The terrorist attacks of 11 September 2001 produced a unique moment in American history at which the intricate relation between trauma and melancholia in an American context can be gauged. In 2004, American and America-based sociologists listed all the components needed for what they call the construction of a cultural trauma. The editor of *Cultural Trauma and Collective Identity* (2004), Jeffrey Alexander,\(^1\) refers to Benedict Anderson’s famous claim about the commemoration of catastrophic events for the evolution of “imagined communities”. However, Alexander is more specific about the mechanisms involved in imagining. He maintains that for what he calls a cultural trauma to become imagined, an audience willing to listen is needed that acknowledges “claim making” done by “carrier groups” which are “the collective agents of the trauma process”.\(^2\) Importantly, Neil J. Smelser, in the concluding contribution, discusses the September 11 attacks as a perfect example of such a collective trauma.\(^3\) Although Alexander *et al.* succeed in convincingly describing the mechanisms behind the construction of a cultural trauma, they neglect the intrinsically cultural, i.e. not purely socio-political, components that make such a construction possible. I maintain that in order to understand why a collective agrees to the label trauma – which, after all, might be regarded as a symptom of

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1 Alexander is also the author of the more recent monograph *Trauma: A Social Theory* which reiterates many of the arguments already present in *Cultural Trauma and Collective Identity*. See Jeffrey Alexander, *Trauma: A Social Theory*, Cambridge: Polity, 2012.
weakness – it is necessary to consider developments in trauma studies which nowadays have entered popular understandings of trauma and to have a closer look at the intricate connection between collective trauma and non-acknowledged cultural melancholia. It is on the basis of my discussion of trauma theory through the lens provided by my interest in melancholia that I eventually arrive at my own definition of cultural melancholia.

Although Cathy Caruth’s name is not actually a name known in the average American household, her understanding of cultural trauma neatly sums up all the ingredients of a contemporary American understanding of the cultural after-effects of a mass-scale catastrophe. In tracing the singular aspects and ideas which have made possible as well as shaped the development of Caruthian trauma theory, I simultaneously examine why trauma has, since the 1990s, made such a big impression within the American pop cultural realm and in the American humanities. My discussion will show that every step of innovation the concept of trauma underwent since its first application in the medico-psychiatric field in the second half of the nineteenth century can be understood more clearly when seen in the framework of melancholy discourses being converted to ones hinged on trauma. Ultimately, I maintain that trauma has become a master concept within an American context because it allows for discourses that should be led under the heading of melancholia to be converted into discourses about trauma.

The rise of trauma theory can be attributed to developments taking place on three distinct levels which I call, borrowing from sociology, _macro_, _meso_, and _micro_. I would argue that had trauma not served as the answer to problems on all three levels, it would never have gained the standing it now enjoys. Importantly, on all three levels, a conversion of unacknowledged melancholia into trauma occurs – a process which seems to explain and hence provide the occasion for working through all the problems encountered on each particular level.

The macro level refers to the broader American mainstream culture. As my discussions in the chapters in which I analyze American fiction published before and after 9/11 will further demonstrate, 1990s white middle class American culture is afflicted with a general melancholia originating from various sources. Due to the fact that melancholia is a very un-American notion and hence does