

AHU TANRISEVER, *Fathers, Warriors, and Vigilantes: Post-Heroism and the US Cultural Imaginary in the Twenty-First Century*, European Views of the United States, Vol. 10 (Heidelberg: Winter, 2016), 273 pp.

Research on heroic figures has shown that those who are deemed heroes act as symbols of contemporary values and ideals of the particular society and culture in which they are created. Studying heroes hence offers an opportunity to learn about what kind of identities are deemed worthy and valuable in a specific society at a specific point in time. After the planes had crashed into the Twin Towers and the Pentagon on September 11th, 2001, for instance, figures who embodied notions of traditional masculinity, such as the New York firefighters, were widely hailed as heroes and role models. This celebration of traditional masculinity is only one example that has led many critics to agree that in the aftermath of the attacks, a reactionary gender discourse emerged which lauded traditionally masculine heroes and supported white male hegemony.

With *Fathers, Warriors, and Vigilantes*, Ahu Tanrisever wants to disrupt what she perceives as an academic “master narrative” (6) by offering alternative readings of texts that feature masculine heroes and thus, at a first glance, seem to support the view that in the aftermath of 9/11, U.S. culture and society returned to more traditional gender roles and norms and celebrated white, heterosexual, middle-class masculinity and power as heroic. By looking at a variety of popular sources that feature allegedly conservative male protagonists, namely fathers, warriors/soldiers, and vigilantes, Tanrisever aims to demonstrate that even though they perpetuate hegemonic masculinity to varying degrees, certain elements of these texts also have the potential to disrupt reactionary discourses and challenge, or at times even subvert, traditional notions of gender, race, and class. The texts chosen for the study can be considered popular as they have enjoyed commercial success and/or received critical acclaim and thus have, according to Tanrisever, “become part and parcel of conceiving U.S. heroism in the twenty-first century” (7). In this context, Tanrisever establishes a new definition of the concept of post-heroism. Drawing on Ramón Saldívar’s conception of the term *postrace*, she maintains that instead of highlighting that heroism is over or irrelevant, the prefix ‘-post’ rather

encompasses a heightened interest in conceptions of heroism, increased self-reflexivity, as well as an awareness of the constructedness of heroes and their ideological functions (12).

In the first part of her analysis, entitled “Maimed Fathers,” Tanrisever focuses on the post-/apocalyptic novel *The Road* (2006) by Cormac McCarthy and *3:10 to Yuma* (2007), the movie adaptation of a 1953 short story with the same title, as well as said story’s first filmic adaptation from 1957. In addition to offering in-depth analyses of the two primary texts, as well as of the movie adaptation in the case of *The Road*, and the literary and filmic predecessors of *3:10 to Yuma*, she mentions a variety of additional father figures who are both powerful and sick, such as those featured in the TV-shows *Breaking Bad* or *The Sopranos*. This chapter hence not only highlights “overall tendencies in the late-capitalist U.S. cultural landscape to center stage the figure of the father” (41), but also argues that these characters embody an inherent criticism of the patriarchal system as all of these paternal figures are terminally ill or permanently injured and ultimately doomed to die. Maimed fathers hence move between the conservative and progressive poles of being powerful patriarchs on the one hand, and symbols of the deterioration of the patriarchal system on the other.

Factual and fictional war narratives of combat soldiers deployed in the Iraq War are analyzed in the second part of the book, “Corporeate Warriors.” Through the blending of the adjectives ‘corporeal’ and ‘corporate’ into the neologism “corporeate,” two innovative aspects of soldierly life and war narratives in the new millennium are stressed. First of all, a former taboo, that is the soldiers’ bodies, their injuries, and even deaths, are made a topic in these narratives. Secondly, war is shown to have become a site of business and economic interest, both for soldiers themselves as well as for the nations who send them to fight. While during the aftermath of 9/11 a large number of war narratives emerged, Tanrisever makes out a common thread that binds these numerous narratives together, namely their stress on authenticity. Authenticity is achieved here by means of individual eye-witness accounts of soldiers who tell their own stories about how they experienced war. Often, these accounts are “cynical, critical of U.S. war efforts, and revisionist in their play with genre conventions” (109).

Both *My War: Killing Time in Iraq* (2005) and *Generation Kill* (2008-2013), the two texts on which this chapter focuses, are based on accounts of men who personally experienced the war in Iraq. While *My War* is a blog turned war memoir written by soldier Colby Buzzell, the HBO miniseries *Generation Kill* is based on a book written by journalist Evan Wright, who accompanied U.S. troops during the first five weeks of the war in Iraq. Even though these texts can be regarded as perpetuating hegemonic masculinity and male power and agency, as they are written by and almost exclusively deal with white, heterosexual, violent men, the alternative readings by Tanrisever deduce that these stories can be seen as complex and progressive. According to her, in these post-heroic texts, the topics of sexism, racism, and homophobia are dealt with in a self-reflexive manner which sheds light on the fact that hegemonic masculinity is performed and thus unstable. While the protagonists refer to and heavily rely on the notion of the mythical warrior and a warrior-ethos, their narratives simultaneously deconstruct this myth.

In the third part of her analysis, Tanrisever turns to a recent phenomenon in popular culture, and that is the focus on aging male leads in adventure and action movies. In a similar fashion to the maimed fathers discussed before, the aging vigilantes' heroism is threatened as they walk a fine line between adhering to the role of the powerful patriarch and being vulnerable and lacking in physical prowess due to their advanced age. While the two movies that serve as the main examples in this chapter, *Gran Torino* (2008) and *True Grit* (2010), employ the same means to tell their respective stories—they draw on genre conventions, intertextuality, and the star personae of Clint Eastwood and Jeff Bridges, the actors who play the respective lead roles—the resulting representations of male heroism differ to a large degree. Even though *Gran Torino* initially depicts white masculinity as a marginalized identity category, it ultimately presents it “as the desirable norm, which grants access to financial security, a vocation, mobility, and heterosexual bliss” (208). Hence, in contrast to the other texts analyzed by Tanrisever, the movie clearly perpetuates the idealization of white male hegemony. *True Grit*, on the other

hand, destabilizes ideas of white male heroism more thoroughly and is thus labeled a ‘deconstructionist Western’ by Tanrisever (227). Directed by the Coen Brothers, the movie calls into question both the myth of the frontier, as well as the notion of masculine heroism often found in Western movies.

All in all, *Fathers, Warriors, and Vigilantes* accomplishes the major tasks it sets out to tackle in the introduction. Tanrisever's work disrupts the discourse of the 9/11 backlash on gender roles and norms, maintaining that instead of reaffirming notions of traditional masculinity, the cultural artifacts she analyzes rather highlight the complexity and ambiguity of negotiations of masculinity in the U.S. after 9/11. In this context, it is especially the analysis of the aesthetic/visual elements of the primary texts that add a fascinating dimension to the interpretation. However, while the ailments, vulnerabilities, and insecurities of the male protagonists are read as metaphors for the decline of white male hegemony and patriarchal systems, it could also be argued that these very obstacles only highlight the heroic status of the respective characters even more.

Secondly, the choice of primary texts, the majority of which have literary and/or filmic predecessors that date back to the twentieth-century, allow Tanrisever to trace both continuities as well as changes when it comes to discourses not only about gender, but also race and class. Tanrisever hence joins the chorus of those who do not see 9/11 as a watershed moment, as her comparative readings clearly demonstrate that certain ideas, motifs, and themes have permeated U.S. culture for decades. Even though it certainly makes sense to mention and analyze these sources, the analysis of said texts could, at times, have been more concise in order to give more room to the adaptations published after 9/11, as these are, after all, the main point of interest of the book. Nevertheless, Tanrisever's work is a valuable addition to the body of research on heroism and gender in the aftermath of 9/11, as it offers interesting and, more importantly, innovative readings of the well-known and often-discussed primary texts with which it engages.

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