On the first anniversary of 9/11, New York City hosted a series of commemorative events that included a variety of speeches delivered by prominent U.S. figures. With the exception of President George W. Bush, who debuted a new speech, Mayor Michael Bloomberg asked speakers to deliver canonical texts from throughout U.S. history instead of original oratories. New York governor George Pataki recited Abraham Lincoln’s Gettysburg Address, New Jersey governor Jim McGreevey delivered the preamble and introduction to the Declaration of Independence, and Bloomberg read excerpts from Franklin D. Roosevelt’s “Four Freedoms” speech.

While Bloomberg framed his decision to mark the occasion in this way as an attempt to “avoid any possibility of politicizing” the memorialization of 9/11—an impossible task—this choice might also be understood as a defensive gesture, an example of displacement in which consideration of the perceived traumas of 9/11 was shifted onto memories of past events that are easier to bear as part of national history.¹ This act of displacement attempted to cover over the ongoing and unresolved wounds of 9/11. But paradoxically, at an event meant to memorialize a loss, what remained was loss: the absence of that day whose memories have been replaced by others decades, even centuries, old.

I mention this act of repetition and displacement not because it is anomalous but because it represents a thoroughgoing strategy in U.S. public culture to remember and reconstruct 9/11 and its aftermath through a return to prior “experiential frames.”² For example, Marcia Landy argues that World War II rhetoric about Pearl Harbor has offered a key frame for constructing cultural memory about 9/11. Although rhetoric about the
Vietnam War was noticeably absent in the immediate aftermath of 9/11, it later resurfaced as a critique of the U.S. response to 9/11 and the War on Terror, as exemplified by Senator Edward Kennedy’s assertion in April 2004 that “Iraq is George Bush’s Vietnam.” Post-9/11 Hollywood also performed a return to history, remaking and adapting a number of films from the Vietnam War era as experiential frames for constructing and interpreting post-9/11 American culture. These films include *The Texas Chainsaw Massacre* (2003), *Poseidon* (2006), *The Hills Have Eyes* (2006), and *I Am Legend* (2007), the last of which is the subject of this essay.

*I Am Legend* is a disaster film about a postapocalyptic future in which a virus, originally developed as a cure for cancer, mutates and either kills most of the world’s population or turns them into zombies. Will Smith plays Robert Neville, a military physician who—believing himself to be the plague’s sole survivor—struggles to find a cure for the disease and to protect himself from the infected population known as the Dark Seekers. Neville, who lost his wife and child, finds temporary solace when he unexpectedly meets other survivors, Anna and a young boy named Ethan, whom he gives his life to save. *I Am Legend* was the first of several eschatological films in the early 2000s to focus particularly on constructions of masculinity and trauma. Other such films include *The Day the Earth Stood Still* (2008), a science fiction remake of the 1951 film of the same name, in which a scientist must convince an alien not to destroy the earth; *2012* (2009), a disaster film about globally cataclysmic floods caused by the heating of the earth’s core and humanity’s attempts to avoid extinction; and *Daybreakers* (2009), a futuristic tale that depicts the aftermath of a plague that has turned most humans into vampires who face extinction as their human blood supply dwindles.

In addition to joining a host of contemporary films interested in apocalyptic themes, *I Am Legend* also has a prior lineage of its own. The third film to adapt Richard Matheson’s 1954 novel of the same name, *I Am Legend* follows *The Last Man on Earth* (1964), starring Vincent Price, and *The Omega Man* (1971), starring Charlton Heston. *I Am Legend* also references a film not based on Matheson’s novel, *The World, the Flesh, and the Devil* (1959), which focuses on an African American man (Harry Belafonte) who finds himself in New York with most of the world’s population exterminated by chemical warfare. Of all its antecedents, *I Am Legend* seems especially and most directly tied to its most immediate predecessor, the Vietnam War era’s *The Omega Man*. Both *The Omega Man* and *I Am Legend* tell the story of a global epidemic caused by human actions. Both films construct Neville as suffering from characteristic symptoms of post-traumatic stress disorder, and both films end with Neville’s self-sacrificial death after he gives his
life to protect and regenerate the world’s population. Despite these marked similarities, however, *I Am Legend* does not exactly repeat its forerunner: while *The Omega Man*, like its source texts, takes place on the streets of Los Angeles, *I Am Legend* is set in New York City, and while *The Omega Man* stars a white actor (Heston) as Neville, *I Am Legend* features a black actor (Smith) in the lead role.

As the remake of a remake, *I Am Legend* might be understood as performing a symptomatic act of repetition, compulsively returning to and re-playing prior films, which themselves address the subject of trauma. The translations offered by *I Am Legend*—the repetitions with a difference—also suggest rhetorical attempts to reframe and reconstitute more recent history. Translations of both place and race reveal efforts within *I Am Legend* to manage post-9/11 discourse about the nation, its leading men, and its prevailing legends by using the discourse of trauma to recuperate the national-masculine in the face of both anxieties about American vulnerability and critiques of American xenophobia. Operating as a stand-in for the allegedly traumatized nation, Will Smith as Neville fashions his own suffering as the grounds for collective renewal and redemption. In the end, *I Am Legend* posits a fantasy of the nation that is posttrauma and postrace.

**Mapping Trauma**

*I Am Legend* never addresses 9/11 overtly, but numerous references within the film animate cultural memories of this event. Chief among these allusions is the film’s updated setting. New York City was so important to the film’s narrative that *I Am Legend* was shot (in)famously on location in what has been described as one of the most elaborate, expensive, and embattled shoots to take place in the city, reportedly costing more than $300,000 per day and prompting considerable unrest among New Yorkers disrupted by the massive production. As the *New York Post* described, “There is no film in which the city feels so integral to the story, no film that has used its sights and streets to such dramatic effect and, it can’t be overlooked, probably no film that has so ticked off residents during its complicated shoot.”

*I Am Legend*, however, does not cite just any version of New York City. The New York City depicted in this film is a city in ruins, a city injured and emptied out by unprecedented loss. Of course, *I Am Legend* is by no means the first film to imagine and construct images of New York City’s destruction. As Claire Kahane notes, such films as *Armageddon* (1998) and *Independence Day* (1996), the latter of which also stars Will Smith, graphically depict the city’s violent devastation in ways that suggest uncanny anticipation of what would transpire on 9/11. In a post-9/11 context, the images of
a fallen New York City take on additional registers of political and ideological significance, animating collective fantasy and cultural memory.

Recalling film critic Ty Burr’s description of its contemporary *Cloverfield* (2008), *I Am Legend* “plays fast and loose with the iconography of 9/11” and anticipates what Burr will describe as the codification of recognizable post-9/11 iconography in such films as *2012* and *Battle of Los Angeles* (2011). The mise-en-scène frequently features the downtown skyline and is filled with dilapidated, uninhabited buildings and streets overrun

Will Smith portrays an isolated military scientist in *I Am Legend* struggling to survive the apocalyptic disaster that has destroyed the world around him by arming himself with weapons, coping with his harrowing memories, and seeking the truth behind the cataclysm.
with dust, debris, and abandoned cars. The buildings, marked in red biohazard symbols, appear wounded as if lacerated and bleeding themselves. The film also features evacuation scenes in which thousands of New Yorkers run for their lives toward bridges to get out of the city. These scenes of a devastated and abandoned New York City likely summon memories of the city in the hours, days, and weeks after 9/11 in which everyday life was radically suspended and the landscape was irrevocably changed.

These links have not been lost on reviewers or fans. To demonstrate, a review for the alternative newspaper Creative Loafing reads *I Am Legend* as using an “apocalyptic sci-fi story to purge some post-9/11 anxieties.” Similarly, a fan post explains that “what used to be a level of destruction only imaginable by CGI technicians is now all too easily conjured up by anyone owning a TV from 9/11 on,” allowing *I Am Legend* to “ta[p] into latent 9/11 trauma” with its depictions of loss and often literally explosive violence. As these responses demonstrate, spectators have interpreted this film not only in relation to the historical context of 9/11 but also in relation to the language of trauma, in which 9/11 is constructed as a traumatogenic event wounding the nation, its topography, and its people.

Neville notably designates New York City as “Ground Zero,” a phrase that has come to stand for the space where the World Trade Center towers once stood. The term borrows from World War II rhetoric that described Hiroshima after the atomic bomb. Memories of 9/11 are also suggested by frequent references in film dialogue to the date, which indicate that the majority of the film’s action takes place during September 4 and 9, 2012, just days before what would be the eleventh anniversary of 9/11. These temporal signifiers thus position *I Am Legend* as offering a fictive before and after to 9/11, the memory of which remains displaced (but not erased) within the text.

Of special note with regard to memories of 9/11, *I Am Legend* emphasizes mediation in the form of televisions and computer screens, which warrants discussion in the context of the important roles that visibility plays in cultural memory of and public discourse about 9/11. The film immediately introduces the importance of visuality, opening with a flashback as television reporters speak in voice-over. In the first shot, a television screen fills the frame as a reporter heralds the discovery of a “miracle cure” for cancer: a genetically engineered strain of the measles virus, called Krippin virus (KV). This news footage cuts to New York City three years later, after KV has mutated, spread, and ravaged the planet.

The choice to introduce the fatally mistaken predictions about KV’s medical promise through the frame of television news references cultural memory of 9/11 as a hypermediated event whose impacts were intensified.
by its mediated coverage. The reporter’s naive optimism recalls constructions of the nation before 9/11, a nation unaware of an imminent tragedy rhetorically framed as something “no one saw coming.” Depictions of infrastructural failures to prevent the spread of the disease and to lend aid following the outbreak further illustrate concern about the nation’s blindness to its vulnerabilities. As Neville laments, “Nothing happened the way it was supposed to happen. Nothing worked the way it was supposed to work.” Instead, “Everything just fell apart.”

This attention to governmental failure to prevent and control the KV outbreak, which was itself the result of human actions and scientific manipulations, unsettles claims of U.S. blamelessness on 9/11. As a military scientist, Neville is professionally connected to the spread of the devastation, and I Am Legend thus mirrors The Omega Man’s suggestion that humans are to blame for their own suffering. Both films present a different scenario than Matheson’s novel and The Last Man on Earth present; in those texts, bacteria, not human actions, are to blame. Both The Omega Man and I Am Legend openly confront the perils of modernist progress, and it is no coincidence that both films were produced in the context of U.S. military aggression that deployed new and devastating technologies. Positioning humans as actively producing apocalyptic devastation and suffering, not as passive or innocent bystanders, each film presents a victim-hero who must right a wrong to which he has contributed. In I Am Legend, Neville acknowledges his guilt. For instance, he defaces an image of himself on a Time magazine cover, marking a caption that once read “Savior. Soldier. Scientist” with a question mark. This expression of self-doubt anticipates his later confession to another survivor: “God didn’t do this, Anna. We did.”

Introducing the tragic story of KV through the lens of television reporting also implies a causal relationship between the news media’s overstated coverage of KV as a “miracle” and the global tragedy that ensued. This frame critiques the role of television news in shaping public opinion and policy, echoing widespread discourse about the impact of mediated images as traumatizing to spectators and/or damaging to public opinion. As one of the many films on which the U.S. Army Media Relations Division has consulted, I Am Legend attends acutely to the political, social, and cultural implications of mediation. It is significant that in I Am Legend’s fictional news footage a reporter speaks of KV as a miracle full of promise, while its creator, Dr. Krippin, appears much more tentative and cautious. This sequence implies that television’s tendency toward spectacle and sensationalism is as much to blame for the KV disaster as is the virus itself.
Television news continues to feature prominently throughout *I Am Legend* as an organizing element of Neville’s lonely existence. In one of his many repetition compulsions, Neville begins each day watching old news broadcasts recorded before the KV outbreak reached its peak. These images reinforce constructions of 9/11 as an event whose horrors have become inextricably tied to its mediated coverage. Depictions of Neville’s efforts to find a cure for KV further imply that images themselves operate as a form of violence. As he experiments on kidnapped Dark Seekers as metaphorical lab rats, Neville visually records his work, taping all of his research trials and using computers to stream videos from his lab. On multiple occasions, *I Am Legend* doubly frames Neville on-screen, both within the larger film frame and on the smaller frame of his computer. Frequently these shots feature Neville looking at his own image on the screen before him. As infected subjects repeatedly die on his table, Neville must see constant and sustained evidence of his impotence, revealing him to be both at the mercy of the disease and a participant in its devastation. Polaroid images of dying and deceased Dark Seekers that line the walls of Neville’s lab underscore his participation in this violent, visual economy.

Positioning Neville on both sides of the camera, *I Am Legend* figures him as a victim and a complicit witness. As the object of the camera’s gaze and the lone survivor of KV, Neville remains exposed: isolated, unprotected, vulnerable, and on display. As the spectator of his own recordings, he is exposed to scenes of violence and devastation, which the film registers as visibly upsetting to him. Unlike prevailing constructions of the typical American citizen-spectator as an innocent and unaware bystander on 9/11, *I Am Legend* implies that Neville is party to his own trauma of spectatorship, for the images that haunt him are of his own creation.

*I Am Legend* reinforces this commingling of visibility and violence through a recurrent cinematographic device: as Neville hunts (for food, for infected people), point-of-view shots reveal Neville’s perspective through the scope on his rifle, its targeting apparatus framing the image. In these point-of-view shots, Neville sees life through the literal lens of violence; as audiences share this viewpoint, *I Am Legend* implies that experiences of spectatorship and violence have become inextricably linked. Hence, *I Am Legend*’s emphasis on visual mediation perhaps suggest unease about the almost instantaneous access that the world had to the events of 9/11 as they were unfolding. As I argue later, however, the narrative emphasis on Neville’s visual surveillance of his (ultimately successful) hunt for a cure for KV demonstrates the film’s efforts to exert mastery over what is imagined as a traumatic past and to reaffirm traditional masculinist subjectivities.
An Unmanned World

_I Am Legend_ replays _The Omega Man_’s construction of Neville as a traumatized subject. He exhibits textbook symptoms of psychological trauma, including flashbacks, hallucinations, and a repetition compulsion. Neville appears isolated, fragmented, and at his breaking point. Formally, flashbacks operate as a significant editing device throughout _I Am Legend_, as with _The Omega Man_ before it, reinforcing Maureen Turim’s understanding of flashbacks as a key trope for representing trauma in Hollywood cinema.10 These flashbacks depict what transpired in the moments leading up to the city’s evacuation, including the death of Neville’s wife and child, and specifically indicate that Neville’s sense of masculinity has been injured.

Neville’s first flashback occurs moments after _I Am Legend_ introduces the KV-infected survivors. Neville and the family dog Dam crouch in his bathtub as Dark Seekers screech outside his window. The film cuts to a flashback in which Neville rushes to evacuate his family before the military quarantines the city. Driving his family to the evacuation site but refusing to leave himself, Neville asserts, “I can still fix this. This is Ground Zero. This is my site.” The second flashback occurs as Neville visually records his latest findings in his search for a cure for KV, cutting from a close-up of Neville’s face on his computer screen to continued scenes of the Neville family’s evacuation attempts and ending with a shot of Neville crying and alone. Implying that Neville’s attempts to find a cure for KV stem directly from his sense of obligation to his family, this flashback structure ties Neville’s heroism to his masculinity and patriarchal directives about his paternal responsibilities. As I argue below, his compulsion to kill the Dark Seekers and cure KV suggests a traumatic response to his failure to live up to these masculinist directives.

The final flashback occurs after Neville deliberately makes himself vulnerable to an attack by the Dark Seekers in the hopes that he would not survive the assault. Following brutal violence that renders him unconscious, Neville remembers his last moments with his family. In the flashback, as U.S. military planes bomb the bridges leading in and out of the city, an out-of-control helicopter careens toward the one evacuating Neville’s wife and daughter, Marley. Seconds before impact, the film cuts back to Neville waking up in the present day. Like many 9/11 films, _I Am Legend_ refuses to show the midair collision.11

Auditory and visual hallucinations further reveal Neville’s melancholic attachment to his wife and child. For instance, when Neville first discovers other healthy survivors, Anna and a young boy named Ethan, he imagines them to be his late wife and daughter, who appear momentarily on-screen.

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before Neville is shocked back into his present-day reality. In one of the final moments of the film, the whispering voice of his young daughter compels Neville to sacrifice himself to save Anna and Ethan. Neville is also prone to speaking to inanimate objects including store mannequins that he has dispersed throughout the city, a device that borrows directly from *The World, the Flesh, and the Devil*. The mannequins never speak, but Neville hallucinates full conversations.

The prominence of family in Neville’s flashbacks and hallucinations reveal that his trauma relates not only to the large-scale catastrophe that began at Ground Zero but also to personal loss and to the disruption of his masculine subject position. Doubly displaced from his former life, Neville has lost both his public position of authority as a military scientist and his private position of authority as the patriarch of a nuclear family. Accordingly, his symptoms make clear that much of the damage done to Neville owes to ruptures in his performances of hegemonic masculinity. In the absence of a public sphere in which to act and a private sphere in which to lead, Neville seems uncertain about how to be a man.

Neville also suffers from a repetition compulsion: each day of his lonely existence replays the previous one almost exactly. For instance, he visits the same video store every day to return a video and rent a new one. He is working through the Blockbuster collection alphabetically and declares himself to be “midway through the G’s.” Interestingly, the film that Neville returns is *The Godfather* (1972), which has been understood as negotiating destabilizations of “the family, the nation, and even the integrity of the individual in the Vietnam era.”

Confirming the routinized nature of his trip to the store, Neville says to a mannequin in the store, “I’ll see you in the morning.” Like the watch alarm set consistently to wake him at sunrise and then to alert him to the approach of sunset, these trips to the video store render Neville’s days familiar and predictable.

In addition, Neville compulsively broadcasts a radio message every day at noon and waits in the same place, hoping that other survivors will appear. This message, which plays multiple times throughout *I Am Legend*, makes a plaintive promise to Neville’s imagined audience: “My name is Robert Neville. I am a survivor living in New York City. I will be at the South Street Seaport every day at midday when the sun is high in the sky. If you are out there, if anyone is out there, I can provide food. I can provide shelter. I can provide security. If there’s anybody out there—anybody—please. You are not alone.” This message is significant for a number of reasons. First, Neville overtly couples his identity as survivor with his location in New York City, emphasizing memories of the city as a central site for loss and as a place that has suffered. It matters that Neville returns incessantly to the

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South Street Seaport, which is located in lower Manhattan’s Financial District where the World Trade Center towers once stood. Neville’s wife and child died at this site, and it is where Neville returns to attempt suicide. The melancholic Neville remains fixed within his suffering and continues to act out his scene of loss. Accordingly, *I Am Legend* situates downtown Manhattan as the locus of tragedy and the originating point for the traumatic history of its leading man and, by extension, the nation. Just as Neville charts the quadrants of the city, marking spots populated by the Dark Seekers, *I Am Legend* maps New York City, fetishizing its traumatic topography. Although it never shows Ground Zero, this film maintains the primacy of this wound in the U.S. imaginary.

Second, Neville’s radio message also reveals the anxiety he feels about his ability to perform traditional masculinity. He is determined (even desperate) to fulfill the patriarchal injunction to be a provider. He insists on his ability to provide food, shelter, and security. As much as Neville insists on his abilities as a provider, however, he also reveals his anxious isolation and fear, ending his message with a forlorn plea for companionship from “anybody.” This depiction of Neville constructs trauma as feminizing, having severed him from the social, destroyed his position of patriarchal authority, and crippled his ability to obey the directives of hegemonic masculinity. Hence, Neville offers synecdochic figuration of the allegedly emasculated nation that was unable on 9/11 to protect its citizens from the terrorist attacks.

The figuration of an emasculated nation circulated widely in public discourse about the attacks on 9/11 and, in particular, on the World Trade Center towers. For instance, on September 13, 2001, during ABC’s “Special News Report: America under Attack,” psychiatrist Alain Poussaint mixed a number of gendered metaphors, likening the attacks on the Twin Towers to a rape, which might leave survivors feeling violated, and describing the “towers as phallic symbols” destroyed by a “symbolic castration.”\(^\text{13}\) Similarly, on September 18, 2001, political commentator William Safire described 9/11 as positioning “the United States as the battered wife to the battering husband of Middle Eastern terrorists.”\(^\text{14}\) This rhetoric not only posits the nation as feminized, or emasculated, but also as traumatized and wounded. Neville’s radio message thus reinscribes the claim that fear as it relates to the experience of terror has unmanned the nation, a fear that is allegorized in the film’s depiction of the last man on earth. However, as much as *I Am Legend* worries about post-9/11 figurations of the national-masculine, the film also labors to redeem its fallen hero, recuperating legends of national strength, resilience, and masculinity.

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MANNING UP

While the emphasis on Neville’s visibility—his frequent depiction on computer screens—might be understood as expressing anxiety about surveillance and spectatorship in the hypermediated post-9/11 context, the simultaneous emphasis on Neville’s vision—his ability to see and to use optical technologies—suggests attempts to manage the politics of visibility and spectatorship. By employing images, cameras, and screens in his search for a cure, Neville enacts visual mastery, asserting a totalizing gaze over post-KV apocalyptic chaos and using mediated technologies as tools of recovery. This technological control realigns what Isabella Freda describes as typical U.S. politics of spectatorship, placing the citizen-subject once again on the “right” side of the camera not as its victim-object but instead as the master of its gaze. This realignment of the politics of spectatorship finds additional reinforcement in the film’s use of point-of-view shots in Neville’s laboratory. As Neville, with a camera affixed to his glasses, gazes at and captures the image of hostage Dark Seekers, the film also positions spectators to adopt this agentive gaze.

When Neville is not searching for a cure, he hunts Dark Seekers who take shelter in the darkness of abandoned buildings, closely recalling former president George W. Bush’s repeated figurations of terrorists as “shadowy” and hiding in “caves and shadows.” Taking advantage of the nocturnal creatures’ vulnerability to light and their near blindness, Neville stalks the Dark Seekers street by street, echoing Bush’s insistence in September 2001 that the United States strive “to hunt down, to find, to smoke out of their holes” those he believed to be responsible for the 9/11 attacks. Like Bush, Neville refuses to turn a blind eye to the threat of the Dark Seekers, and like the lab rats that Neville uses in his research trials, his enemies become the objects of his active investigative gaze. The trope of Neville-as-hunter further performs a restabilization of the politics of spectatorship, positioning the nation’s cinematic stand-in as an agentive looker rather than as spectacular prey.

This construction of Neville may be understood as fashioning a fantasy of national remasculinization, a gendered transformation underscored by visual emphasis on Smith’s muscular physique and Neville’s rigorous exercise routine, including a montage sequence that depicts Neville training on the treadmill and doing pull-ups. If 9/11 has been framed in public discourse as a symbolic castration that unmanned the nation, Neville’s vigor and resilience assert his ability to man up in the face of tragedy. His dedication to curing KV and to protecting his site, Ground Zero, perpetuates

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traditional associations of masculinity with strength and self-reliance and performs a version of national identity that is unrelenting in its pursuit of security and justice.

This fantasy of unyielding heroism—the insistence on continued struggle no matter how dire the losses or how insurmountable the odds—reinforces former president Bush’s stay-the-course rhetoric about the seemingly endless War on Terror. Infiltrating the Dark Seekers’ hives, Neville appears to have accepted Bush’s insistence, articulated in a speech to the Veterans of Foreign Wars in 2005, that we “go after” our enemies “where they live,” a positioning mirrored by resemblances between the film’s construction of hidden nocturnal Dark Seekers and Bush’s description of terrorists as guided by a “dark vision” and hiding in “shadowy networks.”

Although *I Am Legend* expresses ambivalence about Neville’s complicity in the KV disaster, the narrative ultimately absolves him of such guilt, praising his subsequent actions as the result of traumatic loss and the source of the world’s recovery. *I Am Legend* carefully manages Neville’s culpability through two strategies. First, the film counterbalances his violence with examples of his vulnerability and compassion. Second, the film recuperates evidence of both Neville’s weakness (or impotence) and his hypermasculine vigilantism through the logic of self-sacrifice, allowing him to undo past losses and atone for transgressions.

Evidence of aggression, hardness, and agency as signifiers of Neville’s masculinity coexist with traits more associated with traditional femininity—including gentleness, sensitivity, and emotionality—characterizations supported by Smith’s extratextual persona. Throughout the film, Neville’s relationship with Sam and memories of his deceased wife and daughter serve as reminders of Neville’s softness. Adding to this construction of Neville as an attentive father is the extratextual fact that his daughter is played by Smith’s own biological child, a recurrent choice for Smith who also played the on-screen father of his son in *The Pursuit of Happyness* (2006). By registering Neville’s woundedness and counterbalancing his resolute pursuit of his enemies with his unflagging love for family, this characterization aligns heroism not with conventionally strong or virile iterations of masculinity but instead with the tragic man. Neville’s role may also be read as repairing public narratives about post-9/11 American identity, inviting understanding of the nation not as vindictive and reactive but instead as compassionate and life giving.

In the film’s final scenes, it is Neville’s paternalistic relationship with his fellow survivors, Anna and Ethan, and his self-sacrificial death that firmly establish him as a warm and loving but also strong and resolved victim-hero. After Dark Seekers have discovered and invaded Neville’s home,
which has also become a refuge for Anna and Ethan, Neville adopts the role of protector. By safeguarding his new companions, Neville may rewrite history, atoning for the traumatic loss of his family and his failures as both a public servant and a patriarch. Anna and Ethan in effect become his new family, as signaled by the hallucination in which Neville imagines them to be his late wife and daughter.

As the Dark Seekers rush in, Neville ushers Anna and Ethan into his basement laboratory and hides them in a cement enclosure inside of a shatterproof cell. While Neville’s wife and daughter died publicly in the wide-open expanse of the New York City skyline, Neville sequesters his figurative family underground in the confines of his fortified domestic sphere. In crafting a new ending for his family’s narrative, Neville has recuperated his patriarchal authority and made, once again, home a safe space. If New York City has been lost, Neville redeems one small corner of his home as a place of refuge in the city, a place that incidentally has also become home to the city’s artistic masterpieces, plucked from the walls of museums and hung on Neville’s walls for preservation.

Neville enjoins Anna to bring salvation to the rest of the world. Having just discovered that his serum is curing a captive Dark Seeker, Neville realizes that her blood may now transmit immunity to others. He draws her blood and passes on the vile to Anna and Ethan to dispense after his death. With Anna and Ethan safely buried in their cement enclosure and with the remaining Dark Seekers pounding on the shatterproof glass of the cell, Neville (holding a picture of his wife and child) grabs a grenade and pulls the pin, killing himself and the infected population but sparing Anna and Ethan. Compelled to repeat the sacrificial gesture of his cinematic progenitor from *The Omega Man*, Neville gives his own life to beget new ones, and what emerges from his ashes is a new family that owes its life not to the laboring body of a mother but from the broken body of a man.

This act of self-sacrificial regeneration simultaneously confronts and contains the trauma of death, subjecting Neville to its finality but gaining mastery nonetheless. While the devastation wrought by the KV outbreak suggested Neville’s (and the nation’s) ineptitude and weakness, this final trauma is one that Neville wills for himself. If at first “Everything just fell apart,” Neville engineers the final staging of his story. His death marks the beginning of his legend, a fact made explicit in Anna’s voice-over narration that closes the film. This exaltation of redemptive death reaffirms the cultural significance of the ultimate sacrifice and the assumption that death (in the trenches or on the battlefield) is the noblest performance of civic duty and that male bodies are a nation’s greatest sacrificial offerings.

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Illustrating *I Am Legend*'s reliance on the masculinist logic of sacrifice, the film's denouement (like that of *The Omega Man*) differs sharply from the endings of Matheson's novel and *The Last Man on Earth*. These prior texts offer dystopic conclusions, killing the Neville characters tragically, not as an act of salvation. The sacrificial violence of *I Am Legend*'s final scenes also constitutes a revision to the film's original script. In the first version, Neville doesn't die or kill the Dark Seekers but instead encourages peaceful coexistence. In this version, Neville recalls the protagonist in Matheson's novel, realizing that as much as the Dark Seekers have become the monsters of his legend, he has become the monster of theirs, hunting down, kidnapping, and torturing the bodies of their people.

In this original ending, Neville understands that his test subjects are hostages, his experiments forms of torture. The Dark Seekers do not invade his home as animalistic marauders but instead come to rescue the infected subject Neville had taken prisoner. He apologetically returns his captive to her people. Without further violence, the Dark Seekers go home, while Neville, Anna, and Ethan, with the cure for KV in hand, leave to find a rumored survivor's colony. Giving up his masculinist quest for mastery over KV, Neville chooses a path of acceptance. And giving up his imperialist desire to control New York City, no longer his site, he cedes the land to its rightful owners.

This initial ending to *I Am Legend* offers dramatic potential for revising prevailing narratives about U.S. exceptionalism, imperialism, and cowboy politics, inviting self-reflexive attention to the metonymic links that culturally bind heroism and masculinity to physical force and to the violence of the nation-state. This denouement offers empathy and friendship to the Other and builds rather than burns bridges. This ending did not find its way to the big screen, however. Warner Bros. rejected this ending (and its potential subversions and ethical demands) and relegated it to the bonus materials on the DVD as an "Alternate Ending" in favor of an ending that revalorizes sacrificial economies of violence, masculinist heroism, and rejection of the Other.

In the ending of the final cut, Neville maintains his misrecognition of the Other as monster. Refusing to bear witness to his own violence, he obliterates all traces of himself and the traumatic history he helped to create. After Neville detonates the grenade the screen fades to white, visually signaling the film's attempts to clean up or whitewash an untidy past. Killing the Dark Seekers and himself, Neville creates a new Ground Zero, ruins from which a revised legend can be generated and recovery from trauma.
can be promised. Although *I Am Legend* initially blames Neville for his suffering, its reliance on sacrificial violence undermines this critique, once again positioning the male body as the final solution to traumatic suffering, his martyrdom atoning for and absolving his guilt and that of the nation.

Neville’s sacrifice thus acts as both expiation (a purging of guilty parties) and redemption (a cleansing of dirty hands). As he seals off Anna and Ethan and annihilates the remains of KV, *I Am Legend* intimates that traumatic history can indeed be undone and contained, offering a fantasy of moving on that is not based on bearing witness and painful self-examination but instead is equated with leaving behind and closing off. Neville’s violence and self-sacrifice ensure that evidence of the traumatic past is destroyed, as with the virus itself.

This cinematic version of closure and recovery from trauma demonstrates Kirby Farrell’s assertion that as a trope trauma often becomes an “enabling fiction,” used here to justify and legitimate Neville’s rejection of the Other and recourse to violence.\(^\text{18}\) Constructing KV as a national trauma—compounded by the personal traumas of familial loss—endows Neville with the moral authority needed to justify his violent act of erasure. Following his self-sacrifice, what Neville leaves behind is not a history of disease, infrastructural collapse, governmental complicity, and oppression but rather a new story of recovery, rebirth, and redemption. If the story of KV might be understood as an allegory for American loss on and since 9/11, this narrative structure uses the imagined wounds of the nation as both justification for the violence of the nation-state and evidence that the nation once was and can again be whole, unified, and healthy. And if 9/11, like the KV virus, marked an anomalous interruption to life in America and a disruption of the nation’s imagined masculinity, then Neville’s successful quest for a cure conflates the possibilities of finding closure and moving on from tragic loss with remasculinization.

As she and Ethan escape, Anna recounts Neville’s achievements, her words playing in voice-over as she and Ethan enter a gated survivor’s colony after leaving New York City behind. As she enters the gates, Anna praises Neville’s “restoration of humanity.” The use of voice-over narration resembles survivor testimony and reinforces the film’s insistence on closure and moving on. Anna’s hopeful words offer the promise of an end to suffering and an “after” following traumatic loss, and the opening and closing of the colony’s gates reinforces the film’s attempts at closure, with the material evidence of suffering and loss locked safely outside.

Anna’s conspicuous references to times and dates further reinforces this notion that trauma can be contained in the past. As she explains, “On September 9th, 2012, at approximately 8:49 p.m. he discovered that cure and at
8:52 he gave his life to defend it.” This reference to the temporal specificity of Neville’s sacrificial heroism allows the film to compress past, present, and future. Fictively winding back time to those days before September 11, *I Am Legend* attempts to rewrite traumatic history. The film gets close to the temporal signifier of 9/11—almost but not quite touching its memory—in order to erect a new temporal monument: the moment the world was reborn through a wounded man. Anna’s rhetoric inverts assertions that 9/11 “changed everything,” promising rebuilding and new beginnings.

Anna declares that “We are his legacy. This is his legend. Light up the darkness.” The film then closes with Bob Marley’s “Redemption Song.” The use of Marley’s music and the repeated iteration of Marley’s phrase “Light up the darkness” link Neville to the reggae icon, whom the narrative constructs as an activist for social change and racial equality. At the same time that the film’s ending refuses to confront Neville’s (and the nation’s) history of violence and oppression, *I Am Legend* openly lays claims to promises of racial equality and harmony. These promises, however, prove to be empty ones. Despite the film’s overt discussion of racism, its translations of race and place maintain the privilege of both U.S. national identity and whiteness.

**Postrace to the Finish**

*I Am Legend*’s most significant departure from *The Omega Man* (and from sacrificial films more generally) is its introduction of a black star into the role of sacrificial victim-hero. In this regard, the extratextual significance of Smith’s adaptation of Heston’s prior role bears noting. At the time *The Omega Man* was released, Heston was associated with the Left. In his first autobiography, he describes himself as being vanguard in his support for civil rights “before it got popular,” having marched in 1963 with Martin Luther King Jr.20 By the time of *I Am Legend*’s release, Heston was well known as an icon of the Right: a former president of the National Rifle Association and a centerpiece of the culture wars, fiercely opposed to affirmative action and identity politics.

If Heston’s transformation might be understood as emblematic of the nation’s shift from the leftist 1960s, with that era’s emphasis on collective action, to the right-wing 1980s and the Reagan-era culture of individualism, then Smith’s adoption of Heston’s role might be understood as offering at best a national apologia or at worst a disavowal in reaction to critiques of America’s histories of racialized violence and xenophobia in the wake of 9/11. Neither racialized violence nor xenophobia is unique to the post-9/11...

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moment, but critiques of the racial politics of the United States became particularly visible in post-9/11 public discourse about the War on Terror.

To demonstrate, in 2006 just one year prior to the release of I Am Legend, A. Sivanandan addressed the participants of the Institute of Race Relations’ international conference “Racism, Liberty, and the War on Terror” by arguing that American and British war efforts in the Middle East have “resurrected a culture of primitive racism (we good, them evil) surrounded by a politics of spurious fear promoted on the back of the real fears of 9/11 and 7/7 and braced by anti-terrorist legislation.” Similarly, on the fifth anniversary of 9/11, the website for MSNBC featured a series of articles and testimonials on the subject of race after 9/11 titled “Scorched by the Scourge of Post-9.11 Racism.” And in 2006 and 2007, multiple publications directly linked U.S. policies on terrorism to racism, including Steven Salaita’s Anti-Arab Racism in the USA: Where It Comes from and What It Means for Politics (2006), Mary Bosworth and Jeanne Flavin’s Race, Gender, and Punishment: From Colonialism to the War on Terror (2007), and Amaey Jamal and Nadine Naber’s Race and Arab Americans before and after 9/11: From Invisible Citizens to Visible Subjects (2007).

I Am Legend’s choice of leading man seems especially significant because, first, Smith also inherited this role from another conservative icon, Arnold Schwarzenegger, who was originally slotted for the remake, and second, Smith is known as a black actor with great popularity and credibility in cultural spaces traditionally defined as white. Adilifu Nama positions Smith as a “seminal figure in American [science fiction] cinema.” What gives Smith such currency, argues Nama, is his blend of the “racially non-threatening posture of Sidney Poitier with the charismatic bravado of Eddie Murphy.” Smith’s persona makes him an ideal candidate for delicately negotiating tensions with American public culture around the subject of race: a popular and entertaining actor, not known for speaking out politically, Smith can appeal to both black and white audiences without forcing too blunt a confrontation with racial politics.

Citing such films as Independence Day, Men in Black (1997) and I, Robot (2004), Nama contends that Smith has “reinvigorated the status of blackness in [science fiction] cinema” and unseated a “host of white protagonists who confronted the science fiction metaphors of American cultural crisis.” Smith has continued this trend with the science fiction films Hancock (2008) and Barry Sonnenfeld’s Men in Black III, which is slated for release in 2012. Given Smith’s striking presence within the science fiction genre and within the series of adaptations of Matheson’s novel, Smith’s role as Neville might inspire an uplifting and even redemptive narrative of social progress and change, as if his casting constitutes a kind of victory over histories of
racism and inequalities. Interestingly, similar logic reverberated not long after *I Am Legend*’s release during what would eventually become Barack Obama’s successful run for the White House.

*I Am Legend* invites such optimistic understandings of Smith’s role in the film through its constructions of Bob Marley, whose album *Legend* plays throughout the film. In fact, Neville repeats the refrain from Marley’s “Three Little Birds” (“Don’t worry about a thing / ’Cause every little thing is gonna be alright”) throughout the film as his survival mantra. Neville describes Marley as having a “virologist’s idea that you could cure racism and hate—literally cure it—by injecting music and love into people’s lives.” This rhetorical stance is significant for a number of reasons.

First, at the level of diegesis, this remark overtly links Marley’s identity to Neville the virologist, a link underscored by Neville’s decision to name his daughter after the late singer. Although Neville will choose to annihilate (rather than accept) the Dark Seekers, the overt associations with Marley invite understanding of Neville’s violence not as an act of destruction but instead as an act of salvation. Rather than encouraging reflection on Neville’s oppression of and hatred toward the infected population, this reference to Bob Marley positions Dark Seekers as the sources of hate that must be destroyed, marking them, in the rhetoric of George W. Bush, as the “evil-doers.” According to such logic, Neville’s sacrificial death marks the end of racist hatred rather than another instantiation of it. Despite the film’s pledge that Neville offers a hopeful beginning and new ways of seeing, Neville’s vision remains tied to masculinist economies of violence. This new beginning and the end of darkness still derive from violent and tragic loss. Trauma has not been cured or undone; it has simply been displaced.

Second, this reference to Marley and his belief that art can operate like an inoculation against racism operates at an extratextual level as well, positioning both Smith (as artist) and *I Am Legend* (as work of art) as cures to a racist past. *I Am Legend* implies that it might inject hope and love into the lives of its audience as an antidote to racism and xenophobia, but the film offers no critical attention to its participation in the ongoing politics of Othering. In fact, this promise operates as a cover for the film’s reinscription of racist logics. Articulating a postrace fantasy, *I Am Legend* invites understandings of racism as a problem of history that no longer matters or requires attention at the same time that it unwittingly betrays this very claim. The doors on that past, the film implies, have been firmly locked shut—as embodied by Neville’s impenetrable cell and the sequestered survivor’s colony—and audience members should, quite literally, move on.

This rhetorical strategy echoes remarks made by Republican presidential nominee John McCain during his concession speech to President-elect
Obama. Addressing the historic election of the first African American president, McCain described the nation as having “come a long way from the injustices that once stained our nation’s reputation and denied some Americans the full blessing of American citizenship,” as if injustices do not continue in the present day and as if all Americans are granted equal rights to citizenship. Referencing the language of trauma, McCain explained that the “memory” of racism “still had the power to wound” (emphasis added), that is until now. McCain’s use of the past tense implies that these memories no longer carry the power to wound, positing a fictive after or end to the transgenerational traumas of racism. McCain positioned the nation as a “world away from the cruel and frightful bigotry of that time” (emphasis added), and to prove this claim he can offer “no better evidence” than the “election of an African American to the presidency of the United States.” McCain thus identified Obama’s election as a turning point in American history, after which there should be no basis for critique of legacies of national identity or citizenship, asserting, “Let there be no reason now—let there be no reason now for any American to fail to cherish their citizenship in this, the greatest nation on earth.” Not only does this rhetoric mirror the move from collective identity to individualism—placing the onus on the individual citizen to live up to his or her rights and privileges—but like the rhetoric of Heston a decade earlier, it also asserts that race should no longer carry rhetorical force as a marker of injustice and that oppression can be understood (and forgotten) as belonging to “that time.”

The diegetic links between Neville and Marley as virologists similarly imply that Neville’s victory over the Dark Seekers and Smith’s triumph as a megastar should be understood as a victory over bigotry and hate and that racism, like the KV virus, should be understood as a thing of “that time” against which survivor’s can be inoculated. The “now” inaugurated by I Am Legend and McCain’s speech, only one year later, is constructed as postrace and posttrauma, a world in which racialized violence and suffering should no longer be said to exist. The proof, as implied by I Am Legend and McCain, can be seen in the black male bodies on the screen and in the Oval Office.

And yet despite such promises of hopeful new beginnings and a world in which race no longer matters, I Am Legend seems somewhat anxious about Neville’s status as a legitimate victim-hero, implying (presumably unwittingly) that Neville’s masculine heroism is compromised by his race or, more precisely, by his blood. In The Omega Man, Neville’s blood becomes the source of new life in postapocalyptic Los Angeles as both the serum that cures those infected by the plague and as a symbolic marker of his self-sacrifice. Although this 1970s-era film might seem progressive in
its depiction of an interracial relationship between Heston and costar Rosalind Cash, Neville is careful to declare that his redemptive blood is “genuine 160-proof old Anglo-Saxon,” linking the purity and potency of his blood to his whiteness. Smith’s Neville can make no such declarations about his blood, which significantly is not the blood that will regenerate the population. Instead of giving his own blood, which boasts immunity to KV, Neville draws blood from his female hostage, the Dark Seeker who has begun to recover and whom he will kill only moments later.

Refusing to offer up Neville’s blood as the source of new life, I Am Legend maintains fantasies about the purity and naturalness of whiteness such that not one drop of black blood will be used to restore humanity. While the film reinforces the hegemonic privilege assigned to masculinity in U.S. culture, it also asserts that the greatest authority lies in bodies that are both male and white. According to such logic, the rite/right of sacrifice belongs to Neville only provisionally. Thus, even as an exception that introduces a black actor into a white role, I Am Legend refuses to sever the hegemony of masculinity from whiteness, reinforces the assumption that traumatic heroism is naturally the province of white men, and reinscribes the privileged position of the white male as the nation’s noblest and most valuable citizen-victim. I Am Legend offers promises of a hopeful new beginning by paradoxically returning to a thrice-told tale, and in the end this film reinscribes old legends about sacrifice, the nation, masculinity, and whiteness.

NOTES


9. These narrative devices, along with the iconography of a devastated city that Neville must loot in order to survive, also suggest references to Hurricane Katrina and the devastation in New Orleans. Given that both events have been framed as traumas within American public discourse, their potential overlap in I Am Legend is not altogether unsurprising. As Irene Kacandes suggests, “radically different traumas can be experienced as similar by those who have already been traumatized.” See Irene Kacandes, “9/11/07 = 1/27/01: The Changed Post-traumatic Self,” in Trauma at Home, 168.


11. For example, in both United 93 (2006) and World Trade Center (2006)—two docudramas about the 9/11 attacks—the camera fades to black seconds before showing the crashing of hijacked planes. It is also interesting to note that the helicopter crash reproduces a plot device from The Omega Man although with significant differences. In The Omega Man, Neville is on the aircraft that crashes after the pilot becomes symptomatic of the plague, and the result of this crash is Neville’s inability to disseminate the vaccine against the spreading illness. However, this film, which was produced at a time when plane crashes didn’t carry the specific weight that they do in the post-9/11 imaginary, shows the full impact of the helicopter’s fiery crash. I Am Legend’s refusal to show the crash demonstrates the work of displacement, in which references that are too specific or too close to 9/11 are frequently tempered or covered over.


13. Marcia Landy, “‘America under Attack’: Pearl Harbor, 9/11, and History in the Media,” in Film and Television after 9/11, 82.


23. Ibid.