The Exceptionalist Optics of 9/11 Photography

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During and after the 2001 attacks on New York City and Washington, thousands of photographs were taken. None, however, would become as iconic as Thomas Franklin's photo of three firefighters raising an American flag above the rubble of the World Trade Center. Franklin's photo, I argue in this essay, casts 9/11 in the familiar myth of American exceptionalism, screening out but still gesturing to the heterogeneous memories left unsettled and animate in amateur photographs, missing-person posters, bodies in pain, and performance. In considering the struggle over the visual memory of the attacks, I first consider how, in the wake of 9/11, the discourse of exceptionalism served to disavow the exceptions historically taken by the state and to rationalize the War on Terror. I show how this system of myths works in dialectical relation to other disruptive forms of cultural memory. I then read Franklin's iconic photograph as a screen by which traumatic memories are masked and onto which nationalist desires are projected. Finally, I analyze 9/11 photography that troubles the exceptionalist optics of Franklin's photo by evoking the visual legacy of the Vietnam War and so challenging the logic of righteous warfare.

The enlargement of a snapshot does not simply render more precise what in any case was visible, though unclear; it reveals entirely new structural formations of the subject ... The camera introduces us to unconscious optics as does psychoanalysis to unconscious impulses.

Walter Benjamin[1]

Viewed live by millions around the world, the coordinated 2001 attacks on New York City and Washington marked the largest media event of the new century. Television footage of the burning towers ran around the clock, as every news cycle for a month was committed to rewatching and scrutinizing the details of that day. This "intensely mediatized seeing," as Diana Taylor wrote in 2003, created an environment in which the more Americans were shown, the less they knew about the state's retaliatory military agenda.[2] While 9/11 may be best remembered by the video coverage of black smoke billowing from the towers, uncannily contrasted against a clear blue sky,

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[1] Walter Benjamin, "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction," in Benjamin, *Illuminations: Essays and Reflections*, trans. Harry Zohn (New York: Schocken, 1968), 217–42, 236–37.
[2] Diana Taylor, *The Archive and the Repertoire: Performing Cultural Memory in the Americas* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2003), 244.

George W. Bush authorized a different visual rendering of the destroyed towers. That fall, he hand-selected Thomas Franklin's already iconic photograph of three firefighters raising an American flag above the rubble of the World Trade Center as the commemorative icon to be used by the Postal Service in honoring the victims of the attacks. Living Americans had, as a rule, never before been so featured by the government agency, and Bush's desired tribute necessitated an Act of Congress to carry out.[3]

Considering the many thousands of photographs taken on and after 11 September 2001, what distinguished Franklin's photo and allowed it to circulate as iconic? Why did the Bush administration select it as the state-sanctioned image of 9/11? More generally, in times of crisis, what is it about the photographic medium that lends it to iconicity? In his famous pronouncement on the political potential of reproducible art, Walter Benjamin suggests that photography offers insight into the basic configuration of its subject by denaturalizing the visual field and enabling new, radical ways of seeing. "The camera," he writes, "introduces us to unconscious optics as does psychoanalysis to unconscious impulses."[4] But one might also approach Benjamin's formulation from the opposite direction and interrogate the "unconscious optics" one brings to photography. Franklin's photo cast 9/11 in the familiar myth of American exceptionalism, screening out but still gesturing to the heterogeneous memories left unsettled and animate in amateur photographs, missing-person posters, bodies in pain, and performance. In considering the struggle over the visual memory of the attacks, I first consider how, in the wake of 9/11, the discourse of exceptionalism served to disavow the exceptions historically taken by the state and to rationalize the War on Terror. I show how this system of myths works in dialectical relation to other disruptive forms of cultural memory. I then read Franklin's iconic photograph as a screen by which traumatic memories are masked and onto which nationalist desires are projected. Finally, I analyze 9/11 photography that troubles the exceptionalist optics of Franklin's photo by evoking the visual legacy of the Vietnam War and so challenging the logic of righteous warfare.

THE DIALECTIC OF EXCEPTIONALISM AND MEMORY

National myths offer citizens a clear, if one-sided, version of history. They construct a social reality that is founded on the governing belief that time is linear and homogeneous, continuing at a steady rate forever into the future.

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[3] Treasury and General Government Appropriations Act of 2002, Pub. L. No. 107–67, 115 Stat. 514 (2001); Jeffrey Zaslow, "Honoring Heroes of Sept. 11 Stirs a Delicate Debate," *Washington Post*, 5 Sept. 2002, eastern edition.   [4] Benjamin, 237.

Through the mythos of the nation, the state endeavors to linearize traumatic events that may introduce an alternative sense of time, what Jenny Edkins has termed "trauma time." Whereas the state demands that trauma be narratively assimilated within the national imaginary – as a sacred sacrifice, an overcoming, a rallying cry – trauma time is that which surrounds the traumatic real, refusing linearization and restoring the political: "the arena of innovation and revolution, a field of sudden, unexpected and abrupt change, a point at which the status quo is challenged."[5] And while the state is often the agent of traumatic violence, it defines itself as the only defender from and redeemer of trauma, by rewriting it into the sense-making mythos of the nation and then avenging it through further violence. But this traumatic real lingers even in national myths, Edkins stresses: "Trauma time has to be excluded from linearity to be convincing, but it cannot be successfully put to one side: it always intrudes, it cannot be completely forgotten."[6] The social reality of the nation, however carefully constructed, can never entirely erase the traumas that inform it.

Linear time is constructed in the United States through the controlling myth of American exceptionalism. While often traced as far back as John Winthrop's 1630 sermon "A Model of Christian Charity," American exceptionalist discourse was formalized in the years after World War II by a circle of scholars later known as the myth and symbol school of American studies. These mid-century scholars included Henry Nash Smith, R. W. B. Lewis, and Leo Marx, who collectively created an idealized heritage for a nation with newly global military ambitions. The exceptionalist narrative they imagined did not merely situate the United States as a singular ideal within the world – as a nation of nations – but also organized what Donald Pease calls the "psychosocial structures" by which citizens disavow the exceptions taken by the state.[7] These psychosocial structures grant

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[5] Jenny Edkins, *Trauma and the Memory of Politics* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), xiii. Edkins's broader concerns are tied to the work of Giorgio Agamben and his theory of "bare life." Agamben argues that the originary activity of sovereign power is the production of bare life in which the human is doubly excluded: barred from political life and yet included as the biological locus of politics. Bare life is today, he adds, being rendered not only visible but universal, as this biopolitical threshold becomes normalized throughout the world. Edkins introduces trauma time as a way of reclaiming the political in an age of biopower. Giorgio Agamben, *Homo Sacer: Sovereign Power and Bare Life*, trans. Daniel Heller-Roazen (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1998), 28–29, 187–88.   [6] Edkins, 16.

[7] Donald E. Pease, *The New American Exceptionalism* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2009), 32–35. For further reading on the history and theory of American exceptionalism see Ashley Dawson and Malini Johar Schueller, eds., *Exceptional State: Contemporary U.S. Culture and the New Imperialism* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2007); Amy Kaplan, *The Anarchy of Empire in the Making of U.S. Culture* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2005); John Carlos Rowe, *Literary Culture and U.S. Imperialism: From the Revolution to World War II* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000);

Americans the ability to remit the traumatic violences carried out by the state, casting Operation Wetback, the atomic bombing of Hiroshima and Nagasaki, and the Vietnam War as brief divergences from the nation's normal order. They narrativize such traumas, as Edkins would suggest, into the social reality of the nation. Trauma can, however, unsettle this exceptionalist mythmaking, halting the advancement of linear time and calling forth the historical abuses of the state, what Slavoj Žižek refers to the "compulsion to *encircle* again and again" the site of the real.[8] Language acts as an obstacle to the traumatic real, as trauma theorists remind us, because one has no language in which to articulate trauma other than that of the social order from which it originated. Encircling forms a break in language and so a break in the exceptionalist codes of the state. Politicians and policymakers must then linearize trauma in the language of American exceptionalism, a process that alters the myth itself. In the wake of 9/11, for example, Bush assembled the myths of Ground Zero[9] and the Homeland out of and in relation to the preexisting myths of the nation of nations, the virgin land, and the invincible nation. This is a process of narrative renewal in which the threat that trauma represents to the authority of the state necessitates an ongoing process of remaking and amending the myth of American exceptionalism. These malleable structures of disavowal serve to work through trauma and assimilate it into a familiar set of nationalist beliefs and unconscious optics, the trained way of seeing circumscribed by the myths of the nation. These optics form the visual dimension of the exceptionalist structures of disavowal, organizing where and how we look when faced with the visual overload that followed in the wake of the attacks on the World Trade Center and the Pentagon.

And yet the myth of exceptionalism must always conceal the conflicting activity of memory-work in order to contain and subsume dissimilar understandings of a traumatic event. I take this term from James Young, who defines memory-work as the total heterogeneous process of remembering that surrounds a memory-site, "whereby events, their recollection, and the role

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and William V. Spanos, *American Exceptionalism in the Age of Globalization: The Spector of Vietnam* (Albany: SUNY Press, 2008).

[8] Slavoj Žižek, *For They Know Not What They Do: Enjoyment as a Political Factor*, repr. (London: Verso, 2002; first published 1991), 272, original emphasis.

[9] As Kaplan underscores, "Ground Zero" refers to the site of nuclear detonation at the same time that it implies a clean slate. Naming Ground Zero as such suggests that the United States lost its innocence on 11 September 2001 – not during the Native American genocide or the Mexican–American War – and that the attacks represent an incomparable trauma, apart from history. Amy Kaplan, "Homeland Insecurities: Some Reflections on Language and Space," *Radical History Review*, 85 (2003), 82–93, 83.

monuments play in our lives remain animate, never completed . . . by which minds reflecting on the past inevitably precipitate in the present historical moment."[10] Young sees the debates that surround the construction of monuments as a tactic for remembering a tragic loss. But there is also danger in an uncritical belief in the good of debate. The conflicts surrounding the construction of memorials and other objects of cultural memory often take place in the language of the state itself. The state fabricates a problematic – democracy or fundamentalism – that restricts the boundaries of the debate so that the choice being made is in fact not one at all. The state's ability to marshal the "memory of the dead" to military ends has even led Maja Zehfuss to provocatively suggest that we should "forget September 11."[11] This note of caution is well taken, as memory-work is not necessarily antithetical to or even distinct from the national mythos. Rather, they are in constant, dialectical tension with one another. One necessitates and inflects the other. Therefore, amending Young's term, I use memory-work to describe a cultural form that troubles the linearity of American exceptionalism, encircling trauma rather than inscribing meaning to it or rehearsing the routine negotiations of the state.

The iconic photograph is a telling site from which to consider this exceptionalism–memory dialectic. A migrant mother, a kiss in Times Square, a flag-raising on Iwo Jima (and later in Manhattan), a shooting at Kent State, a naked girl running from a napalm attack. Though variably, twentieth-century US history is told through a reel of images. Barbie Zelizer notes that in times of crisis and confusion journalists emphasize photographic representation because it makes room for the imagined and contingent aspects of an episode, what she calls the "as if."[12] It is the "as if" of the photograph that facilitates the recasting of a trauma within the framework of American exceptionalism, making an illegible incident comprehensible and familiar. The iconic photograph thus operates as a screen. It offers a banal object of cultural memory that stands in for and obstructs traumatic memories at the same time that it produces a surface onto which unconscious, nationalist desires

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[10] James E. Young, *The Texture of Memory: Holocaust Memorials and Meaning* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1993), 15.

[11] Zehfuss identifies the danger in too readily embracing memory as a means of challenging the War on Terror. The 9/11 attacks were, she notes, construed as a singular "'uncaused' cause," an event that necessitated a vaguely defined global war and yet was itself without a cause. This has allowed the "memory of the dead" to be used as a rationale for warfare and the vast surveillance of individuals within and beyond the United States. Maja Zehfuss, "Forget September 11," *Third World Quarterly*, 24, 3 (2003), 513–28, 520–21, 525–26.

[12] Barbie Zelizer, *About to Die: How News Images Move the Public* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010), 16–17.

are projected.[13] In Sigmund Freud's original articulation of "screen memories," he notes,

in these periods of arousal … memories did not, as people are accustomed to say, *emerge*; they were *formed* at that time. And a number of motives, with no concern for historical accuracy, had a part in forming them, as well as in the selection of the memories themselves.[14]

The repressed past is not to be found in the content of the screen itself but in adjacent histories. It is a "mnemic image" that superimposes itself onto other memories that are more difficult to represent. Interrogating an iconic photograph as a screen thus offers a critique of the exceptionalist mythos that led to its canonization – the ideological desire projected onto it – and foregrounds the memory-work that it obstructs. The photographic screen is a tool not so much for forgetting but for remembering to forget.

   Penetrating the unconscious optics of the photographic screen necessitates a radical approach to the medium. Since Roland Barthes's original articulation of "the photographic paradox" – that the connotation or "code" of the photograph implies pure denotation[15] – theorists recognize that, despite a neutral façade, photographic images contain ideological content in need of decoding. This interrogation, however, often begins with the assumption that the photograph represents the final product of an encounter, that it is a static document. In contrast, Ariella Azoulay implores us to think not of specific photographic images, but instead of "the event of photography": a scenario "made up of an infinite series of encounters" that encircle and reshape an episode.[16] We are inclined to think of a photograph as the creation of the photographer alone. But the event of photography implicates multiple actors – photographer, subject, and spectator – all of whom participate in the perpetual reconstruction of the photographic event. The result is more than a tangible photograph. The spectator is capable of recognizing the absence of the photograph: the adjacent untaken, lost, or uncirculated photos. "The event of photography," Azoulay contends, "is never over. It can only be suspended, caught in anticipation of the next encounter … that might allow a certain spectator to remark on the excess or lack inscribed in the photograph so as to re-articulate every detail."[17] The screen of the iconic photograph is susceptible to the

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[13] In this definition of screen memories, I build on Marita Sturken's particular adaptation of the Freudian concept. Marita Sturken, *Tangled Memories: The Vietnam War, the Aids Epidemic, and the Politics of Remembering* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1997), 8, 44.

[14] Sigmund Freud, "Screen Memories," in *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud*, Volume III (London: Hogarth, 1962), 301–22, 322, original emphasis.

[15] Roland Barthes, "The Photographic Message," in *Image-Music-Text*, trans. Stephen Heath (New York: Hill and Wang, 1977), 15–31, 19.

[16] Ariella Azoulay, *Civil Imagination: A Political Ontology of Photography*, trans. Louise Bethlehem (London: Verso, 2012), 26.   [17] Ibid., 25.

Figure 1. Three FDNY firefighters raise the American flag at the site of the former World Trade Center. Thomas E. Franklin, *Firefighters Raising Flag*, 2001. Used by permission of and © 2001 by Thomas E. Franklin/NorthJersey.com.

recognition of the spectator, opening it up to memory-work that can unsettle and reshape it. Franklin's iconic photo is just one outcome of the event it represents. Positioning it as part of a larger photographic event complicates and contests its function as a document of American exceptionalism.

EXCEPTIONALIST OPTICS AND THE WAR ON TERROR

On the afternoon of 11 September 2001, Franklin used a telephoto lens to capture three firefighters raising the American flag at the site of the former World Trade Center (see Figure 1). It ran on the front page of Franklin's local paper on 12 September and then proceeded to circulate to publications across the country – including *Newsweek, Life*, and *People Weekly* – and garnered

a Pulitzer Prize nomination.[18] Part of the photo's broad appeal resulted from its apparent reenactment of one of the most recognizable images in the United States: Joe Rosenthal's 1945 photograph of US marines raising a flag on Iwo Jima. Iconic images, Marita Sturken points out, generate a set of codes according to which future incidents are understood.[19] Franklin's photograph became an icon not because it was the most accurate or characteristic photograph but because it was the most familiar. It appropriated a comprehensible code in order to articulate an incomprehensible trauma. The code it appropriated was one of militarism and an exceptionalist prefiguring of Cold War imperialism. The almost instantaneous iconization of Franklin's photo thus speaks to its function as a screen, onto which were projected nationalist desires for retaliation and the simultaneous desire to suppress this "exception" through the exceptionalist optics that attracted Americans to and informed their reading of this iconic photo.[20]

The World War II intertext in Franklin's photograph is not a superficial one. Rather, it gestures to a larger, ideological discourse that traces the genesis of Bush's homeland security state back to the national security state of the Cold War era. In the aftermath of the attacks, Bush constructed a renewed exceptionalist mythos that cast US citizens as protected, rather than represented, against the specter of the terrorist other. In his address to the nation on 20 September 2001, Bush announced, "Every nation in every region now has a decision to make. Either you are with us or you are with the terrorists. … We will take defensive measures against terrorism to protect Americans. … The hour is coming when America will act."[21] Bush's

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[18] For detailed accounts of the circulation and reproduction of Franklin's photograph, see Marita Sturken, *Tourists of History: Memory, Kitsch, and Consumerism from Oklahoma City to Ground Zero* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2007), 188–96; Robert Hariman and John Louis Lucaites, *No Caption Needed: Iconic Photographs, Public Culture, and Liberal Democracy* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2007), 128–36; and David Friend, *Watching the World Change: The Stories behind the Images of 9/11* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2006), 311.   [19] Sturken, *Tourists of History*, 190.

[20] For more thorough analyses of how Franklin's photograph draws on and resituates Rosenthal's, see Marguerite Helmers and Charles A. Hill, introduction to Helmers and Hill, eds., *Defining Visual Rhetorics* (Mahwah, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum, 2004), 1–23; and Guy Westwell, "One Image Begets Another: A Comparative Analysis of *Flag-Raising on Iwo Jima* and *Ground Zero Spirit*," *Journal of War and Cultural Studies*, 1, 3 (2008), 325–40. Helmers and Hill detail how historical and circumstantial knowledge was integral to the rhetorical weight viewers granted Franklin's photo. Westwell shows how the legacy of Rosenthal's iconic photo was not always as secure as commentators might have imagined in 2001, having been reframed during the late-century rise of the New Right and by the cultural revising of World War II history.

[21] George W. Bush, "Address before a Joint Session of the Congress on the United States Response to the Terrorist Attacks of September 11," 20 Sept. 2001, The American Presidency Project, at www.presidency.ucsb.edu/ws/index.php?pid=64731&st=&st1=.

statement takes as its model Harry Truman's so-called "Cold War consensus" in which he built his containment/integration approach to foreign affairs out of the right's fierce opposition to communism and the left's ideal of international integration.[22] Bush spent much of his speech thanking other nations for their support – Great Britain, Germany, South Korea, France, Australia – suggesting that the attacks represented an occasion for international union, not just one for choking out terrorists and nations that harbor terrorists. While calling for global integration, Bush made clear that this would be a coalition governed by the terms set out by the United States. As Amy Kaplan writes, American exceptionalism is not merely a statement of the nation's difference from other nations but also a claim to the United States' "status as the apotheosis of the nation-form itself."[23] The nation is contradictorily imagined as singular and yet universal, a model around which the world could unite, as Bush imagined it. In his formulation there are only two choices: us or them, integration on our terms or violent retribution. But the most telling distinction is in his consistent and careful use of "America" and "Americans." America acts. Americans are protected. Bush did not instruct citizens to organize, speak out, or send aid. He asked instead for cooperation with the FBI and continued faith in the nation's economy. He imagined American citizens, in effect, as a protectorate of the state, as later actualized through the passage of the 2001 PATRIOT Act and 2002 Homeland Security Act. Americans were collectively rendered victims in whose names he would act, without their knowledge or consent.

Bush's speech recalls the language of the Truman Doctrine, one of the founding credos of the Cold War. Before a joint session of Congress on 12 March 1947, Truman proposed sending aid to Greece and Turkey in order to inhibit "terrorist activities" in the Mediterranean. "At the present moment in world history," he declared, "nearly every nation must choose between alternative ways of life . . . One way of life is based upon the will of the majority . . . The second way of life is based upon the will of a minority forcibly imposed upon the majority." Addressing not US citizens, as Bush did, but the members of Congress alone, Truman concluded, "The free people of the world look to us for support in maintaining their freedoms."[24] Although the Truman Doctrine tends to be read as a manifesto of Cold War

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[22] For further discussion of the origins of Cold War containment/integration policies, see Christina Klein, *Cold War Orientalism: Asian in the Middlebrow Imagination, 1945–1961* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2003), 24–28.

[23] Kaplan, *Anarchy of Empire*, 16.

[24] Harry S. Truman, "Recommendation for Assistance to Greece and Turkey: Address of the President of the United States," 12 March 1947, Harry S. Truman Library and Museum, at www.trumanlibrary.org/whistlestop/study_collections/doctrine/large/documents/index.php?documentdate=1947-03-12&documentid=5-9&pagenumber=1.

containment, Truman also called for global integration: the fostering of allies through the United Nations, economic alliances, and the preferential treatment of like-minded democratic nations. Prefiguring Bush's twenty-first-century policies, Truman's address places all nations in one of two categories: the free and the unfree, the nations to integrate and the nations to contain. It is a dualistic framework that boils "alternative ways of life" down to us or them, and it articulates this decision as the domain of the state, not the citizenry. Citizens' "freedoms" are not chosen or gained but conferred through state processes. Indeed, the USA PATRIOT Act and the Homeland Security Act are altogether continuous with the defense and intelligence projects of the National Security Act of 1947. Yet, whereas the Truman Doctrine initiated the mid-century consensus, nationalist culture sustained it. Whether as a John Wayne film, a recruitment poster, or a postage stamp, Rosenthal's photograph became a tool for casting Cold War militarization in the golden light of American exceptionalism. Hence Bush's mythmaking adopts and adapts Cold War ideologies – containment, integration, and the construction of a protectorate citizenry – at the same time that it reenacts its photographic screen.

FDNY firefighters occupied a position in post-9/11 US culture similar to that of the "greatest generation" during the Cold War. The figure of the firefighter as the embodiment of heroism and manliness became a mask for the horrors of death and disfigurement in the months after the attacks. And yet the figure of the firefighter also models a particular form of citizenship, interpellating the citizen according to the logic of Bush's exceptionalist rendering of 9/11. Robert Hariman and John Louis Lucaites theorize the importance of iconic images in structuring a citizen's relationship with the state, suggesting that "photographs not only expose but also model social behavior, not least the behaviors that constitute citizenship as an embodied identity."[25] In addition to generating codes for understanding trauma, iconic photographs communicate codes for performing one's citizenship. It is therefore important to consider the precise moments captured in Rosenthal's and Franklin's photographs: moments of action in progress. The flags are not raised but in the process of being raised. Although there are film recordings and other photographs of the flags being planted at Iwo Jima and at the destroyed World Trade Center, no other documents capture and model the efforts of the marines and the firefighters like, respectively, Rosenthal's and Franklin's iconic images.[26]

[25] Hariman and Lucaites, 17.
[26] Franklin himself took 24 other photographs of the firefighters. Rosenthal took a posed photo of the marines after raising the flag. Friend, 318; Hariman and Lucaites, 97.

But Hariman and Lucaite's argument neglects to attend to the specific placement of the spectator – the citizen for whom citizenship is being modeled – in relation to the subjects of the photograph. Franklin's image captures the firefighters from below and at a distance. In the foreground of the shot there are a couple of indistinguishable blurred objects that indicate the photographer's distance from the firefighters. But the firefighters are captured in focus, in stark contrast to the faint pile of debris that occupies the space behind them, a contrast that makes the firefighters appear solid and permanent despite the destruction surrounding them. The photograph models citizenship for the spectator. In light of Bush's exceptionalist narrative of the attacks, however, it situates the spectator not as the firefighter but as the firefighter's protectorate. The iconic image models inaction and spectatorship, not action and input. It is a positioning that, echoing Cold War-era ideologies, facilitates the state's exceptionalist incursions abroad and US citizens' simultaneous disavowal of these exceptions. The figure of firefighters raising a flag over the rubble of the World Trade Center constructs a continuum from domestic protection to foreign aggression, from the home to the Homeland.

TRACING VIETNAM IN THE PHOTOGRAPHIC EVENT

Yet as a mnemic image the photographic screen also gestures to the traumatic real it obstructs. Whereas Franklin's photo itself replicates the ideological basis of Bush's Homeland, this mythos appears tenuous when taken as part of a capacious photographic event. Considering a single photograph alone, Azoulay reminds us, sustains the artificial distinction of "inside" and "outside" representation – what does and does not fall in front of the lens – that encourages dehistoricization and facilitates a belief in reductive national myths.[27] This is not to suggest that the iconic photograph should or can be ignored. Rather, it must be understood in context, as part of a shifting and incomplete event of photography. In the margins of Franklin's image are the other photographs taken and not taken on 11 September 2001. If memories do not emerge but are formed during periods of arousal, they contain the inherent potential to be reformed as conflicting memory-work emerges. In considering what Franklin's photo screens out, I analyze adjacent objects of cultural memory that relate to, historicize, and denaturalize the exceptionalism surrounding his iconic photograph.

Local photographer Ricky Flores captured the same moment as Franklin from the second floor of a building on Canal Street (see Figure 2). In contrast to Franklin's, his photograph presents an angle looking down upon the firefighters and makes them appear small and out of place beside the

[27] Azoulay, *Civil Imagination*. 25.

Figure 2. Ricky Flores captured the same moment as Thomas Franklin but from above the firefighters. Ricky Flores, 2001. Used by permission of Ricky Flores, *The Journal News*/LoHud.com.

prominent skeleton of a fallen building. Whereas Franklin's image captures a moment of nationalist defiance, Flores's photo presses the spectator to attend to the destruction surrounding the firefighters. It complicates the simple and familiar code of exceptionalism, and it denaturalizes the mythos surrounding its iconic counterpart. Flores's image offers another standpoint from which to assess the raising of the flag on 9/11. In doing so, it changes the spectator's relationship to the iconic photograph. It reconstructs the moment through a different encounter with the iconic actions of the three firefighters and gestures to the presence of an infinite series of encounters just out of sight.

Figure 3. A child runs from the cloud of dust created by the collapse of the North Tower on 11 September 2001. José Jiménez-Tirado, 2001. Used by permission of José Jiménez-Tirado.

Whereas Zelizer argues that photojournalism lends itself to the representation of trauma because it accommodates the "as if" of an unsettling episode, placing Flores's image alongside Franklin's marks the limits of this representational simplicity. The contingent space of the photograph permits imagination and emotions, but it also facilitates ideological interpretations, the exceptionalist optics that threaten to restrict the visual field. But a future encounter – the introduction of another account or spectator – promises to disrupt the myth that the "as if" of the image enables. Flores's overhead view of the firefighters recalls what Franklin's photograph screens out: the traumatic destruction surrounding the performance of this nationalist ritual.

Franklin's photographic screen, however, masks far more than the immediate complications of the scene it captures. In the moments after the collapse of the North Tower, independent photographer José Jiménez-Tirado captured the image of a child running from the cloud of dust trailing him through the street (see Figure 3). His mouth is open, and he is screaming. He has on a polo shirt and carries a backpack, reminding the spectator of the routine beginnings of that day. Jiménez-Tirado's photo is one of countless images depicting people fleeing from the World Trade Center and the surrounding area, a collection that Franklin's photo comes to stand for and screen out. But underneath this screen Jiménez-Tirado's photograph constructs a different historical intertext, apart from the greatest generation and the myth of American exceptionalism. In particular, his image recalls

Nick Ut's 1972 photograph of a Vietnamese girl running from a "friendly fire" napalm attack, screaming and holding her arms out at her sides. Her clothes are gone, burned off in the chemical blast, and she faces the cameraman head-on. There are four other children running alongside her, all of whom, like the child in Jiménez-Tirado's photo, emphasize that this is a civilian population under attack. It is a tie that binds 9/11 to past traumas that complicate an exceptionalist belief in the radical innocence of the United States. It performs the representational function of what Benjamin refers to as "dialectical images," launching a series of traumatic images that coalesce into a single trauma and demand redress.[28] Jiménez-Tirado's photograph conducts memory-work capable of halting the structured mythmaking of American exceptionalism, offering a different and incomprehensible encounter with the photographic event of the September 11 attacks. It foregrounds a past trauma brought about by the state's attempt to snuff out communism on a global scale and foretells the perilous shape of an analogous response to the specter of the terrorist.

Jiménez-Tirado's photo, though, also speaks to the larger historical erasure of American exceptionalism after September 11. It is an inaccurate generalization to suggest that Ut's photo changed the reception of the Vietnam War in the United States and therefore the course of the war. But it is nonetheless revealing of the national culture in 1972 that such a distressing image could become iconic. The Vietnam War represents the most difficult period in twentieth-century US history to assimilate into exceptionalist national myth. In the Vietnam War, Pease underscores, "the nation's myths and symbols encountered a historical violence it could neither foreclose from recognition nor deny."[29] Lacking the usual instruments of national myth, politicians and policymakers instead recast the entire war as itself an exception. The Vietnam War became a historical outlier, an uncharacteristic flaw in the otherwise unblemished record of the United States. The paranoia and unrest of the period could and should, the thinking goes, be disregarded as uncharacteristic of a chosen nation. The canonization of Franklin's image of firefighters raising a flag at the World Trade Center site produces a historical intertext that ties 2001 to 1945, erasing the complications and "historical violence" of a period that resists the myth of exceptionalism and problematizes future acts of militarization. Despite generating images reminiscent of Vietnam, the attacks are remembered through an icon that omits the war in Southeast Asia from

[28] Walter Benjamin, *The Arcades Project*, trans. Howard Eiland and Kevin McLaughlin (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press, 1999), 462–63.

[29] Pease, *New American Exceptionalism*, 162. Spanos has also stressed how critical retrieving the "singularity of the Vietnam War" is to "challenging the United States' effort, based on its mythological status as a redeemer nation, to achieve global sovereignty." Spanos, *American Exceptionalism*, xvii.

the historical line it constructs. It reenacts the photographic screen of Cold War militarization at the same time that it attempts to erase this past altogether. Franklin's photograph had to be foregrounded to ensure that more upsetting images – and the incomprehensible histories they conjure – remained in the background, screened from sight.

And yet the memory-work surrounding September 11 emerges from the photographic record when taken as fragments of an incomplete photographic event, rather than static documents sealed off from the present. It is an infinite entanglement of encounters that sometimes appears in the photo itself. The photographs of 9/11 are often photographs of photographs – images of missing-person posters that include pictures of the dead before the attacks – or photographs of photographers, records of recording. On the left-hand side of Jiménez-Tirado's photo is a man in shorts and a T-shirt, looking into the viewscreen of his camera as the dust cloud rises behind him. Like the screaming child in front of him, the man's posture replicates the scene of Ut's Vietnam photo, in which a press photographer appears in the background of the image, walking and looking down at his camera. It is an aspect of the photograph that speaks to the heterogeneous memory-work that takes place at sites of trauma. It gestures to another, different encounter. Whereas exceptionalist nationalism attempts to foreclose discussion and conflict – to settle the meaning of a historical moment – Jiménez-Tirado's image refutes closure in the recognition of another sightline on the collapse of the North Tower. National myths attempt to impose coherence, whereas memory-work admits to the incoherence of trauma. It encircles the photographic event in anticipation of a future encounter capable of remaking it once again.

The photographer in the margin of Jiménez-Tirado's photo addresses the desire for coherence in the face of traumatic incoherence. While the North Tower collapses behind him, he is looking at his camera, making sense of scenes from minutes and seconds earlier. It is a desire for comprehension – a desire to limit inputs to a manageable number – that feeds the proliferation of exceptionalist beliefs in times of crisis. In the months after September 11, though, the images did not stop. Some New York City residents took up cameras in order to gain a sense of control. Taylor recalls taking pictures as a tactic for confirming her presence in Manhattan amid the excesses of the TV and print-media reportage. "Photography was evidence," she notes,

proof not so much of the existence of the object of a photograph but of our own existence . . . In photography, some of us found an act of unity of sorts: we were all focused on the same thing, we were all framing what we saw from our position.[30]

[30] The cited passage falls within a larger theoretical project. Taylor, *Archive and the Repertoire*, 255, 28, distinguishes what she refers to as the scenario, a "reactivation" of the historical past that "bears the weight of accumulative repeats." The scenario implicates the past in the

The act of taking pictures offers a photographer a sense of ontological permanence, stabilizing trauma through the assertion of one's own perceptions. Yet, as Jiménez-Tirado's image suggests, there can be hazards in using a camera to make sense of trauma. While, unlike Freud, I am emphasizing the function of screen memories in the cultural realm, screening can nevertheless emerge from more local sites of arousal. The photographer in Jiménez-Tirado's image reminds the spectator of the countless photographic encounters taking place at that same moment. But it also reflects the desire to disremember the manifold memory-work surrounding a traumatic episode. Seconds after the collapse of the North Tower, the photographer is looking down and beginning to work through the recent past, to narrate and make sense of the destruction around him. Rather than encircling trauma, facilitating the recognition of unfamiliar encounters and impressions, the man halts this process in the interest of making the moment cohere. He must rearticulate what he sees in the viewscreen of his camera in linear time, what Edkins calls "the time of the state."[31] It is the desire for coherence that makes citizens amenable to the unconscious optics of state ideologies. This is not to discount the act of taking pictures altogether. It can be an act of unity if understood as part of a more capacious photographic event. The position of the spectator is not limited to the photographer alone. It is the recognition of this heterogeneous memory-work that makes the photograph a document to encircle rather than work through.

Hence the creation of memory-sites at which to share traumatic encounters enables the continuation of memory-work. In the aftermath of the attacks, the families of the missing hung posters throughout Manhattan – including photos of the lost smiling at parties and graduations – pleading for their safe return. In the weeks after the collapse of the Twin Towers, the missing-person posters were transformed into makeshift memorials for the dead at which mourners left flowers, candles, notes, and personal trinkets. Thus practices of grief after September 11, like images of people running from the burning buildings, recalled the effaced historical presence of the Vietnam War. Maya Lin's 1982 Vietnam Veterans Memorial embodies recent memorial culture in the United States. Two intersecting gabbro walls on which are listed the names of the American dead form the centerpiece of the memorial, which occupies the northwestern corner of the Washington Mall. Since its dedication, "the Wall" has attracted, like the makeshift 9/11 memorials, offerings of personal artifacts and keepsakes. The thousands of items left at the site include medals, combat boots, dog tags, cans of beer, letters, and photos of grandchildren. Sturken suggests that the national memorial attracts an outpouring of

present moment but also represents a space for the introduction of counterhistories and change. [31] Edkins, *Trauma*, xiv.

repressed memories because the Vietnam War represents a period in the United States that citizens are encouraged to forget. The Wall facilitates the transformation of objects of personal memory – hidden from sight in the immediate aftermath of the unpopular war – into ones of cultural memory. "The memorial," Sturken suggests,

is perceived by visitors as a site where they can speak to the dead (where, by implication, the dead are present) and to a particular audience – seen variously as the American public and the community of veterans. It is because of this process that The Wall is termed by many a "living memorial."[32]

Placing a note or memento at the Vietnam Veterans Memorial is at once an act of personal grief and of communal mourning. Whereas Lin's memorial, as Sturken suggests, can act as a screen that reduces and homogenizes human loss, the practice of sharing a personal artifact at the Wall penetrates this screen as an act of memory-work. The visitors recognize the memorial not as an absolute statement on the Vietnam War but as a mnemic image that can facilitate heterogeneous encounters with the past.

Although not occurring at a state-recognized memorial site like the Washington Mall, the residents of New York City replicated the Wall of the Vietnam Veterans Memorial at and around the location of the former World Trade Center. Numerous assemblages of missing-person posters appeared near St. Vincent's Hospital in Greenwich Village, one of the medical centers that treated the injured on and after 11 September 2001. Amateur photographer Chris Kreussling took a photo on 18 September of a neighboring bus stop that had been transformed into a memory-site for missing-person posters and memorial offerings (see Figure 4). The entire bus stop seating area is concealed behind photos of the assumed dead, and the ground is littered with candles and mementos. Commuters stand around looking at the faces of the missing people. Whereas Franklin's photograph attempts to compress the trauma of September 11 into an icon of nationalist defiance, the bus stop memorial speaks to an infinite number of encounters with loss. Rather than foreclosing on trauma by narratively assimilating it into national mythos, the photos and surrounding objects distinguish 9/11 as an ongoing photographic event that refuses closure and linearization. The wall of photos, to use Young's term, points to the production of "collected memory" – as opposed to the more recognizable "collective memory" – making space for memories that compete, disagree, and inform one another.[33] The spectators looking at the faces, the pleas, and the personal keepsakes recognize that, beneath the icons of the attacks, there is an infinite series of memories that cannot all cohere with the myth of the Homeland. Kreussling's photograph thus signals, in Azoulay's

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[32] Sturken, *Tangled Memories*, 76, 78.   [33] Young, *Texture of Memory*, xi.

Figure 4. Commuters study a bus stop that has been converted into a makeshift memorial and missing-persons bulletin after the 9/11 attacks. Chris Kreussling, *Bus Stop Memorial and "Missing Person" Posters*, 2001.

words, "the event of photography . . . that undermines any attempt to terminate it or to proclaim that it has reached its end."[34] His image, like Jiménez-Tirado's photograph of a photographer, gestures to other encounters with the photographic event that urge the spectator to further encircle the incomprehensible site of trauma and unmask prehistories, like the Vietnam War, that trouble a belief in America's exceptionality and innocence.

But the makeshift memorial walls contain photographs that for the most part pre-date the attacks. The time of the missing-person posters does not conform to the ideal of progress made manifest in icons of exceptionalist nationalism. It returns to a past photographic event – a reunion, a class photo, a graduation, a trip to Europe – that collides with the present of that person's absence and the production of the poster itself. The missing-person poster does not attempt to work through but instead encircles the trauma of 9/11. The past refuses to cohere with the present. It is what Edkins calls trauma time, "the disruptive, back-to-front time that occurs when the smooth time of the imagined or symbolic story is interrupted by the real of 'events.'"[35] The trauma time of the makeshift memory-site unsettles the futurism of

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[34] Azoulay, 27. [35] Edkins, 229–30.

Franklin's iconic photograph and returns the spectator to the site of traumatic rupture. Unable to put it into language, the bus stop memorial facilitates the memory-work that proceeds to surround and rearticulate the attacks. Like the Vietnam Veterans Memorial, the dates of which circle from 1955 to 1975 to 1955, the posters represent an infinite time loop. The site of mourning returns the spectator to a time before the attacks that then transforms the mourning process itself. The missing-person posters indicate a desire to represent the trauma of September 11 and at the same time signal the lack of a language in which to do so. This is not to suggest that trauma time is a hopeless enterprise. Rather, it counters the process of linear narration that inflicts the further trauma of erasure. Thinking not of the document alone but of the conflicting memories to which it attests – not the photograph but the event of photography – refutes the disremembering that sustains the exceptionalist mythos of the nation. Memory-sites like the Wall and the bus-stop memorial collapse time and space in bringing together an infinite series of encounters with a single, incomprehensible trauma.

The photographic screen is not impenetrable. In fact, it must be malleable in order to maintain its hold on the repressed past. Its meaning and function can and must change according to different historical demands, what Zelizer calls the "as if" of photojournalism. Since the discourse of exceptionalism relies on the adaptation of preexisting myths, it necessitates icons that also facilitate adaptation. But it is for this reason that the mythmaking of the photographic screen is susceptible to the critical operation of memory-work. The "as if" of the photograph offers space for the contingent aspects of an episode, a space the unconscious optics of American exceptionalism attempt to close off through the foregrounding of familiar tropes. But it is also space in which memory-work might instead open the photographic event up to different encounters and prehistories. The photographic screen does not altogether mask trauma from sight. Rather, it is a mnemic image that, if understood as part of an incomplete photographic event, conjures conflicting memories that trouble the construction of a homogenizing nationalist account of trauma.

Interrogating Thomas Franklin's photograph of firefighters on 9/11 as one photographic encounter among an infinite number of adjacent ones makes room for the recognition of what Avery Gordon refers to as "complex personhood." We must remain cognizant, she writes, "that even those who live in the most dire circumstances possess a complex and oftentimes contradictory humanity and subjectivity that is never adequately glimpsed by viewing them as victims or, on the other hand, as superhuman agents."[36] When a single

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[36] Avery F. Gordon, *Ghostly Matters: Haunting and the Sociological Imagination* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1997), 4.

photograph is made to stand for a trauma affecting thousands of people, it cannot help but generate and thus efface victims and heroes. There is little space in Franklin's photograph to recognize the complex personhood of the "superhuman" firefighters or the people being represented in their statement of nationalist defiance. Nevertheless, embedding a photograph in broader cultural and historical contexts can enable the permanent renewal of the captured moment. In the margins of Franklin's iconic photograph are the screened-out memories of death, disfigurement, fear, mourning, and a repressed historical past that continues to inflect our understanding of trauma in the present. Positioning the photographic screen among other objects of cultural memory – photos of different angles and people running from the Twin Towers, the analogous image of a naked girl running from a napalm attack, and a makeshift memory-site of missing-person posters – foregrounds the need to resist linearization and instead encircle the traumatic real. If the "camera introduces us to unconscious optics," we must ask, Whose optics are they? Whose optics do they obstruct?