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

New York: Palgrave MacMillan, 2012, 179 pages

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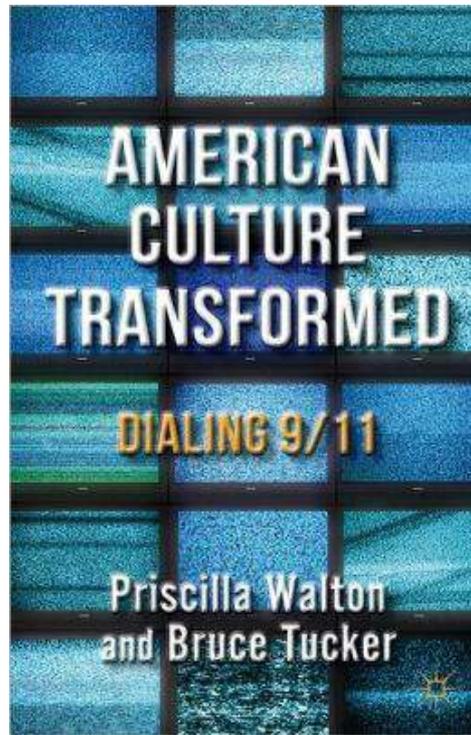
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- 1 Published just months after the 10th anniversary of the 9/11 attacks, Priscilla L. Walton and Bruce Tucker's *American Culture Transformed*, by pertaining to both media and gender studies, strives to contribute a complementary and original point of view to the debates about the post-9/11 years. For Tucker and Walton, that historical cycle coincided with the George W. Bush presidency, "an era that was so often shrouded in secrecy that it was closed to critical inquiry" (xv). Barack Obama's election in 2008 was to mark a break in History that allows for the authors' retrospective point of view of that decade. The main aim of Tucker and Walton's book is to show how, after 9/11, critical discourses tended to exploit some social facts and read them through a unilateral and reductionist meaning. Thus, the collective thinking of that period of



American History would be defined by its obscuration of complexity. The principal chapters of the book examine in detail four sociocultural topics, using a dialogical perspective alongside which the authors oppose each time two stories which made headlines during the last decade and may have had a cultural impact in America. First, they compare the public celebration of Private First Class Jessica Lynch after her release from Iraq by a coalition task force during a spectacular televised operation, and the case of soldier Lynndie England, accused of acts of torture and humiliation upon Iraqi prisoners in Abu Ghraib prison in 2004. Chapter three draws a line between the incarceration of Martha Stewart, a book author and a businesswoman specializing in domestic advice dedicated to women who was condemned for financial fraud, and the Fall of Enron Corporation in the early 2000s. Then, the authors discuss the difference between two commercial hits of American literature, the conspiracy and millenarian novels *The Da Vinci Code* (Dan Brown, 2003) and *Left Behind* (Tim LaHaye Jerry B. Jenkins, 1995-2007). Finally, the last chapter focuses upon two presidential figures through analyses of the late President Ronald Reagan's solemn burial, and of the bashing of the then president George W. Bush by Michael Moore's *Fahrenheit 9/11* (2004). As we can see here, Tucker and Walton are less interested in dealing frontally with 9/11 as a historical event than in reading its cultural consequences from original angles.

- 2 The first chapter is a long and detailed introduction in which Tucker and Walton sum up the theoretical field dealing with the issue of fame. A media construction of our contemporary society, celebrity culture should be considered in its complex relationship with History, or with its cultural, political and economic context. The authors' goal is to study celebrity by linking famous contemporary figures with post-9/11 America. Tucker and Walton defend the choice of designating "representative icons" (9) in order to understand how their stories symbolize that specific period of History. After that theoretical summary, they list the "ideological implications and movements" (12) that

followed from 9/11 onwards. The perspectives of Paul Virilio, Slavoj Žižek, Jean Baudrillard, Jürgen Habermas, Jacques Derrida, Judith Butler and David Simpson are examined in their contribution to the debates surrounding 9/11, as well as in their limits. Then, Tucker and Walton also review some cultural works dealing with that same topic, such as the documentaries by Michael Moore (*Fahrenheit 9/11*, 2004) and by the Naudet Brothers (*9/11*, 2002), or novels, i.e. Don DeLillo (*Falling Man*, 2007), Frederic Beigbeder (*Windows on the World*, 2002) and John Updike (*Terrorist*, 2006). Surprisingly, neither Hollywood movies nor comic books about the event are mentioned, like *United 93* (Paul Greengrass, 2006) and *World Trade Center* (Oliver Stone, 2006), or *In the Shadow of No Towers* (Art Spiegelman, 2004). If the second part of this opening approach is very useful for any scholar interested in that topic, one might question the pertinence of that summary, considering that none of these works is cited later in the book (excepting Moore's *Fahrenheit 9/11* in chapter five) and that it diverges from the authors' stated goal.

- 3 According to the authors, pre-9/11, critics would take into account the complexity and the ambivalence of subjects, but in today's topics, simplicity prevails. "A collapse of ambiguity followed the collapse of the Twin Towers." (81) To demonstrate that idea, Walton and Tucker pick out examples from various fields such as war, finances, religion and politics. Thus, the four following chapters which we summed up above show that the public interest in various famous figures results from the manipulative narratives committed to shaping reality so as to reduce the facts to a stereotypical meaning. For example, the book depicts the communication processes which have lead Private First Class Jessica Lynch to become a national heroic figure after she came back from Iraq to the U.S, highlighting the idea that her story was in fact totally fabricated, despite the denegations of the Pentagon. "Why Lynch and why then?" (30) To Walton and Tucker, "both the American government and the media began to use [her] story as a template for narratives that went far beyond the life of an American soldier to engage questions about war, race, gender, and nation" (27). The authors note the contradictions surrounding that kind of standardized story that becomes the vehicle for different and even contradictory thoughts. Jessica Lynch is sometimes seen either as a feminist icon, or as an antifeminist icon, or either as the Caucasian heroine of the racial hierarchy of American society, or as a young rural woman of Appalachia with limited capacities, and so on. In the next chapter, Walton and Tucker turn to another particular subject, the financial embezzlement of the Enron Company. Considering its manipulative attitude with banks so as to cover its losses, Enron would become "a postmodern company" (85), governed by a logic of derealization, artifice, lying and simulacrum. However, "the pluralism of pre-9/11 life was lost after the tragedy" (81) and "the modernist post-9/11 world required a Truth" (94). The complexity of the case would have been discredited in media discourses by this research of a unilateral truth, which became a new form of fictionality. On a religious and literary level, *The Da Vinci Code* is another post-9/11 example of "skeptical examination of received truths" (129). Later, about the political sphere, Walton and Tucker argue that the burial of the late President Ronald Reagan "had all of the hallmarks of modern performance theater, orchestrated to evoke a memory of popular administration at a time when the Bush administration's popularity ratings had plunged to historic lows" (131). Then, the authors identify attempts to "side-step public disaffection with the politics of the George W. Bush era and to re-appropriate the Reagan legacy" (135). Here too, through one particular event, media discourses are, according to the authors, used to divert public attention from the policies of the present presidency and attempt to transfer the moral values of the past into today's America.

- 4 Finally, Walton and Tucker's book attempts to show how manipulative narratives and reduction in complexity echo the feminist issues of post-9/11 America. For example, the authors describe how business magnate Martha Stewart, while enjoying great commercial success long before her arrest, began her career "within the 'post-feminist' movement, [and] was viewed with suspicion by critics and reviewers alike" (64). However, she later benefited from the compassion of her former opponents during her trial. The authors explain in that chapter that the mediatisation of Jessica Lynch's story and, at the same time, the new concern for the "unliberated women of Afghanistan" led to the re-evaluation of Martha Stewart's public image. "It is hard to imagine that these issues did not, in the same way, cast a shadow over Stewart's trial in January 2004." (73) Walton and Tucker also recall that Stewart is the author of the narratives about her own persona, i.e. the perfect modern housewife, by mimicking the diction and the manners of the English upper-class, thus ignoring the roots of her own modest New York family. After her release from prison in 2004, her contradictory image was hidden by the media reviews which "reduce Martha Stewart to homemaker status" (80). The gender problematics are also discussed in chapter 4, when the authors evoke Dan Brown's novel *The Da Vinci Code*. They argue that, although it is often seen as the vehicle for a feminist point of view about religion, *The Da Vinci Code's* construction of gender is also contradictory because, as it shows that "woman is the instrument through which 'man' can see God", the novel is "no different from any other traditional portrayal of objectified womanhood" (111).
- 5 To conclude, the main concern of Walton and Tucker is to examine the evolution of media thought in showing how particular contemporary issues have focused the interest of commentators during the 2000s. The strength and originality of their work is to examine in great detail subjects rooted in the popular culture of the last decade and to accurately deconstruct the way they are narrated. Still, we can pick out two limits to their argumentation. First, the link between several topics approached by the authors and the 9/11 attacks is sometimes very indirect, to such an extent that we can wonder if the use of the term "9/11" in the book title is not unreasonable, even as a pun ("dialing 9/11"). If we can accept that Jessica Lynch is described as a post-9/11 heroine, or understand how the celebration of Ronald Reagan allows the Bush administration to redeem its legitimacy during an unpopular war, the example of *The Da Vinci Code*, which forms the bulk of Chapter 4, is hardly related to the event. The authors equate what we could possibly name "the Bush years" with 9/11 and its aftermath, as if the memory of the event had contaminated all strata of the popular culture of that era, which is yet to be demonstrated. The second questionable point is the evocation of "celebrity studies" in the first chapter which are sometimes forgotten in the course of the demonstration, especially in the fourth chapter and the analysis of *The Da Vinci Code*. Walton and Tucker's book is nonetheless very relevant and well worth reading: it is highly documented, accessible, and is pleasant to read for scholars or non-scholars interested in various aspects of American contemporary culture.

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