing' or becoming 'disillusioned' through war."[76]

It is therefore perhaps not just the conjuring of a melodramatic narrative before war that mobilizes the population, but also a deeper belief in Western culture about war's potential to reveal truths about the world and the inevitability of war itself. While the melodramatic narratives used by many American representatives of the state are powerful and are a strong force in galvanizing support for expansionist military policies, this is supported by an understanding of war and masculinity in western culture which has roots deeper than just America's history and mythologies. While Anker correctly identifies the melodramatic narratives which generated support for Bush's foreign policy, it is equally important to acknowledge that these narratives found incredibly fertile ground.

While the wars of the 20th century, especially the Vietnam War, created a strong divide between civilians (who cannot understand) and veterans (who had seen the truth), the attacks on 9/11 stand apart. Because the attacks were deliberately targeted at the civilian population, civilians could, through their television sets, join in the viewing of the destruction and experience the trauma of war. Even though only a small fraction of the American population directly witnessed or was affected by the attacks, the American people *believed* that they had seen the truth, often speaking of a "loss of innocence." This meant that Bush could count on a population willing to hear his message, especially in the run up to the war in Afghanistan in the direct aftermath of the 9/11 attacks.

[75] *9/11*, 00:19:19.
[76] Harari, *Ultimate Experience*, 303.

2.3 Masculinity in Post-9/11 Melodrama

The effectiveness of this narrative in the mobilization of the American people towards war in the Middle East has been extensively studied. An important concept to understand in this regard is the concept of "felt legitimacy" introduced by Anker. She argues that "melodramatic political discourses often construct legitimacy for antidemocratic forms of state power."[77] She claims that this type of discourse was at least in part responsible for achieving legitimacy for policies that were introduced in the War on Terror.[78] She explains that what she calls felt legitimacy "refers to an affective experience of authorizing state power," and she believes it can be equally as powerful in generating legitimacy as formal procedures.[79]

The main affects evoked by the melodramatic discourse that was used, in particular by then-president Bush, to legitimize the War on Terror were that of grief, anger, fear, and ultimately reassurance that that which is evil will be overpowered by that which is good. Anker illustrates how Bush incorporated these emotions in his "Freedom at War with Fear" speech, in which he introduced the war in Afghanistan and the Office of Homeland Security.[80] Speaking in a tone of "vehemence," he "enacts heightened affects as he references them – grief and anger – in order to show how they demand resolution, a resolution that will be the end of fear."[81] Anker notes that this rhetoric was employed to make state action seem heroic, "morally obligatory," and as a logical consequence of the grief and anger that were brought upon the nation.[82] Bush hereby blurs any historical context that was already in place before the attacks, focusing completely on the sudden attack on the nation and the inevitable retribution to restore freedom.

Masculinity occupies an important, though not static, place in melodramatic narratives. Anker states that "melodrama (...) masculinizes its self-sufficient heroism: it is often the men who

[77] Anker, *Orgies of Feeling*, 110.
[78] Anker, *Orgies of Feeling*, 111.
[79] Anker, *Orgies of Feeling*, 111.
[80] Anker, *Orgies of Feeling*, 122.
[81] Anker, *Orgies of Feeling*, 122.
[82] Anker, *Orgies of Feeling*, 122.

are self-emancipating and self-making; men are self-made upon women's suffering. This is not always the case, however; historically, melodrama's gender conventions are themselves somewhat unstable."[83] While the masculine does not always occupy the role of the hero in melodrama, it often does, and it certainly did in the melodramatic narrative of 9/11. In *The Terror Dream*, Faludi argues that American commentary of 9/11 shows a regression to traditional gender norms.[84] She refers to this as "Cold-Warrior manhood," indicating that themes of military heroism centered on violent revenge have made their reentry in the public imagination.[85]

This is not the first time that explicitly traditional gender roles were used in melodramatic narratives in response to a crisis. In "Can Melodrama Cure?" Anke Pinkert describes how post-war German cinema employed the casting of "female protagonists within roles of purity and innocence," where "the women's ideological function is to redeem men from their debilitating link to the fascist past."[86] While 9/11 was a crisis of a different kind, it evoked a similar response. Faludi describes a return to traditional masculinity in American media which took firefighters as the symbol for that masculinity. She cites various news outlets like the Washington Post and the New York Times describing firemen as "burly men with axes," contrasting them to the "vaguely feminized men" of the 1990s.[87] Faludi describes a pattern in the articles: "The articles always seemed to gravitate toward the same argument: 'maleness' was making a comeback because New York City's firemen were heroes on 9/11, and they were heroes because they had saved untold numbers of civilians —especially female civilians."[88] Even though most of the victims of the attacks were male, the media focused almost exclusively on female victims or female relatives of male victims such as widows and daughters.[89]

Besides the media, president Bush also had a strong hand in this regression to traditional

[83] Anker, *Orgies of Feeling*, 82.
[84] Faludi, *The Terror Dream*, 4.
[85] Faludi, *The Terror Dream*, 5.
[86] Anke Pinkert, "Can Melodrama Cure? War Trauma and Crisis of Masculinity in Early DEFA Film," *Seminar: A Journal of Germanic Studies* 44, no. 1 (February 2008), 119.
[87] Faludi, *The Terror Dream*, 74.
[88] Faludi, *The Terror Dream*, 79.
[89] Faludi, *The Terror Dream*, 79.

gender norms in service to the greater melodramatic narrative. In the months after 9/11 this narrative used by Bush focused mainly on the victimhood of the United States, exemplified by the firefighters of the FDNY. It was at the State of the Union Address of 2002, on January 29th, that Bush introduced the "Axis of Evil" against which the War on Terror would be waged. As stated before, Bush constantly evoked the sentiments of grief, anger, fear and the assurance of the victory of good over evil. In this State of the Union Address, Bush starts out by addressing both the grief of the nation and the grief of specific people, such as a retired firefighter or a son of a man who died in the attacks.[90] Perhaps most effectively, Bush invited a widower whose husband died in Afghanistan: "Last month, at the grave of her husband, Michael, a CIA officer and Marine who died in Mazur-e-Sharif, Shannon Spann said these words of farewell: 'Semper Fi, my love.' Shannon is with us tonight."[91] Through the use of widows such as Shannon, women are placed in a position of victimhood in the melodramatic narrative, which serves to inspire and reinforce masculine heroism. Faludi states that widows have been used in this way since at least the Civil War, when they were expected to take the lead in memorializing the nation's male heroes.[92] The widows of FDNY firefighters were also kept in the public view for these purposes.[93]

Despite growing resistance (especially compared to the almost universal support for the war in Afghanistan), a large share of the nation was, at this point, ready to support war with Iraq. Bush had spread a rhetoric of fear and terrorist threat towards a public that remained willing to hear it. Post-9/11 fear for terrorism and a willingness to support war in Iraq was at an all-time high.[94] As the country was being mobilized to war, the president needed a representation of American heroism that better fit the context of war. It was natural, then, for him to shift further away from firefighters

[90] George W. Bush, "The President's State of the Union Address," transcript of speech delivered at the United States Capitol, Washington D. C., January 29, 2002, https://georgewbush-whitehouse.archives.gov/news/releases/2002/01/20020129-11.html.
[91] Bush, "State of the Union."
[92] Faludi, *The Terror Dream*, 93.
[93] Faludi, *The Terror Dream*, 93.
[94] Anthony R. DiMaggio, *Selling War, Selling Hope: Presidential Rhetoric, the News Media, and U.S. Foreign Policy since 9/11* (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 2016), 64.

and closer towards American military service members in his speeches. While he continued his melodramatic narrative in the same vein as before, he would start paying more attention to these heroic American soldiers, both now and in American history. Bush had to prove to the country that he was a man capable of taking decisive action. His appearances after the 9/11 attacks referenced the military more and more, which served to prove his masculinity.[95]

As said before, an important component of American melodrama is the full belief in the eventual victory of the victim-hero.[96] This belief in the inevitability of American victory was demonstrated by president Bush himself in a speech he held on May 1st, 2003, when not even two months had passed since the start of the Iraq War. This televised speech would later be (though sometimes mockingly) referred to as the "Mission Accomplished" speech, due to a banner that was placed in the backdrop of Bush's podium with the words "Mission Accomplished" printed on an American flag. Bush held the speech on board of the *U.S.S. Lincoln*, after having been flown there in a jet. He arrived in full military getup.

President Bush started his speech by announcing that "major combat operations have ended," and then immediately shifted focus to the soldiers: "Your courage, your willingness to face danger for your country and for each other, made this day possible. Because of you, our nation is secure. Because of you, the tyrant has fallen, and Iraq is free."[97] He starts his speech by affirming the heroism of the American soldiers in Iraq, and later likens them to earlier heroic figures from America's war history: "the daring of Normandy, the fierce courage of Iwo Jima (…) is fully present in this generation."[98] Where the image of Iwo Jima had not long ago been used as a way to venerate the heroism of firemen, it had already found its way back to the military.

The speech then shifts to the victims of evil that heroic America is taking the lead in

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[95] Julie Drew, "Identity Crisis: Gender, Public Discourse, and 9/11," *Women and Language* 27, no. 2 (2004), 74.
[96] Anker, *Orgies of Feeling*, 122.
[97] George W. Bush, "President Bush Announces Major Combat Operations in Iraq Have Ended," transcript of speech delivered from the USS Abraham Lincoln at sea off the coast of San Diego, California, May 1, 2003, https://georgewbush-whitehouse.archives.gov/news/releases/2003/05/20030501-15.html.
[98] Bush, "President Bush Announces."

fighting against. He talks about both Saddam Hussein and the Iraqi citizens that were the victims of his dictatorship, and Al-Qaeda and the Taliban who victimized the United States on 9/11.[99] The President grasps this moment as a perfect opportunity to further reinforce the necessity of the expansion of state power. He states: "Our mission continues. Al Qaeda is wounded, not destroyed. (…) Our government has taken unprecedented measures to defend the homeland. And we will continue to hunt down the enemy before he can strike."[100] These unprecedented measures involved not just the violent intervention in the Middle East, but also the expansion of government powers to infringe on citizen's privacy in an effort to root out terrorism. The speech goes on to confirm the inevitability of victory: "We do not know the day of final victory, but we have seen the turning of the tide. (…) Their cause is lost. Free nations will press on to victory."[101]

This speech exemplifies the melodramatic narrative used by the Bush administration to argue for the continued necessity of the government's interventions, both at home and abroad.[102] Bush identifies American soldiers as the heroes that rescue the world from evil, and shows that victory is certain as long as these soldiers keep their courage and the government is allowed to continue their violent interventions. The "Mission Accomplished" speech is particularly well-known for the extremely masculinized and militarized staging of the event. For the melodramatic narrative, victory had to be associated with Bush's leadership and, in particular, his male leadership "qualities."[103]

Because of the importance of the inevitability of victory for the melodramatic narrative, it was at this point no longer possible for Bush to place the FDNY firefighters in the position of the victim-hero. Firefighters could not be a symbol of military success because they had never been in combat and were never victorious. Rather than firemen being reminiscent of heroes, they now reminded Americans only of their loss and their national trauma. Through military victory, the

[99] Bush, "President Bush Announces."
[100] Bush, "President Bush Announces."
[101] Bush, "President Bush Announces."
[102] Anker, *Orgies of Feeling*, 188.
[103] Anker, *Orgies of Feeling*, 245.

nation could move on from the trauma inflicted and start healing, assured of its position as a benevolent world leader. In melodramatic political discourse, the promise of unbound freedom through victory must prevail.[104] While firemen were still generally regarded as heroes, cracks started to form that made space for them to become tragic victims rather than victim-heroes.

2.4 William Langewiesche's American Ground

In 2002, the *Atlantic Monthly* published a report by journalist William Langewiesche that consisted of three separate articles. These three articles were eventually published as a book titled *American Ground: Unbuilding the World Trade Center*. In the aftermath of 9/11, Langewiesche had been on the site of the cleanup of the World Trade Center for six months, and had had nearly unrestricted access to the site and the people working there. Before writing about this topic, Langewiesche had spent most of his time as a journalist in Africa and the Middle East, often writing about conflict zones. In "Part One: The Inner World," Langewiesche writes:

> After years of traveling through the back corners of the world, I had an unexpected sense not of the strangeness of this scene but of its familiarity. Wading through the debris on the streets, climbing through the newly torn landscapes, breathing in the mixture of smoke and dust, it was as if I had wandered again into the special havoc that failing societies tend to visit upon themselves. This time they had visited it upon us.[105]

Through these words it immediately becomes clear that Langewiesche continues in the vein of the melodramatic narrative of 9/11. He describes the site at the fallen World Trade Center as resembling a warzone and makes an explicit reference to an "us" that experience war and a "them" that cause war, preserving America's innocence and victimhood in the narrative. Interestingly, Žižek makes the same observation on the similarity of Ground Zero to conflict zones in the Middle East, but draws a different conclusion. He argues that "the question we should have asked ourselves as we stared at the TV screens on September 11 is simply: *Where have we already seen the same thing*

[104] Anker, *Orgies of Feeling*, 37.
[105] William Langewiesche, "American Ground: Unbuilding the World Trade Center, Part One: The Inner World," *Atlantic Monthly* 290, no. 1 (July 1, 2002), 47.

over and over again?"[106] In answering this question, Žižek points to two places: on our television screens in Hollywood blockbusters, and on CNN during reports about conflicts, particularly in the Middle East.[107] The melodramatic narrative which supports the idea of a national trauma requires that America retains its innocence in order to remain "good" and capable of fighting a clearcut "evil." Langewiesche, in simply describing his first sensations of Ground Zero, protects this American innocence and buys into the "us vs. them" idea of the melodramatic 9/11 narrative.

Even though Langewiesche buys into this melodramatic narrative, he does make the controversial choice of criticizing the FDNY, choosing a different type of man as the hero to his story; the heroes of Langewiesche's story are engineers. In particular, they are the engineers who took the task of cleaning up Ground Zero upon themselves. Langewiesche describes the breakdown of traditional hierarchies due to the sense of urgency to find survivors, which resulted in a few men taking charge naturally.[108] In all three articles, Langewiesche consistently describes these men in terms of their capability to stay calm and rational in stressful situations and their decisiveness. This becomes particularly clear when Langewiesche tells the story of Peter Rinaldi. Rinaldi played an important role in the cleanup of the site, but Langewiesche first tells the story of how he survived the 1993 bombing in the World Trade Center:

> They had been trapped for about twenty minutes now, and their situation was suddenly desperate. People reacted in different ways. The only woman crouched silent in a comer as if she had gone into shock. One of the men grew hysterical, presumably because he was not an engineer. When I asked Rinaldi about it later, he said, "Yeah, we had a guy who was kind of emotional." I said, "Crying?" "Hyper and screaming and kind of upset." The others ignored him, and he finally quieted down. As for his own predicament, Rinaldi thought, "This is real." He was not afraid to die so much as worried about abandoning his wife and children. He locked eyes with an old friend named Frank Lombardi, a balding, soft-spoken man who at that time was the Port Authority's second ranking engineer, and had his own family to leave behind. They exchanged little nods, acknowledging the danger they were in.[109]

[106] Žižek, *Welcome to the Desert*, 17.
[107] Žižek, *Welcome to the Desert*, 17.
[108] Langewiesche, "Part One," 48.
[109] Langewiesche, "Part One," 66.

Langewiesche clearly sets up these engineers as the heroes of this story. They are the ones who take a pragmatic and reasonable approach to the situation, even when that situation is completely shocking and overwhelming. While this is reminiscent of the same virtue of stoicism that was lauded in the documentary *9/11*, there are some important differences. Firstly, the protagonists in Langewiesche's narrative are people who have a connection to the blue-collar workforce through their profession, but are college-educated people themselves. He describes, for instance, how an engineer named Pablo Lopez earned his Master's degree at Manhattan College but that "he [Lopez] was proud of his humble background, and his connection to the streets."[110] Langewiesche's protagonists have this in common; they form a bridge between the blue-collar world of physical labor and the white-collar world of office work. Secondly, while the FDNY as shown in the documentary *9/11* responded to the attacks with a stoic and can-do attitude, Langewiesche goes into great detail to describe how the engineers turn that can-do attitude into success. While the FDNY responded to the attacks with sentiments that tapped into masculine bravado and machismo, the engineers in Langewiesche's tale take an analytical approach to the problems posed by Ground Zero.[111] This paints a picture of a very different masculine environment in which machismo is unwelcome and the only thing that speaks to your success as a man is your ability to overcome problems intelligently. While Langewiesche is certainly not disdainful of blue-collar workers, his continuous extolling of these engineers' virtues makes clear who the real men and the real heroes were for Langewiesche in the unbuilding of the World Trade Center.

Langewiesche addresses three different groups that have worked on the project of the cleanup: the FDNY, the police, and construction workers. While he is critical of each of these groups due to evidence of looting and their descent into tribalism, the FDNY takes the brunt of this criticism. In "Part Three: The Dance of the Dinosaurs," Langewiesche tells the story of the fight that broke out between the FDNY and the police during a demonstration where firemen protested

[110] William Langewiesche, "American Ground: Unbuilding the World Trade Center, Part Two: The Rush To Recover," *Atlantic Monthly* 290, no. 2 (September 1, 2002), 73-74.
[111] Langewiesche, "Part One," 64.

against the mayor's plans to cut back on FDNY involvement in the search for the deceased. In the leadup to this physical altercation, Langewiesche describes the onset of tribalism at Ground Zero:

> Ordinary firemen were narrowly focused on the rubble underfoot, where the remains of civilians and police officers were regularly discovered, but only the recovery of their own people seemed genuinely to interest them. Though their attitude was sometimes offensive to others working on the pile, it was not difficult to understand: the firemen were straight-forward guys, initiates in a dosed and fraternal society who lived and ate together at the station houses, and shared the drama of responding to emergencies. (...) For nearly two months they had let their collective emotions run unchecked, and had been indulged and encouraged in this by society at large.[112]

To Langewiesche, the tribalism that developed was most apparent in the FDNY, which is explained with reference to their "fraternity." The brotherhood, this particular hypermasculine environment of the FDNY, is the reason the firemen were so focussed on taking care of their own. Adding fuel to this fire was the nation's attitude towards these firefighters – the constant framing of firefighters as tragic heroes. Langewiesche describes how "the image of 'heroes' seeped through their ranks like a low-grade narcotic."[113] It was this continuous reinforcement of this heroic framing in national media that led to resentment amongst the members of the other two tribes, the police and the construction workers. In sharing his view on this heroification of the FDNY, Langewiesche explains that the actions of the firefighters were normal within the context of their jobs and that while some firefighters definitely performed feats of heroism on that day, this did not give the FDNY as a whole the right to claim a "monopoly on altruism."[114] Combined with the firemen's tendency to revere Ground Zero as a sacred site[115] (but only to them), this led to the physical fight breaking out during the protest.[116]

It is in Langewiesche's description of this fight that the difference between his heroes and the firemen becomes clear. Where he consistently praises engineers for their calm rationality, he

[112] William Langewiesche, "American Ground: Unbuilding the World Trade Center, Part Three: the Dance of the Dinosaurs," *Atlantic Monthly* 290, no. 3 (October 2002), 94.
[113] Langewiesche, "Part Three," 100.
[114] Langewiesche, "Part Three," 99.
[115] Sturken, *Tourists of History*, 169.
[116] Langewiesche, "Part three," 95.

derides firemen for their overly emotional and irrational reactions that even lead to aggression. He describes the lack of discipline in the FDNY as a well-known component of their male culture which had led to irrational showcasing of more theatrical heroics, for instance when many off-duty firefighters showed up to the 9/11 site even after being explicitly asked to stay away.[117] In the documentary *9/11* this event is shown as an example of their heroism. Langewiesche sees in this attitude an irrationality born out of a culture of machismo and bravado.

Further criticism of the hero worship appears when Langewiesche describes a scene where construction workers and the FDNY found a firetruck in the rubble. Rather than the firetruck containing the bodies of deceased firemen, "its crew cab was filled with dozens of new pairs of jeans from The Gap."[118] Langewiesche's exposition of firemen's looting behavior became a huge controversy when the third part of his story was published.[119] Kevin Boon contends that the controversy of Langewiesche's account of the looting was not because it was untrue, but because "he humanized national heroes."[120] Boon uses this as an example of the paradox of masculinity; the impossibility of living up to the standard of the heroic male and the simultaneous emasculation resulting from its failure or lack of trying. For Boon, this explains where, for instance, the firemen's "irrational" behavior and bravado comes from.[121]

But based on this exploration of Langewiesche's work so far, it cannot be said that his work explicitly aims to humanize heroes. It aims to humanize *certain* heroes through a criticism of the FDNY, while venerating a different kind of masculine hero. Langewiesche's heroes are men who, to some extent, have escaped Boon's masculinity paradox; after reading the articles that compose *American*, no one can question their masculinity. Langewiesche does something which is common in the context of hegemonic masculinity: he praises a type of masculinity which (in his

[117] Langewiesche, "Part three," 103.
[118] Langewiesche, "Part three," 102.
[119] Kevin Alexander Boon, "Heroes, Metanarratives, and the Paradox of Masculinity in Contemporary Western Culture," *The Journal of Men's Studies* 13, no. 3 (2005), 307.
[120] Boon, "Heroes, Metanarratives," 307.
[121] Boon, "Heroes, Metanarratives," 310.

view) is at the top of the gender hierarchy, while criticizing another type of masculinity using terms which are commonly associated with feminine qualities (more emotional, less rational). Boon points to the importance of agency in perceptions of masculinity.[122] In Langewiesche's story, firefighters are described as impotent; they throw themselves on the pile of rubble but are rebuffed, they are unable to get anything done. When their access is threatened to be taken away, they respond to this emotionally and aggressively, which to Langewiesche points to their *lack* of agency. In *American Ground*, firemen read as emasculated through their inability and this lack of agency. In contrast, the engineering heroes with their practical, intelligent and analytical attitudes are the successful men of the story.

Another pattern in *American Ground* points to Langewiesche's not quite objective views on masculine behavior and agency: the lack of female heroes and female agency. The only women who are described in positive or neutral terms are the spouses of the protagonists.[123] When Langewiesche describes two survivors who were found in the rubble in the days after the attack, the male survivor's story takes several pages, going into his background as an engineer, where the female survivor's story is granted a single paragraph.[124] Most telling however, is Langewiesche's description of a meeting between some managers of the cleanup efforts, Mike Burton and Bill Cote, and a number of firefighters' widows.

The city was tasked with explaining to these widows, "an increasingly organized group that spoke for mothers, fathers, and children as well, and that after two months of national sympathy was gaining significant political strength," why they were giving up on the rest of the missing firefighters' bodies.[125] Langewiesche describes the meeting in detail and shows how multiple people, including the medical examiner and Mike Burton, attempted to explain their reasoning while being constantly rebuffed by an emotional crowd of widows getting angrier by the minute:

[122] Boon, "Heroes, Metanarratives," 309.
[123] Langewiesche, "Part One," 59.
[124] Langewiesche, "Part Two," 60-64.
[125] Langewiesche, "Part Three," 104.

> The crowd listened sullenly for a while, until a woman stood up and yelled, "We don't even want to hear from you! You're Mr. Scoop and Dump!"
>
> Burton was flustered. He said, "Listen, this will only be a few more minutes. Just let me explain our thinking, so we're all on the same page and can have a rational conversation."
>
> The woman shouted, "No! You're not the sort of person I want to talk to! You're the problem!"[126]

Langewiesche uses similar descriptions for firefighters and for their widows; they are "not entirely wrong," but they are emotional, aggressive, irrational, and blinded by their grief. Langewiesche had an opportunity here to do more to counter the dominant melodramatic narrative. In the chapter "Perfect Virgins of Grief," Faludi discusses the media circus that surrounded these widows; how many of them lived under constant public scrutiny and how they were expected to remain pure and innocent torch-bearers for their lost husbands.[127] Langewiesche even notes that these widows were "gaining significant political strength" and that "the widows would be heard from again - but increasingly through formal channels created for them."[128] Rather than expanding on this example of these widows' agency and expanding political presence, Langewiesche leaves the matter ambiguous.

The power of this widow's meeting, however, becomes clear when Langewiesche returns to the protagonist Mike Burton. The suffering of the widows, according to Langewiesche, had reminded Burton that "the unbuilding was more than just a problem of deconstruction, and that for the final measure of success they would have to take emotions into account."[129] Burton, in the continuation of the story, mostly seems bothered by the necessity of taking emotion into account and treats it as an afterthought. When Langewiesche uses the word emotion or refers to the grief caused by the tragedy, he uses this as an explanation for irrational behavior. As such, emotion becomes the antithesis to reason. Emotion is associated with irrationality and extended to

[126] Langewiesche, Part Three, 105.
[127] Faludi, *The Terror Dream*, 89-116.
[128] Langewiesche, "Part Three," 106.
[129] Langewiesche, "Part Three," 106.

emasculation and femininity.

However, through Langewiesche's narrative runs an interesting hidden thread. He reveals that both firefighters and their widows, as separate political groups, use their emotion – their effeminate quality – as a way to increase their agency in the political realm of the unbuilding of the World Trade Center. Langewiesche tends to view this as a negative, agreeing with his protagonists that the *physical* restoration of the city is the highest priority. One could argue, however, that the firefighters' demonstration and the widows' organizing were attempts to regain some of the sense of control that was left after 9/11. Sturken describes how Ground Zero became a sacred site to firefighters, and contends that *American Ground* was controversial because it described the site "in unsentimental terms as an engineering problem."[130] Reducing Ground Zero to "a pile of rubble," however, does not do justice to the multitude of meanings attached to the site. Whether or not the veneration of Ground Zero by firefighters and their attempts to recover their brothers' remains interrupted the physical restoration of the site is not the only yardstick by which the actions of firefighters and firefighters' widows should be measured. For them, their mental or spiritual "restoration" was their priority. Their grief and their emotions led them to identifying Ground Zero as a sacred site where they had to hold vigil. When obstructed, they used the power of that grief and that emotion as a means to gaining control, political strength, and agency. This story ultimately shows that a rethinking of masculinity requires a rethinking of agency as a quality that is not inextricable from maleness; that differing masculinities and femininities express their agency differently.

2.5 Conclusion

The FDNY occupies a unique position in American history. Firefighters were venerated as military heroes, yet had not been to war or achieved military success. As the concept of the masculinity paradox described by Boon would predict, this meant that they would eventually lose their status as

[130] Sturken, *Tourists of History*, 182.

the nation's heroes. *American Ground* was one of the first cracks that signaled this "de-heroization." While many firefighters were angry at its publication and the stories Langewiesche told, Goren shows that their fall from grace was not entirely unexpected. She describes that many firefighters understood that their status as a hero did not just have to do with their own actions, but that they had even more so represented a necessary symbol for the nation at a specific moment in time. Goren adds that "for the most part the men experienced the constant media attention as depriving them of the time and ability to mourn in private."[131] Thus, many of the FDNY's members showed an awareness, if not explicitly, of the masculinity paradox. Rather than choosing to attempt to live up to an impossible heroic myth, they chose to refute the claim that they were heroes and tried to move on with their lives despite the public insistence that they remain shackled to their grief. This does not, however, prevent the disillusionment of the public with its heroes, and what Goren describes as its effects: "psychological and social containment."[132]

This chapter has shown how Langewiesche was, perhaps unintentionally, one of the first people to spark the FDNY's public fall from grace. Interestingly, he did this by describing them in terms associated with femininity, essentially implying that the nation's heroes were not actually heroes as they could not live up to a more ideal form of (American) masculinity. Instead, to Langewiesche, engineers exemplify hegemonic masculinity. With the nation's eyes upon them, the masculinity paradox thus became much more vivid and real for the FDNY's men. The next chapter will explore how issues of masculinity and agency prevented or enabled members of the FDNY to deal with their personal trauma while the American public was in the process of renegotiating hegemonic masculinity.

[131] Goren, "Society's Use", 43.
[132] Goren, "Society's Use", 44.

Chapter 3: Negotiating Masculinity in Trauma Recovery as Portrayed in *Rescue Me*

3.1 Introduction

Whereas the previous two chapters studied non-fictional accounts of 9/11, this chapter will focus on the fictional TV series *Rescue Me*. Besides the fictional elements of the narrative, however, the series is grounded in the reality of 9/11 and the trauma suffered by the members of the FDNY. It clearly responds to the "fall from grace" experienced by firefighters and is an attempt to honestly depict a FDNY firehouse and its culture. Because its protagonists are all firefighters, the series gives these men agency in dealing with their trauma and explores the ways in which this can go right and wrong. However, before going into an analysis of *Rescue Me*, it is important to consider trauma theory first.

3.2 Trauma Theory and 9/11

Cathy Caruth's work on trauma theory created an academic understanding of trauma which allowed it to be applied in multiple fields of study, including the humanities and more specifically in the study of literary fiction.[133] As explained in the introduction, she describes trauma as an experience for which there was no preparation and which the conscious mind could not defend.[134] An important addition to this theory, which helped it bridge the gap to the humanities, is the concept of witnessing worked out by Soshana Felman and Dori Laub in *Crises of Witnessing.* Referring to trauma as an "event without a witness," they argue that in order for a survivor to work through trauma, there must be a witness or listener to the survivor's narrative. The witness then has a role of helping the survivor assimilate the repressed memory into the conscious.[135] Later work in psychoanalysis established that it is not the belated arrival of the memory into the survivor's mind that makes an

[133] Susannah Radstone, "Trauma Theory: Contexts, Politics, Ethics," *Paragraph* 30, no. 1 (March 2007), 9.
[134] Caruth, *Unclaimed Experience*, 6.
[135] Shoshana Felman and Dori Laub, *Testimony: Crises of Witnessing in Literature, Psychoanalysis and History* (New York, NY: Routledge, 1992), 57.

event traumatic, but the meanings given to that event after the event occurred.[136] Susannah Radstone explains that "a memory becomes traumatic when it becomes associated, later, with inadmissible meanings, wishes, fantasies. (...) What I take from this is that it is not an event, which is by its nature 'toxic' to the mind, but what the mind later does to memory."[137]

Applying this theory to the 9/11 attacks suggests that for the members of the FDNY who witnessed the attack and were closely involved in rescue attempts, the event would have become especially traumatizing not just on the day of the event, but in the days, weeks and even months after. As stated before, the attacks on the World Trade Center were immediately and constantly discussed and given meaning. The FDNY were cast in a central role in that meaning-making, whether or not they wanted to. In Laub's sense of the word, 9/11 was an event without a witness, because people were not adequately prepared for such an event to be assimilated into a narrative prepared by the mind. However, the American public at large and the members of the FDNY experienced two distinctly different events; the American public viewed an attack on their nation, and the FDNY experienced a terrifying reality of death and destruction first-hand. As Goren explains, firefighters "experienced the constant media attention as depriving them of the time and ability to mourn in private."[138] As such, America's need for a heroic figure may have made 9/11 significantly more traumatic for the FDNY.

This idea corresponds with strategies for engaging with trauma theory developed by feminist research. Jennifer Griffiths writes that "feminist strategies of interpreting testimony and creating meaning entails a consciousness of the way a witness can impose identities and agendas onto survivor testimony."[139] She further explains that a feminist understanding of trauma theory includes an understanding of the way in which traumatic experiences are related to their specific cultural and political context. Any witnesses to a trauma survivor's story form a part of this cultural

[136] Radstone, "Trauma Theory," 17.
[137] Radstone, "Trauma Theory," 17.
[138] Goren, "Society's Use," 43.
[139] Jennifer Griffiths, "Feminist Interventions in Trauma Studies," in *Trauma and Literature*, ed. J. Roger Kurtz (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2018), 194.

and political context. This requires an awareness of the possibility that witnesses, intentionally or not, impose their own meanings on survivor's testimony. We see this very clearly in both the documentary *9/11* and in *American Ground*. Both of these works can be seen (in part) as a witnessing of the survivors. The Naudet brothers imposed on that story a narrative of masculinity and heroism that was at that historical moment required by their cultural and political context. Langewiesche imposed the same melodramatic narrative, but cast the firefighters in a different – feminine and emasculating – role. As witnesses these authors imposed a gendered identity on the members of the FDNY, which affected their agency as survivors of trauma.

This third chapter will turn towards a fictionalized account that takes as one of its subjects the trauma experienced by FDNY firefighters after 9/11 – the FX series *Rescue Me*. Set three years after 9/11, the show provides a window into the aftermath of the 9/11 attacks and sheds light on the personal lives of firefighters. While the show's firefighters are set up as ultimately fallible people, they are still the protagonists and as such the heroes of the narrative. They are not (just) heroes because of their vocation, however, but also in their attempts to come to terms with their trauma, which frequently fail. The setting for this exploration of mental trauma is the highly masculine environment of "Ladder Company 62," a fictional firehouse in Harlem. The toxicity of the masculine behavior rewarded in that environment is a constant throughout the show. While the show treats that as a serious issue, it also uses the idiosyncrasies of such masculine behavior as comic relief. In doing so, it acknowledges that while these firefighter's trauma is impacted by their (macho) cultural context, we should not always take that machismo too seriously.

Even though *Rescue Me* was created by people (including Dennis Leary) who have a personal connection to firefighters, it is still a fictional account which tells a story *about* firefighters rather than *by* firefighters. As such, watching this show does not necessarily put the viewer in the position of a witness to firefighter's trauma. What the series does portray, however, is the difficulty these firefighters have in finding witnesses or listeners and how that difficulty is inextricably

connected to their cultural context. It is therefore the show itself that takes the position of witness. According to a feminist approach to trauma theory, then, we should be asking in what ways this witness has imposed their own identity or agenda onto the survivors' testimony.

Because the show ran for seven seasons, there is too much content for the scope of this chapter. This thesis therefore focuses on specific plotlines that establish the masculine culture of Ladder Company 62 and their firefighters' attempts to come to terms with their trauma within this culture. In the first season, the show kicks off with a storyline concerning homosexuality and the appearance of a female firefighter, both of which challenge the firehouse's traditional conception of the firehouse as a masculine space. The first season also juxtaposes the main character's unproductive response to his trauma (through alcoholism, aggression, etc.) and other, less traditionally masculine responses. In the final season, a narrative is created in which a firefighter who died on 9/11 is the subject of a documentary. The narrative here, interestingly, includes its own fictional version of a "witness to trauma" and details the firefighters' response to that witness. These varied plotlines will allow this thesis to identify the show's portrayal of firefighter's trauma as well as the cultural and political agenda behind that portrayal.

3.3 Denis Leary's Rescue Me

Denis Leary is not just the creator of the show, but also one of its main writers and the actor for the main character of the series. Even before 9/11, Leary had set up the *Leary Firefighters Foundation* in the year 2000 in response to a fire which killed six firemen, including his cousin and a friend.[140] Leary, in promotional material for his foundation, states: "Firefighters never go on strike. As a result, they are often an easy target for government budget cuts. This is where The Leary Firefighters Foundation steps in."[141] This theme of government dysfunction or at least failure to take care of firefighters also runs through the show and is strongly formed by Leary's personal

[140] Denis Leary, "Supporting Our Everyday Heroes," The Leary Firefighters Foundation, accessed March 4, 2022, https://learyfirefighters.org/.
[141] Leary, "Our Everyday Heroes."

connection to the firefighting profession. As such, Leary was poised to create and star in a show exactly about that subject, but this also gave him a platform to espouse his personal and political beliefs around this subject. Because his connection to firefighters started long before 9/11, with his foundation opening in 2000, he has greater credibility than a complete outsider.

His strong knowledge of FDNY culture is present throughout the show. The locker room decor, for instance, includes stickers which say "just suck it up" or "~~pussies~~," reflecting the expectation of bravery in the firehouse often expressed through traditional gendered language. A small storyline in the first season includes a hockey match between the FDNY and the NYPD. This rivalry, which Langewiesche also often remarked upon, constantly returns in confrontations between Tommy and police officers, who at one point tell him that "the honeymoon's over, Gavin. So tell all your friends, all that hero worshiping you got after 9/11, ain't getting paid any due from us anymore. We lost guys downtown too, but nobody ever talks about us."[142] This rivalry eventually culminates in a brawl after a hockey game, referring back to the fights that broke out between the two camps during the cleanup efforts and showing their lasting difficulties. A final, strong example of Leary's grasp on FDNY culture after 9/11 is a monologue his character has in the final episode of the first season. As the men are looking at the skyline, they talk about the spotlights that had been installed in the place of the Twin Towers. Tommy says:

> That's the thing about the spotlight. You walk out into it, at first everybody thinks they see a good-lookin all-American hero. Then you stay out there long enough… you know… they start to notice certain things. Maybe your nose is a little crooked, maybe your teeth are too. You got a little scar on your upper lip and your hair's not right.[...] Next thing you know, they think they're looking at some kinda goddamn monster.[143]

This is precisely what Goren states about firefighters' expectations regarding their heroic status. While Leary couches this in language about physical appearance, he is referring to the behavior for which society judges those who were in the spotlight. As Goren states: "portrayal of firefighters had

[142] "Immortal," *Rescue Me* (FX, September 22, 2004).
[143] "Sanctuary," *Rescue Me* (FX, October 13, 2004).

shifted to that of the fallen heroes, with news stories shifting to titillating reports of sexual misconduct and brawls inside firehouses, alcohol and substance abuse, aggressive run-ins with the police."[144] These topics all occur in *Rescue Me*, but while the show is often highly melodramatic, it does not treat them as scandals to be gawked at. Rather, it invites the viewer to consider the struggles of these firefighters with their place in the public imagination. Leary has also stated that he used acquaintances who serve as firefighters as a "touchstone" while writing.[145]

One thing Leary fails to address in this first season, though, is how this same spotlight affected the widows of firefighters who had died on 9/11. Faludi describes how these widows faced enormous condemnation if they went "off-script" or seemed to move through their grief too quickly. Their treatment by the media would be even worse if they began a relationship with another firefighter.[146] An important storyline in the first season is Tommy's burgeoning affair with Sheila, the widow of Jimmy, a firefighter who died on 9/11 and Tommy's cousin. Throughout the season, Tommy is warned that such a relationship would not be welcomed, but Sheila's perspective on the morality of their relationship is missing. She is simply the woman that tempts Tommy into an immoral relationship while he tries to resist but eventually gives in. Faludi shows how the media was far more quick to forgive the men who engaged in these relationships, placing blame on the women by portraying them as evil temptresses.[147] In the show, the firemen often refer to "the widows," a group of firemen's widows who are treated as a monolith to uphold some sense of morality, but these women are kept almost entirely offscreen. This is one of the ways in which Leary's perspective is limited. This limitation, especially when it comes to female characters and their perspectives, is subtly present throughout the show.

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[144] Goren, "Society's Use," 43.
[145] Jennifer Squires Biller, "Rescue Me: Chat with Denis Leary," Tube Talk, April 12, 2006, http://tubetalk.blogspot.com/2006/04/rescue-me-chat-with-denis-leary.html?m=1.
[146] Faludi, *The Terror Dream*, 106-107.
[147] Faludi, *The Terror Dream*, 106.

3.4 The Macho Firehouse

In the world of the FDNY firehouse and as such in the fictional world of Ladder Company 62, there is a clear type of masculinity which reigns supreme. It is centered around blue-collar lives and values and takes place in a space where there are hardly ever any women present. This masculinity is similar to the one described by Faludi as being popularized after 9/11.[148] Almost every scene that takes place inside the firehouse is filled with "locker room talk," where men describe, for instance, their heterosexual conquest of women and their homophobic views. Leary was clearly given free reign by FX, given that his characters consistently refer to women as "broads," homosexuals as "fags," and people considered less intelligent than average as "retards." The lockers themselves are often decorated with posters or photos of nude or scantily clad women. Because of a lack of outsiders in the series, this language often remains unchallenged. The show even starts with a monologue of Tommy addressing probies, where he talks about the size of his balls and the dangers of being a pussy as a firefighter; connecting male and female anatomy to courage and cowardice respectively.[149]

While most of the masculine behavior in the show corresponds to these blue-collar macho notions, there are some characters which challenge that hegemony. Through the use of a number of plot devices, Leary places his own character Tommy as a more valuable masculine figure than Tommy's romantic rival Robert. At the start of the show, Tommy is separated but not yet divorced from his wife Janet and he has moved to a house across the street. One thing we learn about Janet's new boyfriend Robert is that he works in finance, without any specifics. Tommy struggles to provide for his family and takes on extra work as a construction worker. This sets up his anxiety about another (white-collar) man coming in and replacing him as the provider. Tommy is given some small victories by the writers, for instance when Janet calls him over to fix the sink

[148] Faludi, *The Terror Dream*, 79.
[149] "Guts," *Rescue Me* (FX, July 21, 2004).

because "Robert's not good with tools."[150] Tommy then fixes the sink but lingers until Robert enters the house, which later leads to an argument between Janet and Robert. Ultimately, Robert's character leaves the show after a number of such occurrences where Tommy's aggressive approach wins over Robert's passive "take the high road" approach. So even though the blue-collar masculinity of the firehouse is at some points challenged or threatened, it usually ends up the victor by the end of the episode or storyline.

3.5 Homophobia

A recurring issue in the show which comes up in nearly every episode is the display of homophobia by the main characters. Besides the firemen, even Janet is unwilling to accept that her and Tommy's daughter could be a lesbian. The firemen constantly use homophobic language and express disgust at the thought of homosexual activity. They also take great care not to exhibit behavior or say things that could be in any way construed as homosexual, for instance when a firefighter assures his peers that he was very uncomfortable during a colonic examination.[151] The second episode of the show is titled "Gay." It features a storyline where the Chief reads an article where a gay firefighter (Bobby Teff) has claimed that at least twenty of the people who died on 9/11 were gay, prompting the men to have discussions about how you can tell whether people are gay. The Chief says: "I'm on the job twenty years and I've never seen one guy that's a faggot. All of a sudden they're telling me twenty guys are taking it right up the ass."[152] Enraged, the Chief ends up confronting Bobby in a gay bar for "dishonoring the memory" of those firefighters and ends up physically abusing him to the point that Bobby needs to be induced into a coma.[153] The next episodes deal with the fallout of this behavior, where the Chief's job is threatened. Eventually, though, the Chief is absolved when he uses his gay firefighter son as a character witness, where his son lies for him in court about his father's

[150] "Kansas," *Rescue Me* (FX, August 4, 2004).
[151] "Gay," *Rescue Me* (FX, July 28, 2004).
[152] "Gay."
[153] "Gay."

homophobia.[154]

One scholar who investigated the (lack of) representation of Asian masculinity in firefighting, Robert Chang, uses the show's use of homophobic characters and language to show that *Rescue Me* does not afford a place among firefighters for certain men, including homosexuals and people of Asian descent.[155] Chang argues that it is precisely because the firehouse is an all-male space where men take on traditionally female duties of cooking, cleaning and caring for each other, that further "anxiety" about sexuality is produced. This results in over-the-top heteronormative behavior that serves to anchor the men as completely heterosexual and assuage that anxiety.[156] The show, then, does a good job of portraying that behavior but not necessarily of addressing or challenging it.

Scholars Jimmy Draper and Amanda D. Lotz take a different approach to examining the place of homophobia in *Rescue Me*. They contend that the show's portrayals of homophobia are paired with discussions amongst the firemen about homosexuality, which they construe as "working through" an ideological challenge, i.e. the firemen's homophobic ideology is challenged in a world in which homosexuality is more and more normalized and their homophobia in the series is a starting point which explores how such a group would or could respond to such a challenge.[157] Importantly, their method "requires that analysts dig past the obvious intolerance of dialogue that suggests a regressive ideology and consider the ideological contribution of depicting the characters' struggles with social change toward gay acceptance."[158] It is the moral ambiguity of the characters – characteristic of newer 21st century television – that allows this working through to take place. This would be impossible in the much more morally static universe of the previously discussed *9/11* documentary, where good is clearly good and evil is clearly evil. Langewiesche's work too barely

[154] "Revenge," *Rescue Me* (FX, August 25, 2004).
[155] Robert Chang, "Rescue Me," in *Masculinities and the Law: A Multidimensional Approach*, ed. Ann C. McGinley, vol. 13 (New York, NY: New York University Press, 2012), 126.
[156] Chang, "Rescue Me," 126.
[157] Jimmy Draper and Amanda D. Lotz, "'Working Through' as Ideological Intervention: The Case of Homophobia in Rescue Me," *Television & New Media* 13, no. 6 (2012), 521.
[158] Draper and Lotz, "Working Through," 521.

challenges the heroic engineers' attitudes towards feminine emotion and other impractical approaches. *Rescue Me* works well in this sense because of its apparent lack of agenda; it does not seek to reform its characters or see them grow into a certain moral direction, which gives the characters freedom for this "working through." If the characters do grow in the way they relate to a changing social environment, they do so only in a few instances. For the Chief, even the threat of losing his job is not enough to let go of homophobic attitudes – and no one around him even directly disagrees with his action of confronting Bobby. This slow ideological change often ends up punishing the characters with physical or emotional turmoil.[159]

3.6 Misogyny

Even though the show depicts a slow process of "working through" and ideological change in its characters concerning homophobia, there are other issues caused by their anxious attachment to masculinity that are even more difficult for these characters – and perhaps for the writers of the series – to address. Another common aspect of the firemen's masculinity is expressed through misogyny. The show's first season mostly portrays misogynistic attitudes in Tommy's interpersonal relationships and in the firemen's discussions about female firefighters and firemen's widows.

Tommy is almost unable to have a conversation with Janet that does not result in him becoming angry or even physically violent towards her. Janet especially serves the story as a woman who constantly provides problems for Tommy which he then needs to solve. For instance, in multiple episodes Tommy has to figure out ways to get Janet money. He had also promised his deceased cousin Jimmy that he would take care of his family if he died, which positions the widow Sheila as another woman who needs providing for. The show directly addresses this when a female coworker, Laura, challenges Tommy and says that he prefers his women in a state of needing him, to keep them from being empowered. When Tommy explains that he's taking care of Sheila as he promised, the following conversation happens:

[159] Draper and Lotz, "Working Through," 529.

> Laura: "But you're kinda getting off on it, huh? Now you're the big sugardaddy, which allows you to excuse all your abhorrent behavior which also ensures that none of the key women in your life are empowered.
>
> Tommy: "Empowered?"
>
> Laura: "Yea!"
>
> Tommy: "Yea… Let me tell you something. My wife was planning on going to college [...] when she found out that she was pregnant. [...] And she decided that she wanted to be a hands-on mom. [...] Not like some of these broads who, you know, have three kids and a full time job in Manhattan and they're never home so their kids are raised by some Nicaraguan nanny. My wife fed and bathed and clothed those kids. Taught them how to act. [...] It's pretty much the most important job on the planet. And I think my wife has done it better than most."
>
> Laura: "Do you ever tell her that?"[160]

Tommy exposes clearly here what he values in a woman, what he considers empowerment, and that what Laura sees as empowerment, he views negatively. He also makes it a point to note that it was his wife's choice to be a mother and that he considers that to be the right choice. In reality, however, the choice to become a mother has made Janet financially dependent on Tommy. While a free and autonomous choice to be a mother *can* be empowering, in the social context of working class American life it often turns out not to be.

Laura functions as a more explicit challenge to the firemens' misogynistic views. Her arrival is foreshadowed in the first episode when another female intruder, psychotherapist Dr. Goldberg, asks Tommy whether he feels threatened by women. Her attempts to engage with the firemen come across as quite ham-fisted, which sets up the firemen to be rightfully dismissive of her. She observes that Tommy does not seem to think women can be firefighters, which (as in the example above) set Tommy up for a righteous monologue:

> Tommy: "I'll tell you what. It's not about being a man or a woman, okay. It's about doing the job. It's about me getting home safe and sound in the morning, to see my kids. Okay? So, you got a woman who can do the job better than the guys in my crew, bring her on, you know. You got a Martian, or a cyborg, or a Chinaman that can do the job, bring them on too."

[160] "Sanctuary."

Dr. Goldberg: "Are there any Chinese firefighters?"

Tommy: "Yeah, probably. Somewhere in… China."[161]

Leary, throughout the show, gives Tommy monologues that function as the "last word" of the conversation, likely intending that to be the most correct interpretation. In this example, Tommy counters Dr. Goldberg's implied claim of misogyny by stating that, on average, women are less capable of doing the job and that he would be completely willing to welcome a capable woman to his crew. In the episode where a female firefighter finally joins the crew, however, this does not appear to be true. The entire crew immediately agrees to "freeze out" and otherwise haze or bully the newcomer (Laura) with the intent of chasing her away. Tommy is fully on board with this idea.[162] Suddenly, the crew comes up with more arguments that a female firefighter is a bad idea, expressing discomfort with having that intrusion in a male space. Laura eventually manages to eke out a spot for herself, but only after she proves that she is up to the task (while enduring the crew's bullying). The way she proves herself, though, is not through doing the job that the men consider firefighting, but by using her (feminine) empathy to calm down a large man who is attacking the crew. So even though *Rescue Me* shows Laura's capability, it still does so by emphasizing her complementary feminine qualities rather than her ability to do the physical labor.

The portrayal of Ladder Company 62's response to this female intrusion is reflected in studies on the lack of women in the firefighting profession. Shelley Pacholock, for instance, interviewed firefighters about this subject, who nearly all saw a clear correlation between masculine qualities and the qualities that make a good firefighter.[163] She also points out that there are firefighters who, after passing the physical fitness test, do not maintain their fitness but are not considered worse firefighters for it. Some interviewees describe the benefits of being a smaller man, to be able to fit where others wouldn't. As such, the assumption that women would be physically

[161] "Guts."
[162] "Alarm," *Rescue Me* (FX, September 15, 2004).
[163] Pacholok, *Into the Fire*, 38.

unable to do the job cannot be correct.[164] *Rescue Me* also shows firefighters who are overweight and would probably not pass the fitness test. Rather than putting Laura in a position to benefit from her form, though, she is only socially rewarded for her work when she uses her "feminine" qualities.

The rest of the firemen, in their heterosexual performativity, mostly talk about or refer to women in the context of sexual conquest. They are very open in discussing when, how, and with whom they had intercourse and do not even shy away from giving each other tips to improve their performance. There is one group of women, however, which is off limits to this language and this behavior: widows. Even though the only widow that features prominently in the show is Tommy's love interest Sheila, characters constantly refer to "the widows" as an off-screen group of women. Draper and Lotz state that there are very few homosexual characters for the firemen to engage with, yet the "specter" of homosexuality hangs over the characters.[165] So too does the "specter" of the widows as a culturally and politically important group hang over the characters, and in particular Tommy. The firemen's protectiveness of these widows show their awareness of the immorality of their objectifying behavior, as such behavior is strictly prohibited and policed when it comes to these widows. When the crew finds out that Tommy has been having intercourse with Sheila, they punish him for it physically.[166]

The idea that Tommy's affair with Sheila deserves punishment is never challenged or addressed. As these widows represent a kind of innocence and victimhood to be protected, this shows a much deeper rooted misogyny present in the characters, but also in the writers of the show. The firemen see the widows as their deceased husbands' properties. Any sexual contact with them, especially by a firefighter, would be a separate claim of ownership over that woman; the deceased husband is of course unable to defend his "property," which makes Tommy's actions so inexcusable. What Sheila wants, or why she might choose to pursue a relationship with Tommy, is hardly explored. There is only one moment, where Tommy explains to a family member that he and

[164] Pacholok, *Into the Fire*, 42.
[165] Draper and Lotz, "Working Through," 527.
[166] "Sanctuary."

Sheila understand each other really well, that seems to touch on the idea that Sheila and Tommy's relationship is a healthy choice made by two consenting, autonomous people.[167]

Rescue Me is quite a bit kinder and more open to challenge when addressing ideas of homophobia than misogyny. Characters face harsher punishment through social situations when they retain their conservative mindset concerning homosexuality than the place of women in firehouses. There, it is up to Laura to do the work which establishes her place in the firehouse. Laura is one of the only women who is granted a chance to express her perspective on the gendered norms of the firehouse; she is the only woman positioned to negotiate gender in the series. While the show, then, provides a space for the ideological working through of these men's homophobic and misogynystic attitudes, it fails to provide that same space for most of its female characters, who are often relegated to the position of objects that play a part in the "working through" of the main male characters. Even though discussions between firemen can be seen as the show's attempt to show these characters "working through" their homophobia and misogyny, the show never treats outsider perspectives as valuable. Whenever a challenge goes too far, Leary inserts a monologue for his character Tommy that serves to quell that challenge. In the first season at least, *Rescue Me*, despite showing some positive shifts in harmful ways of thinking, ultimately seems to settle on the idea that the ways in which masculinity is portrayed by the characters, is at worst part of the job we should simply accept, and at best honorable behavior.

3.7 Portrayal of Trauma

Besides working through homophobia and misogyny, *Rescue Me* often stands out in its portrayal of (mentally) damaged men working through severe trauma. Even though this "working through" trauma is of course very different, the characters are constantly confronted by a need to challenge their ideas of masculinity before they can work through their trauma from 9/11. Again, Leary uses Tommy as the main vehicle for exploring trauma related to 9/11. While many of the firemen on the

[167] "Sanctuary."

show had been there, Tommy is seen to be struggling the most, especially through his connection to his deceased best friend and cousin Jimmy.

The very first scene of the series shows Tommy in a bathroom when smoke starts coming out of the toilet and filling up the room. As he tries to escape, he finds that the door is locked after which he screams for help before waking up from this nightmare. This narrative device where the viewer is placed into a position of uncertainty concerning Tommy's perspective is used throughout the show, in the form of recurring dreams and nightmares. There is one episode in which Tommy believes a girl trapped under the rubble to be alive, only to find out after pulling her out that she had died on impact and that he had been having a conversation with a dead girl.[168] The most common effect of Tommy's trauma is his hallucination of Jimmy and frequent conversations with that hallucination. Even though he is aware that it is a hallucination, he often treats that Jimmy as a separate, real person. In addition, he also suffers from flashbacks, which show the viewer an (often unreliable) version of Tommy's experience during 9/11. The specific symptom of hallucinating about people who died is not listed under the diagnostic criteria of PTSD in the DSM-5.[169] However, it is a useful narrative device Leary can use to show the trauma Tommy carries with him. Besides these symptoms, Tommy is constantly shown drinking alcohol and throughout the first season he engages in increasingly risky behavior while on the job.

In the final moments of the first episode, after Tommy's confrontation with Dr. Goldberg, we see three firemen separately trying to come to terms with their trauma.[170] Franco, at the same time, simply takes his anger out on a punching bag. Lou is seen writing poetry on his home computer, which is a storyline that returns in the first episodes of the season. Finally, Tommy drives to the beach in an aggravated state while consuming a bottle of hard liquor. As he walks off the beach to go home, he is followed by the ghosts of Jimmy, three other firefighters, a little boy that

[168] "Revenge," *Rescue Me* (FX, August 25, 2004).
[169] U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, "A Treatment Improvement Protocol: Trauma-Informed Care in Behavioral Health Services," 2014, https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/books/NBK207191/box/part1_ch3.box16/.
[170] "Guts."

died after Tommy had carried him down, and a little girl who he also had not managed to save despite saving her kitten. It is Tommy and Lou that, in the first season, are shown to be attempting to deal with their trauma.

3.8 Dealing with Trauma

There are some similarities in Tommy and Lou's approaches. They are both secretive about their trauma and their attempts to cope or heal. Tommy hides his alcoholism from the rest of the crew, even though he carries a flask with him from which he drinks before going into burning buildings. Lou is attempting to express his feelings through his poetry, but does not want to share them with anyone at first. Even though the crew is shown to be a typical FDNY 'brotherhood', where the men speak about their problems and help each other out with them, they never delve into the emotional aspects of their issues. Tommy frequently uses city connections to help his coworkers when they are in a pinch, but is, for instance, unable to connect to Lou in the first episode. When Franko tells Tommy that he had heard a rumor that Lou is writing poetry, Tommy tries to talk to Lou:

> Tommy: "Hey, how you doing?"
>
> Lou: "I'm fine."
>
> Tommy: "Yea?"
>
> Lou: "Yea."
>
> Tommy: "You okay?"
>
> Lou: "Yea. I'm fine. Why you asking?"
>
> Tommy: "I was just asking."
>
> Lou: "Then why are you busting my balls?"[171]

This attempt displays clearly how Tommy is not unwilling to help, even on an emotional level if necessary, but he is simply incapable. Lou, on the other hand, is unaware that that is what is

[171] "Guts."

happening, but likely would not be open to it if he were. Tommy's reasons for hiding his alcoholism are also practical; they could endanger his job and his access to his children in the event of a divorce. Lou's reasons for keeping quiet, however, have everything to do with maintaining his masculinity in the firehouse. Tommy is incredulous when he hears that Lou had been writing poetry, because it does not fit with the image he has of Lou. Lou only presents his masculine side to the firehouse, meaning that these men, despite (or perhaps because of) their brotherhood, can never fully know each other.

Another similarity in their stories is what happens when they seek help outside of the environment of the firehouse. The Chief suggests to Tommy that he speak to Health Services, under the guise of getting two weeks off of work due to a burnout. In reality, the Chief is concerned because the firemen had told him Tommy was seen having a conversation with a dead girl.[172] Even the Chief cannot show his real concern for his friend, but Tommy goes on his way to the FDNY's psychotherapist. This psychotherapist, however, is only interested in offering him medicine. When the doctor does so, the following conversation occurs:

> Tommy: "That's it?"
>
> Doctor: "You wanna talk or something?"
>
> Doctor: "You're not seeing dead people, are you?"
>
> Tommy: "No."
>
> Doctor: "Cause word's gotten out that when you're seeing dead people you get two weeks free."

The doctor is not really interested in Tommy's actual issues and is shown to be skeptical of anyone seeking his help. Even though the FDNY is insistent on their firefighters finding mental health support, for instance by sending Dr. Goldberg or through other offerings during the show, when Tommy actually reaches out he is immediately dismissed out of hand. His actual condition, which

[172] "Revenge."

he hides from the doctor, is even ridiculed. In this same episode, Tommy later turns to his neighbor, who he also finds out is a psychotherapist and who advises him not to take the medicine together with alcohol, and provides him with some other advice as well. Even though Tommy tries to follow that advice, he eventually reverts back to dealing with his issues by being angry at them and engaging in vandalism.[173]

While Lou does not have such anger issues, he is looking for a place to share his poems and feelings about 9/11. He does not engage in the same destructive actions that Tommy engages in, but his poems definitely touch on traumatic experiences. When the Chief tells the firemen that there is a 9/11 PTSD support group, Lou openly ridicules that idea but later calls the number in secret. As he is speaking to the leader of the support group, he hangs up as soon as a coworker approaches. The first one he eventually shares his poems with is his wife, who responds negatively and harshly criticizes his written work. Eventually, though, he finds the courage to join the support group. When he reads his poems there, the reaction of the group is extremely emotional; they cry with him over his words. At that point, Lou asks the group members about their experiences on 9/11, which leads to them revealing that none of them were close to the events or had any family members that died, with one participant sharing that he has "a cousin whose neighbor had a friend who knew someone who died."[174] Lou is enraged, feeling that the group is using 9/11 to avoid the problems in their lives instead of dealing with them. The writers of the show are obviously nodding to the post-9/11 sentiment of national trauma, which included many people who had not personally witnessed the attack being diagnosed with or self-diagnosed with PTSD.[175] This also reflects Harari's insight (discussed in chapter 1) into the way war veterans treat outsiders as people who cannot understand.

Both Tommy and Lou, separately and distinctly, attempt to make use of help that is offered, but find that it is lacking in every way. As Caruth stated in her work on trauma theory, the

[173] "Revenge."
[174] "Revenge."
[175] "Twenty Years after 9/11, What Have We Learned about Collective Trauma? with Roxane Cohen Silver, PhD," *Speaking of Psychology* (American Psychological Association, September 2021).

traumatic event is one without a witness. Tommy and Lou are portrayed as traumatized men who are looking for those witnesses, but are unable to find them. In that sense, *Rescue Me* is giving its audience exactly what it asked for. As the dust settled after 9/11 and the media started publishing scandal pieces on firefighters, the public fed on their downfall. *Rescue Me* is an honest attempt to explore the aftermath of that objectification without pulling any punches.

3.9 Press

The final season of the show, season seven, shows marked differences but also a marked similarity with the first season. On the one hand, the characters have come to accept one of their fellow firefighters as bisexual, even though they still use pejorative terms to refer to homosexuals. Within their circle, the men are more free to be who they want, yet, this same "working through" that is so apparent in the context of homophobia is lacking in the context of misogyny: the second episode, "Menses," revolves around the plotline that Tommy is living with four women whose menstrual cycles have overlapped and he has to constantly give in to their irrationality.[176]

Another marked difference is that this season addresses the issues the FDNY has had with being 'in the spotlight' after 9/11 far more directly. This occurs mostly in a new storyline that spans half the season; a camera crew is interviewing the members of Ladder Company 62 in order to create a memorial documentary featuring Jimmy. As in the first season, Tommy is immediately distrustful of these outsiders and Leary writes the story in such a way that this distrust foreshadows future issues or betrayal. In the second episode, Tommy asks whose idea it was to put Jimmy in the documentary, to which his coworkers simply reply: "HQ signed off on it."[177] It becomes immediately apparent that both Leary and Tommy find this kind of journalism exploitative and the scene conveys the idea that the public treats the FDNY as something to judge. When Tommy becomes aggressive in response to the media crew's presence, the cameraman says they should get

[176] "Menses," *Rescue Me* (FX, July 20, 2011).
[177] "Menses."

that on tape, which, of course, enrages Tommy further. Then, in the opening scene of the third episode, Tommy daydreams about driving his car into a "9/11 10th anniversary" pop-up shop and setting it on fire. These scenes clearly establish Tommy's (and by extension Leary's) opinion that the public mostly has a perverse interest in 9/11. The pop-up shop's elements, such as a cardboard cutout of one of the towers with the words "where were YOU," correspond clearly to Sturken's description of the "kitsch" objects that were produced after 9/11.[178] The show even directly addresses this by having Tommy ask: "who owns Jimmy's memory?" without giving a clear answer.[179]

Eventually, however, Tommy agrees to do an interview. The opening scene of episode four shows just how horribly that interview went. While at first the interviewer, Pam, asks questions directly related to Jimmy, she ventures into territory that makes Tommy uncomfortable so that she can get a reaction out of him. This is where the show starts to directly address the downfall of the FDNY in the media circus that followed 9/11. The interview goes as follows:

> Pam: "After America and the world finally came to see firefighters, and NYC Firefighters in particular, as heroic, shining figures who leap to help complete strangers in a time of need. How do you feel about the attention?
>
> Tommy: "We appreciate it but we just want to do our job like we did that day. We don't need a spotlight."
>
> Pam: "There's been a lot of controversy since 9/11 involving the FDNY; alcohol and drug abuse, allegations of racism in the department's hiring practices, allegations of sexism. That the department is nothing but a big boy's club run amok."
>
> [Tommy here attempts to fight back against the allegation of racism but comes off as erratic, before he storms off while flipping off Pam and the camera.]
>
> Pam then says, in a shot of her walking along the firefighters' memorial: "So, it seems the pain of 9/11 still runs deep. Perhaps it's men like firefighter Thomas Gavin who need more than ever the psychological help many men in the department refuse to seek."[180]

[178] Sturken, *Tourists of History*, 7.
[179] "Menses."
[180] "Brownies," *Rescue Me* (FX, August 3, 2011).

This interview is clearly representative of the way many FDNY firefighters felt the media intruded far too deeply into their lives after 9/11. Pam directly brings up the criticisms leveled against the firefighters, but these criticisms are only brought up this directly in season seven, when the show has had ample time to address these issues. For instance, Pam brings up the fact that many firefighters refuse psychological help, but the show has long since established that the help being referred to was never particularly helpful. This again serves to reinforce the idea that outsiders at best do not understand and cannot help and at worst exploit the situation for their own benefit.

The interview immediately causes problems for Tommy and the crew. In particular, Pam is looking to do a follow-up story about Tommy's relationship with Jimmy's widow due to the scandalous nature of that affair. When the Chief requests that Tommy try to stop that investigation, he says: "She's gonna name all the other firefighters that are sleeping with the widows. Look, me and you know it's about emotional bonding and shared grief, but to these people? This is tawdry sex and headlines, my friend. It's chum in the water."[181] This is a constant through the show. The insiders on the fire crew often show glimpses of deep understanding of their own predicament. However, they operate under the assumption that outsiders cannot understand this matter. When the characters do try to go to outsiders for help, it usually leads to more trouble. When outsiders try to come in, it is usually exploitative. In the first chapter of this thesis, Harari's claim about veterans of war is introduced; that their experience meant that outsiders could not understand. In the second chapter, the investigation of *American Ground* gave strength to Goren's claim that the public backlash against the FDNY caused the firemen to be stuck in "psychological and social containment."[182] *Rescue Me* shows a clear awareness of these aspects of trauma and masculinity.

What Leary shows, perhaps unintentionally, is that the firemen's adherence to strict standards of masculinity causes them to participate in their own 'psychological and social containment'. Within the narrative of *Rescue Me*, firemen participate in their own objectification

[181] "Head," *Rescue Me* (FX, August 10, 2011).
[182] Goren, "Society's Use," 44.

and an escape from this is not shown to be a possibility. The final episode of the series calls back to the first episode. In the final scene, Tommy introduces probies to their new job before sitting in his firetruck and talking to the ghost of Lou, who had perished in a fire the previous episode. The ghost of Jimmy has been replaced by the ghost of Lou. For Tommy, who represents the FDNY in this sense, there is no resolution to his trauma.

3.10 Conclusion

In *Rescue Me*, Leary created a show that ultimately invites empathy for the FDNY. As an author, he is positioned much closer to the FDNY than Langewiesche was. While the Naudet brothers also lived closely with the FDNY for a time, Leary has shown a lifelong commitment to firefighting in his work and personal life. As such, Leary has much more of an insider's view into the FDNY, but he still cannot claim to speak for them. For Leary too, we must look at his own agenda and the ways in which *Rescue Me* gives voice to that agenda. While a major part of that agenda is that call for empathy, there are some other elements to it.

First, the show uses the macho environment of the firehouse as a source for comedy and conflict for its main characters, which serves to reassure the viewer that this masculinity is mostly ridiculous and ultimately harmless. This connects to the second idea that becomes clear throughout the show, namely that the FDNY is and *should be* a closed culture with a high barrier of entry. Any intrusions that fall too far outside of the firehouse's norms ultimately fail. This is quite contradictory to the idea that the firehouse's masculinity is harmless, since it does result (both in the show and in reality) in discriminatory practices. Finally, this distrust of outsiders extends to anyone who seeks a brief connection to the firehouse, either in the form of (psychological) help or media interest. By portraying this masculinity as ridiculous-but-harmless and showing the eternity of trauma in the final episode, the show speaks too much for the dominant culture in the firehouse and does not give space to marginalized voices within that culture. The only exception to this is Mike, the bisexual

firefighter. So even though *Rescue Me* is far more empathetic, the way it witnesses the trauma and other effects of 9/11 does reinforce the traditional notions of masculinity that it ridicules. In fiction, *Rescue Me* is as close as we have to a narrative that treats the FDNY as subjects rather than objects, but in so doing does not create a space for disparate voices. Further, while the show (rightfully) criticizes the public's attitude towards the FDNY, it fails to provide a real challenge to the overarching cultural and political issues. The overtly political is where Leary drew the line, leaving that to be said by the actual members of the FDNY.

Conclusion

Through the use of three different case studies which used broadly distinct forms of media and contained broadly distinct narratives, this thesis has attempted to answer the question: How did these first 9/11 narratives reconcile the concept of the traditional male hero with the trauma suffered by these heroes? Did the focus of these narratives shift over time, as the traumatic effects of 9/11 became manifest?

Through this study, three separate narratives can be defined. There is not one moment which can be identified at which one narrative superseded the other in the American public discourse, but it is clear that there are slow shifts in dominance of one over the other. The first and clearly most well-known narrative is that of the firefighters as the masculine heroes that defied the enemy on 9/11. In that narrative, masculinity is clearly a prerequisite for heroism. This masculinity is most strongly defined through stoic attitudes in the face of danger, which preclude the possibility that masculinity can be defined in ways which allow an openness about trauma and the expression of emotions. At the same time, being cast as invulnerable heroes through such a narrative functioned to exacerbate the effects of their trauma.

The second narrative, in this study represented by Langewiesche, took that same stoicism, but positioned a different kind of male hero as hegemonic: the engineer. By adding pragmatism and intellect to that stoicism, Langewiesche's heroes were much further removed from the victimhood that defined the members of the FDNY. In replacing these firemen as heroes, Langewiesche's narrative allowed space to criticize them as well. Langewiesche's narrative places the firemen next to their widows in their feminine prioritization of emotion and irrationality. Trauma or grief, then, are things not to be given any space. Langewiesche's story is not the only criticism levied at the FDNY, nor was it the harshest, but this case study shows a commonality in those criticisms; a disregard for the effects of trauma caused by 9/11 on the first responders. Placing firefighters in a narrative as people who failed to live up to their heroic ideal, is just as objectifying

as casting them as heroes in the first place. Just like the first narrative, this gendered narrative precludes the possibility of dealing with trauma rather than ignoring it.

The third narrative, in this study represented by *Rescue Me*, is a narrative that attempts to give agency to firefighters; it positions them as subjects rather than objects in the story. This invites the viewer to empathize and allows for an exploration of the effects of trauma, but *Rescue Me* is still ultimately an outsider's perspective. This third narrative is almost a return to a comfortable interpretation of masculinity. Leary uses that masculinity as comedic fodder, but rarely challenges its implications or effects. The narrative then serves to reassure the audience that the traditional masculine behavior displayed by its protagonists is somewhat ridiculous, but mostly harmless. Because the show concludes by circling back to the beginning, it implies a hopelessness about the firemen's situation. However, this hopelessness is the result of Leary not challenging the masculine behavior and culture of its characters; it sets them up to fail. In this narrative, trauma is something that cannot be resolved. Because it focuses on empathy, it places the masculine firemen as the victim of circumstance. This, just like the other two narratives, ultimately denies firemen their agency.

The honest approach taken by *Rescue Me* is far more rare than the previous two approaches. As such, this narrative has never had dominance over the other two. It comes closest to an approach that corresponds to Caruth and Laub's ideas on trauma; that a traumatic event requires a witness. But *Rescue Me* cannot position itself as an impartial witness because it is still telling other people's story. As Griffiths shows, the authors of these narratives - as witnesses - insert their own beliefs and agenda on the narrative. Despite Leary's best efforts and his respectful approach to the subject matter, he still inserted his own agenda onto the show. The narrative he created probably corresponds to what many firemen felt, but it did not give any real space to disparate or marginalized voices. While the first two narratives are far more exploitative of the FDNY, all three ultimately fail to give their protagonists real agency.

This study has focused solely on the more immediate aftermath of 9/11 and the competing narratives that arose from Ground Zero. By viewing these narratives through the lens of masculinity and trauma theory, it becomes clear, firstly, that the expectations associated with traditional masculinity do create a barrier to productive ways of dealing with trauma. Secondly, it becomes clear that the narratives created in the direct aftermath of 9/11 have either exacerbated those issues or failed to challenge them. Trauma theory indicates that one of the most important elements of working through trauma is that the survivor tells their own story. This element is completely absent in the first two narratives and not sufficiently present in the third.

In the last decade, however, more stories have sprung up about the FDNY and their physical and mental trauma related to *9/11*. Some of these are produced and told by firefighters themselves. It would be very interesting to do a further study on this "fourth" narrative to see if the action of telling their own story helps these firefighters heal from their trauma. In 2021, for instance, the documentary was published, which details the health struggles members of the FDNY have faced since 9/11.[183] Many others have, over the last decade, worked to create spaces where firemen can tell their own stories about 9/11, including some celebrities such as Steve Buscemi and Jon Stewart.[184] These narratives do what the three narratives described here do not, or do not do sufficiently: they challenge government dysfunction and provide a platform for survivors themselves to tell their story. A further study into the potential healing effects of that narrative on trauma would be extremely useful. Such studies have already been done in the context of PTSD in veterans, such as "Competing Narratives: Heroes and PTSD Stories Told by Male Veterans Returning Home," by Adam Gregory Woolf and "A Pilot Examination of the Use of Narrative Therapy With Individuals Diagnosed With PTSD," by Christopher R. Erbes, et al. Studying those effects of narratives in the context of the FDNY could be a step towards creating a public understanding of witnessing in American society that gives survivors of trauma what they need.

[183] *Dust: The Lingering Legacy of 9/11* (Olive Productions, 2021).
[184] Steve Buscemi, "Steve Buscemi: Everyone Said 'Never Forget' 9/11. Some Have No Choice," Time, September 9, 2021, https://time.com/6095709/steve-buscemi-9-11-firefighter/.

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