

## TRAUMA, FEAR, AND PARANOIA

### *Lost and the Culture of 9/11*

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ONE OF THE MOST POPULAR TELEVISION SHOWS OF THE LAST DECADE, *LOST* (2004-2010) CONFOUNDED MANY OF ITS VIEWERS WITH ITS TWISTING, CONVOLUTED PLOT LINES. THIS ARTICLE IS AN EXPLORATION OF THE MANY ELEMENTS OF THE SHOW OVER ITS FIRST FEW, DYNAMIC YEARS THAT ULTIMATELY WEAVE TOGETHER TO FORM A SUBTLE, SUBVERSIVE IMAGE OF POST-9/11 AMERICAN SOCIETY. THROUGH AN EXAMINATION OF SPECIFIC CHARACTERS, AND THE CAST AS A WHOLE, AS WELL AS VARIOUS DISTINCTLY TERRORISTIC AND APOCALYPTIC COMPONENTS OF THE SHOW'S PLOT, *LOST* IS REVEALED AS BOTH A REPRODUCTION AND A CRITICAL RE-IMAGINATION OF THE AMERICAN RESPONSE TO THE EVENTS OF SEPTEMBER 11<sup>TH</sup>, 2001. *LOST* BECOMES NOT MERELY AN ARTIFACT OF POST-9/11 AMERICAN SOCIETY BUT A MEANS THROUGH WHICH VIEWERS ARE INVITED TO SEE WAYS IN WHICH OUR WORLD CAN GROW AND CHANGE.

The events of September 11, 2001, not only permanently disfigured the face of New York City and greatly changed the lives of thousands of Americans, but also created a cultural shockwave in America that is still felt today. American society was transformed almost immediately after the attacks; this response to terror can be seen in much of the visual culture that followed. When viewed in a post-9/11 context, the television show *Lost* (2004-2010) simultaneously reproduces, comments on, and reshapes the American response to 9/11 in the imagery employed, the topics discussed, and the characters depicted in its episodes. By subtly playing with the themes of tragedy, loss, and terror, *Lost* draws upon America's cultural memory of the events of 9/11 and subversively provides a critique of our responses to terror.

The pilot episode of *Lost* aired on September 22, 2004, and the significance of that date—with its visual and numerical similarities to the date of September 11—was hardly lost on viewers. The show follows the survivors of the crash of Oceanic flight 815. The cause of the crash is a mystery. As the first season progresses it becomes clear that no one beyond the bounds of the island upon which the plane crashes has any idea of what happened to the survivors. The first episode, which details the events immediately following the crash, uses imagery that draws heavily upon representations of 9/11 and acts profoundly as a reproduction of this culture of fear and trauma. As Marita Sturken explains in her book *Tourists of History*, “reenactment of dramatic events is a staple of popular culture in the form of television programs, documentaries, and feature films.”<sup>11</sup> In paralleling the events of 9/11, *Lost* is not alone, joined by a slew of other war-on-terror television dramas such as *24* and *Sleeper Cell* but also feature films like *Traitor* and *The Kingdom*. *Lost* is unique in that its imagery is much more



TITLE SCREEN FROM THE ABC SERIES *LOST* (COURTESY OF WIKIMEDIA COMMONS)

subtle. The first scene of the pilot episode depicts Jack Shephard (Matthew Fox), a surgeon and the main character of the series, sprawled on the ground in the middle of the jungle. He is wearing a tattered business suit and looks remarkably like a corpse. The positioning of his body and his costuming is meant to align him with those many victims of 9/11, the men and women working in the offices in the towers who died inside or even those who flung themselves from the buildings. This parallel is somewhat obscured by the surrounding jungle; the viewer, removed from the exact setting of 9/11, is initially able to dismiss the similarities between these two images.

This, however, becomes impossible, as it is made clear that Jack is anything but dead; he stands, brushes himself off, and immediately begins to sprint to the beach where it seems as if nothing is amiss. The scene is almost idyllic—beautiful palm trees and bright white sand with the clear water ahead—but as Jack scans the coast, the faint sounds of a woman screaming can be heard. He begins to run in the direction of the sound, and as he hears the shouting, pieces of the plane come into view; twisted metal, incinerated luggage and mangled limbs cover the surface of the beach. After briefly observing the scene, Jack immediately takes on the role of protector and hero. Rushing from person to person—at one point, as an act of chivalry, assisting a young pregnant woman who is having contractions from the trauma of the crash—Jack suddenly embodies the ultimate hero, one who becomes a leader in the moment of chaos; here, rather than resembling those men and women who lost their lives in the World Trade Center, he becomes those firefighters, policemen, and everyday brave figures who helped hundreds of men and women escape the towers on 9/11. By saving lives and delivering orders amongst piles of twisted steel, Jack becomes a conflation of both victim and hero, thus morphing into a symbol for a majority of American affected by the attacks.

While Jack Shephard stands in for all American people in those first scenes of *Lost*, the most obvious 9/11 image employed in these first few moments is that of the plane, Oceanic flight 815. Although few images of the hijacked planes exist, this first image on *Lost* of the plane cut in half and partly in flames, dozens of frightened and injured people running about, is clearly reminiscent of the events of 9/11. This initial view of the plane is accompanied by a visual and aural hush, as the background noise dulls and the camera seems to steady for the first time since the frenzied start of the show. This pause suspends both the viewers and the characters in time, allowing for a brief moment of

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stasis and reflection in the chaos and emphasizes the terror and horror of the image. The familiarity of the scene also becomes apparent in these few frozen seconds. Such depictions of a mangled plane almost necessarily evoke memories of the events of 9/11 and their immediate aftermath. The viewer, bombarded with imagery of destruction and simultaneously reliving the trauma of those horrific terrorist attacks in only the first fifteen minutes of the pilot, is invited to view nearly every event that follows the initial crash through a post-9/11 lens. As the show progresses, it is natural to assume that these contexts of terror would gradually begin to drop out of the viewers' perception as they distance themselves from this emblematic and emotional 9/11 image of a crashed plane, but since much of the narrative of *Lost* is framed around flashbacks into the pasts of the survivors of Oceanic flight 815, it is almost impossible to forget these images. Many times these flashbacks bring the characters back to the first moments of the crash, and the result is a narrative structure that continually progresses and regresses with the moment of trauma being repeated countless number of times. As Sturken explains, “In psychoanalysis, compulsive repetition occurs when subjects are traumatized to the extent that they repeat their moment of trauma over and over again and are unable to either narrativize it or move beyond it to make it a memory”.<sup>2</sup> Both the characters on *Lost* and the viewers are not only traumatized by the crash of Oceanic flight 815, but also by the repetition caused by this narrative structure. This clearly parallels the repetition of 9/11 images in American media following the attacks. The result, for both American society and the community of *Lost*, is a group of people that are unable to move beyond their trauma, whether this be by choice or not.

While the now-marooned survivors attempt to cope with the loss and trauma of the crash, they slowly begin to form a community amongst themselves. Asians, African Americans, Arabs, and other ethnicities, as well as diverse religions and backgrounds, are all represented in this cast of characters. Promotional cast photographs for these earlier seasons depict a mini-community that is, although small in numbers, quite diverse. The diversity of this group is

meant to stand in as a small-scale representation of American society. They manage to function even in the face of both their extreme trauma and their differences. This concept of community and unity amongst all peoples is consistent with much of the political rhetoric following 9/11. George W. Bush's speech to the American public on the evening of September 11, 2001, is emblematic of this concept of the diverse community and world-wide unity. As he states,

America and our friends and allies join with all those who want peace and security in the world and we stand together to win the war against terrorism ... This is a day when all Americans from every walk of life unite in our resolve for justice and peace.<sup>3</sup>

Not only does he promise that all Americans will unite—no matter their race, religion, or origins—but he also reassures the American people that the entire world is part of their unified community. The American public and all worldwide lovers of freedom will come together to fight evil in the hopes of achieving “justice and peace.” This concept of all races throwing aside their differences to work toward the common good is one which was seen nearly everywhere following the events of 9/11; it also carries with it the implication that all Americans, not simply those immediately connected to 9/11, were affected by the attacks. The cast of *Lost* is this idealistic post-race unified community on a smaller scale; although the survivors have their differences, they are bound together by their common tragedy and provide a unified front, physically standing in a line as equals in their promotional photos to combat whatever dangers may come their way.

While the diverse survivors of the crash are initially able to create a community that unifies them, as time goes on this harmony slowly begins to erode. The first of these breaks occurs after the survivors spend the first few days waiting for assistance to arrive. As more and more time passes with no sign of rescue, it becomes evident that they may be lost for a while. With a new goal of long-term survival, they begin to search for more permanent places to set up shel-

ter. A shared trauma cannot hold them together for long, and even this relatively innocuous task of establishing a settlement creates a virulent faction within the survivors; half of them, led by Jack, head deeper into the jungle to seek shelter in caves, while the other half remains on the beach. A rivalry forms between these two sub-groups from the originally harmonious mini-community of crash survivors. As stand-ins for all of American society, this division between the survivors illustrates a parallel to many of the policy debates that ensued almost immediately following the events of 9/11. One such debate was centered upon the issue of whether or not the American government should invade Afghanistan. Both officials and citizens debated whether or not war would be beneficial, heated discussions often resulting in anger and resentment. Hostility also appears in the now-broken groups of survivors on *Lost*. The destruction of a unified community in a dangerous and foreign land poses many issues for the survivors, not the least of which being the mysterious and almost-mythical beasts lurking in the jungle of the island, creatures that include a massive polar bear and a Smoke Monster. The survivors soon realize that, separated into two distinct groups, they hold almost no chance of survival; they may have been united by their trauma and divided by their opinions, but now they must reunite to survive. In this the writers of *Lost* provide their critique; in the mini-community, viewers are invited to see a parallel to the greater American society. The realization that the community on *Lost* cannot survive as separate factions forces the

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viewer to consider that the same may be true for American society. If the experiences of the survivors on *Lost* are any indication, then it is clear that the anger and debates in American society will only serve to further endanger a country that is already living in a world of loss, terror, and trauma.

While the survivors on *Lost* eventually do find a way to move beyond their differences and work together, they have a clear limit as to with whom they can and cannot ally

themselves. Even in the face of their reunification, they continue to draw clear lines between themselves and other people on the island. As they explore deeper into the jungle, they come across a group of people that had not been on the Oceanic flight. These people are part of a group that has lived on the island for decades in a compound-like community, living off the grid and completing scientific experiments. The survivors name these strangers The Others. While this name is simply meant to provide a clear and succinct distinction between the survivors and the settlers, the wording of the phrase is reminiscent of and almost implies a racial difference. This division between the familiar and the other is a mirror of the typical post-9/11 American response toward Arabs or Muslims in which, simply due to skin color or religion, they are deemed as other and are subjected to intense racism and racial profiling. As Cynthia Young explains in her essay *Black Ops*,

The widening of the “we” of US citizenship to embrace those who were formerly marginalized, be they African Americans, Asian Americans, or Latinos, allows war on terror dramas to mark a new boundary between citizenship and “alienness” that includes some but still excludes Arab Americans and Muslims.<sup>4</sup>

Just in the way that American citizens created a new dynamic of “we” versus “alien,” so do the survivors on the island. The differences between the survivors and the Others are not based fundamentally on skin color or religion—

there is even a prominent Arab character accepted in the survivors’ group as a part of the “we”—but rather on ideological differences. However, the immediate marginalization of these settlers on the island is a definite parallel to the American response toward Arabs and Muslims following the events of 9/11; taking no chance to examine their point of view or to create an ally with the settlers, the survivors take their perceived alienness as a reason to give them the name of Other and to treat them as such by attacking them and, as is more often the case, fearing them.

In the face of this clear division between the “we” of the survivors and the “alien” of the Others, the character of Sayid Jarrah (Naveen Andrews) and his past come as a surprise. Sayid is an Arab man who, prior to crashing on the island, was a member of the Iraqi Republican Guard and served for many years as an interrogator and a torturer. Sayid is often depicted in such a way that showcases his brute strength, symbolizing both classical masculinity and violence. However, despite Sayid’s violent and dark past, the survivors—many of them with difficult pasts as well—still accept him wholeheartedly and consider him to be a member of their community. This somewhat contradicts Evelyn Alsultany’s argument in her book *Arabs in the Media*, in which she claims in post-9/11 American society there is a shift in the representation of Arabs in which,

There is indeed a process of rehabilitation taking place, but it is one in which images of acceptable Arab and Muslim Americans are produced through the figure of the Arab American patriot or victim of post-9/11 hate crimes.<sup>5</sup>

The character of Sayid seems to contradict this, being neither victim nor patriot. Sayid is, on paper, an entirely unlikable character; he shows little emotion, his violent past is abhorrent, and both his race and his former occupation draw upon the raw trauma and fear surrounding the terrorist figure that still festers in American cultural memory. In spite of all of this, Sayid is a character with whom the viewer is meant to—and does—sympathize. Sayid also raises issues with Alsultany’s concept of the “simplified complex representation” of Arab males in the media. She explains that this is a new trend in television and film dramas in which whenever a negative or stereotypically violent Arab man is portrayed, he is “balanced” with the figure of an Arab patriot who is ally to the United States



DEBRIS ON ROOFTOPS NEAR WORLD TRADE CENTER  
(COURTESY OF FEMA PHOTO LIBRARY)

government. This device, she claims, is meant to combat potential critiques of racism toward Arab Americans; in including a “good” Arab, they mean to counteract the blatant stereotyping of the “bad” Arab. Sayid certainly does not fall into this category of the simplified complex representation; Sayid, a man who is still considered to be a protagonist, is at once both good and bad, both torturer and redeemer. Rather than having two Arab figures acting as either extreme, *Lost* depicts one Arab figure who encapsulates both ends of the spectrum. Viewers, in finding themselves sympathizing with a character who in any other circumstance would be considered reprehensible and potentially even labeled a terrorist, are invited to reconsider the typical American response to 9/11 that was characterized by fear, paranoia, and hatred of all Arabs and Muslims. While Sayid himself has the capacity to be a terrorist like the hijackers on September 11, knowing his life and his story makes him more human; this raises the question of why our society has chosen to vilify an entire ethnicity and an entire religion following 9/11 and whether or not—even in the case of the terrorists themselves—this perceived evil is the reality.

Much of the first season of the series is focused on the main characters’ acceptance of their new situation. As the survivors struggle to come to terms with their new lives of fear and paranoia, many people on the island turn to different and often opposing methods of coping. Jack Shephard, de facto leader of the survivors and a proclaimed “man of science,” attempts to rationalize every strange and foreign danger that comes their way. He tries to analyze the actions of the treacherous Smoke Monster that plagues the survivors’ camp, and in leading the group he seeks the most efficient and structured methods of completing tasks. Acting as his foil is John Locke (Terry O’Quinn), an elderly man whose Enlightenment namesake would have appreciated his belief in faith. Prior to living on the island, an accident bound him to a wheelchair, unable to walk. This disability was the greatest curse of his prior life. However, upon landing on the island, Locke awakes amidst the chaos of the crash and, as he lies incapacitated on the sand, notices that his toes can move for the first time in years. He walks. The look of wonder on his face is a clear indication of his new-found faith. Now a firm believer in destiny and fate, Locke repeatedly tells Jack in their arguments that most things in life are “a leap of faith.”<sup>6</sup> While both men seem to firmly believe in their own methods of coping and of searching for answers, neither manage to accomplish much; the island is still shrouded in mystery and although the survivors establish themselves there, it is in-

explicitly against their presence. At every turn, it thwarts their attempts at reaching a new level of normalcy. The island is their primary obstacle in healing following the trauma of the crash. However, as Sturken explains in *Tourists of History*, “American mythology clings tenaciously to the belief that one can always, heal, move on, and place the past in its proper context, and do so quickly”.<sup>7</sup> Even a man like John Locke, who is physically healed by his appearance on the island and whose narrative most supports the idea that trauma and loss can provide a way to become a better individual, is unable to solve the questions that the island presents. This farcical belief that healing after a trauma can be done quickly—a concept that arose in the immediate aftermath of 9/11 in the frenzied attempts to clean and rebuild the urban wound of Ground Zero—is negated by the survivors’ trials on the island. They, unable to find answers for the many mysteries of their trauma and of the island itself, are caught in an emotional purgatory. Similarly, life is clearly continuing beyond the bounds of the island. As Shannon (Maggie Grace), a minor character in the first season, argues with her brother in the pilot episode, she shouts, “The plane had a black box, idiot. They know exactly where we are. They’re coming.”<sup>8</sup> This suggests that the survivors are aware that life is continuing outside of the realm of their static life on the island, and yet they are never helped. They are literally left behind, and this seems to parallel the unhealed pain and fear following 9/11 in that both American society and the survivors on the island are trapped in their trauma, left unassisted while being caught in an inescapable cycle of paranoia and fear.

Many mysteries unfold in the subsequent seasons of *Lost*, but as the series approaches its end few of the questions that arise are answered. The most decisive answer that the survivors get, however, is to the question of why the plane crashed and how they ended up on the island. The answer confounds them: it is their fault. Prior to the fifth season, *Lost* introduces many pseudo-scientific themes and it turns out that the island and its inhabitants are able to time travel. In a strange twist of events, the survivors of flight 815 are sent back to the 1970s and they detonate a hydrogen bomb, sucking themselves into a time warp and setting off a surge of electromagnetic strength that, ultimately, is the cause of their crash in 2004. Prior to this revelation, however, the survivors had been blissfully unaware of their own role in their crash, much in the way that American society seems to have forgotten the preceding events leading up to the attacks of 9/11, instead choosing to view that day as a strange, unprovoked anomaly. Sturken explains this well when she states that our society re-

lies heavily upon, “the image of the United States as a country of pure intentions to which terrible things can happen, but which itself never provokes or initiates attack”.<sup>9</sup> Just as the crash of Oceanic flight 815 was the result of a long standing, albeit warped, past involving the survivors themselves, the terrorist attacks of 9/11 were also the explosive result of decades of political tension between America and various Arab states. However, while the survivors on *Lost* are ultimately forced to confront their role in the events that led to that fateful plane crash, American citizens have yet to truly accept the fact that America, through a series of ill-advised political endeavors, helped to breed a climate in which the events of 9/11 could occur. In forcing the survivors to examine their past actions, *Lost* in turn forces the viewers to dig deeper into America’s role in the lead-up to September 11, 2001.

In a post-9/11 society that constantly reproduces and repurposes the culture of fear, paranoia, trauma, and terror that arose from the terrorist attacks, *Lost* serves not only as a reproduction of the American response to 9/11, but also as an example of the ways in which America fell short in addressing the changes that occurred in society. Through the imagery employed, the topics discussed, and the general themes of the show, *Lost* is able to hold a mirror to the face of post-9/11 American society and provide a critique of how, if at all possible, Americans can change the reflection they see staring back at them.

#### ENDNOTES

1. Sturken, 26.
2. Sturken, 27.
3. Bush.
4. Young, 45.
5. Alsultany, 14.
6. *Lost*, 2.3, “Orientation”.
7. Sturken, 14.
8. *Lost*, 1.1, “Pilot: Part 1”.
9. Sturken, 15.

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