

# Chameleon Conservatism: Post-9/11 Rhetorics of Innocence

Aimee Carrillo Rowe *University of Iowa*  
Sheena Malhotra

Copyright © 2003 Aimee Carillo Rowe and Sheena Malhotra

## Recommended Citation

Carrillo Rowe, Aimee; and Malhotra, Sheena. "Chameleon Conservatism: Post-9/11 Rhetorics of Innocence." *Poroi* 2, Iss. 1 (2003): p. 56-78 <https://doi.org/10.13008/2151-2957.1056>

Hosted by [Iowa Research Online](#)

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by Iowa Research Online. It has been accepted for inclusion in *Poroi* by an authorized administrator of Iowa Research Online. For more information, please contact [lib-ir@uiowa.edu](mailto:lib-ir@uiowa.edu).

# Chameleon Conservatism

## Post-9/11 Rhetorics of Innocence

Aimee Carrillo Rowe and Sheena  
Malhotra

*Poroi*, 2, 1, August, 2003



- 1 “Why did this happen to us?” “Why would anyone want to ‘bomb’ the U.S.?” These questions reverberated in conversations with students in our classrooms, family members, people in the grocery store, and children within popular television programs in the immediate aftermath of the events of September 11, 2001. This bewilderment and shock is contingent on a national sense of self as innocent and just, rendered possible through an erasure of the historical and geo-political role of the U.S. in global domination. Discourses of victimization of power-holding groups – of the U.S. nation and its citizens (i.e., anti-immigration discourse), of white men (i.e., anti-affirmative action discourse), and of heterosexuals (i.e., anti-gay-rights discourse) – enables this national identity to emerge. Such discourses advance the agenda of the New Right by appropriating the moral authority associated with systemic marginalization put forth by liberal and leftist groups in their struggles for social justice ( Kennedy 1996; Berlant 1997).
- 2 Popular representations in the wake of 9/11 provide the national narrative of victimization with a new sense of legitimacy and centrality. The nation imagines itself within these representations by suturing a host of seemingly oppositional discourses together: “feminism” ushers in militarism; militarism provides a space for multicultural inclusion within the realm of the national imaginary; the U.S. drops bombs and food on Afghanistan. The articulation of such divergent ideological formations positions a conservative and militaristic agenda to occupy the complete political spectrum in unprecedented ways. This chameleon-like conservatism draws upon liberal discourses – such as feminism, multiculturalism, “democracy,” and inclusion – in the cultural production of the U.S. nation in the wake of 9/11 to articulate U.S. military aggression as a liberal democratic form. Thus people make sense of the events of September 11 through narratives of victimization available in the popular culture of the United States. These secure their meaning through liberal-democratic discursive formations (i.e., feminism, tolerance, multiculturalism) in order to achieve two neo-conservative functions: to mainstream militarization as a daily

practice and to contain dissent arising in the face of U.S. militarism.

- 3 This kind of conservatism may be traced in most recent history to the rise of the “new right” under the global leadership of Reagan and Thatcher (Bello 1994). Of the post-9/11 moment, Mab Segrest writes:
- 4 Our leaders can now make tragically oversimplified arguments (so clearly belied by our own foreign policy) because of thirty years of careful propaganda and political work by the Right that has constantly rerouted conversations about class and power, race and power, gender and power, sexuality and power, into different narratives of “reverse discrimination” or “special rights” or “right to life.” It is as if causes and effects have been so scrambled and distorted, the radar over our causal fields so jammed, that events come to us, quite literally this time, out of the blue and crashing into national consciousness (2003, p. xvii).
- 5 Our work here is to untangle some of the specific cultural moments when this kind of hegemony becomes visible. By “hegemony,” we mean a “dominant cultural order which is consistently preferred, despite its articulation with structures of domination and oppression” (Grossberg 1996, p. 161). While any particular hegemony relies upon the “political work” that precedes it (Segrest 2003), hegemony is “never permanent” because it is an unstable cultural form which shifts over time (Hall 1997). We call the particular, post-9/11 form of hegemony we analyze “chameleon conservatism” to signal the specificity of its form in this historical moment. It draws upon previous rhetorics of “reverse discrimination,” yet it is not the same because the cultural and historical terrain has shifted. Rhetorics from government and popular culture reinforce one another “intertextually” to produce chameleon conservatism. Hence this hegemony appears in popular and government outlets, which prefer similar narratives and interpretations.
- 6 In order to explore the cultural production through which the conservative agenda has achieved its hegemony, we draw from an array of popular and government texts. Many of these texts are ones we enjoy: favorite television shows or magazines we like to read. The selections are not systematic, let alone comprehensive, but they suffice to reveal patterns of chameleon conservatism in popular texts from everyday life. Because hegemony is intertextual, it appears in diverse texts, and what matters is *how*

*we read* them. We might not choose your favorite show or other example of chameleon conservatism, but we would expect it to be susceptible to such a reading. Here we offer a *critical reading practice* that may be applied to any number of texts rather than a critique of a particular set of texts. Of course, texts are polysemic, admitting many readings. Yet hegemony often blinds people to multiple perspectives, curtailing polysemy and even appropriating alternative views. In the face of such hegemony, cultural studies provides a mode of criticism “to enable people to understand what [is] going on, and especially to provide ways of thinking, strategies for survival, and resources for resistance” (Hall 1992, p. 2).

- 7 We begin by examining the ways in which feminist and pluralistic discourses have been mobilized to frame U.S. military aggression as an inevitable outcome “in response to the evil attack.” Then we look at the infiltration of a new multicultural face of militaristic imagery into the realm of the popular. Finally we explore the way the cooptation of liberal discourses circumvents critique and pathologizes individualized voices of dissent.

### **Popular Appropriations**

- 8 If the history begins at the ground zero of 9/11, the question arises, “Why would they do this to us?” The absence of historical knowledge or discussion of U.S. global hegemony made a narrative of innocence and victimization possible. This section examines the conditions of possibility for the seeming inevitability of U.S. military intervention and the containment of dissent.
- 9 In calling attention to regressive uses of victimization in response to 9/11, however, we are not arguing that the attacks on the U.S. were justified or inevitable. Rosalind P. Petchesky describes the reductionism we seek to avoid as “two opposed but mirror-image versions: the narrative, advanced not only by the terrorists and their sympathizers but also by many on the left in the U.S. and around the globe, that blames U.S. cultural imperialism and economic hegemony for the ‘chickens coming home to roost’ versus the patriotic, right-wing version that casts U.S. democracy and freedom as the innocent targets of Islamist madness” (2003, p. 16). We argue that the cultural production of U.S. innocence serves a current hegemony, but we do not say that the U.S. “got what it deserved.” Through critical interrogations of explanations for 9/11, we seek rather to examine how the trope of innocence promotes U.S. militarism and contains dissent.

- 10 In the wake of September 11, there was a proliferation of popular images that attempted to make sense of the day's events. Although television specials produced in the week following 9/11 tried to provide a historical context for U.S. involvement in Afghanistan, the longest surviving and most popular narratives have been the ones that sutured the events of this day to the narrative of victimization. "Isaac and Ishmael," the episode of *The West Wing* written by Aaron Sorkin specifically to address 9/11, presents the U.S. as being attacked for its pluralism and for being an open society. It resolves the anxiety surrounding this construction by arguing that the most heroic or patriotic act is to protect and fight for this particular way of life and these "freedoms." One storyline in the episode involves a group of high school students who are visiting the White House when there is an imminent threat of terrorism against the U.S. They are held for their own safety, becoming the embodiment of what Lauren Berlant (1997) has called the "infantile citizen" as *The West Wing* staff educates them about reasons for the attacks. They learn that elements of American society ranging from Judeo-Christian teachings and women's empowerment in the West to the principle of an open society are unpalatable to fundamentalist terrorists. One staff member, Josh, articulates the notions of liberalism to project an enemy that is narrow-minded, irrational, and ultimately evil. "So what bothers them about us? Well, the variety of cheers alone coming from the cheap seats in Giant stadium when they're playing the Cowboys is enough to start a jihad. To say nothing of street corners lined with church next to synagogue next to mosque. Newspapers, they can print anything they want. And women who can do anything they want. Including taking a rocket ship to outer space, vote, and play soccer. This is a plural society. That means we accept more than one idea. It offends them."
- 11 The enemy constructed by this popular television series is one who is willing to attack a society that is good, free, and innocent, in order to impose his restrictive and fundamentalist views on them. This story frames the U.S. as an innocent player on the world stage, wherein "we" were merely going about our business and "they" invaded us without particular provocation. The implication is that we are being invaded "just for being who we are." This representation justifies a military response because it erases histories of U.S. dominance, locating the attack as an unprovoked and therefore incomprehensible act of evil. The narrative relies on a progressive "American way of life" that may be defended by merely ignoring the political events and continuing with business as usual. Josh's parting words to the students tell them what they

– and by extension, the audience – should do to defend “our” way of life in these troubled times: “Worry about school; go out and meet guys, or girls. Be good to each other; go the movies, parties. Remember pluralism. Do you wanna get these people? If you really want to reach in and kill them where they live? Keep accepting more than one idea. Makes them absolutely crazy!”

- 12 Therefore one of the solutions provided by this special *The West Wing* episode is to defend against a terrorism aimed at the heart of the U.S. – the American way of life – by defiantly continuing to live and celebrate “American” freedoms. This seemingly liberal response appears all the more shocking and admirable when it is set against a reading of the terrorist action as evil and unprovoked. The Bush administration’s response to 9/11 effectively used the construction of a free and plural society under attack. It was organized precisely according to these same two principles. The first response from the administration was to justify military action. It constructed the conflict in binary terms of good vs. evil. It elevated the actions of a few men, not formally associated with any government, to an “act of war” – as opposed to calling it a “criminal act.” This classification set the stage for the military action that members of the administration wanted to pursue, and the mainstream media did not question it in any meaningful manner.
- 13 The second response by Bush was a call to thwart the terrorist intent of attacking American freedoms by having Americans go about their lives “as usual” (September 20, 2001). “Freedoms” were often equated with consumerism to keep American businesses solvent and with returning to work as our patriotic duty. A wide range of media outlets, including National Public Radio, echoed Bush’s call to reinvest in an unreflexive and capitalistic way of life. Thus U.S. popular-cultural narratives of victimization that secure their meaning through liberal-democratic discursive formations served the priority of the Bush administration to support big corporations (instead of laid-off workers). Big business lobbied for corporate aid in the form of special tax breaks and bailouts (Morgenson 2001), and the government awarded billions of dollars in such aid under the guise of protecting the “American way of life.” Rescinding civil rights for average Americans, on the other hand, was classified as part of the strategy of military action.
- 14 Both responses were predicated on the construction of a nation that is good, innocent, and under attack by evil forces. Indeed

Bush's next Thanksgiving speech (November 20, 2001) characterized the nation as a "free, faithful and fair-minded land." Such a construction relies upon a narrative of victimization in order to cast the attacks as unprovoked and illogical. The call for a united "America" within a binary construction of "us vs. them" precluded effective critique of the U.S. government at this time. We were expected to go about our lives in an oblivious fashion to show "the terrorists" that they cannot "get the best of us." Binary constructions of us vs. them, good vs. evil, civilized vs. uncivilized, light vs. dark, civilized vs. barbaric were all evoked by national leaders in the West within the first few hours of the September 11 events. Bush took this discourse to its logical explicit extreme when he stated, "You are either with us, or with the terrorists" (September 20, 2001). Media coverage, instead of questioning such rhetoric, bought into it and built on it.

- 15 The use of the binary in this case was problematic, reducing complicated histories to a simplistic narrative that erases the impact of U.S. foreign policy in the Middle East. It also allowed the U.S. to define the terms of inclusion. Therefore all the nations of the world were placed in the position of proving their loyalty to the U.S. by providing support that went beyond early words. This construction allowed the U.S. to define its problems as the world's problem, centering globe around itself. That equation seldom has worked in the other direction when there has been terrorism – sometimes as a direct impact of U.S. hegemony – in other parts of the world (such as Latin America, Russia, Kashmir, etc.). These binaries linked to the theme of a nation victimized by evil terrorists; they cast the U.S. as the innocent underdog that all the nations of the world must gather to protect. Therefore in a move of chameleon conservatism, the administration successfully appropriated the liberal discourse of pluralism to rally the world to its cause.
- 16 This trope of "us" and "them" also functioned paradoxically in terms of setting up the U.S. as savior of the world. This is a representation born directly from the construction of the American nation as just and as the most powerful in the world. Over the past decade, with the fall of the Soviet Union, this has fed a national investment in America as the "police" of the globe. This articulation of national identity, alongside the evocation of the U.S. as innocent victim, worked to salvage American pride. As used by neo-conservatives, it is contingent on a paradoxical victim-hero construction. Victimization produces anxiety that becomes resolved through regressive or retaliatory measures that are cast as

heroic. Other examples have been the attack on affirmative action, with Proposition 187 in California, the fortification of the U.S.-Mexico border, and the Defense of Marriage Act.

- 17 Even when “America was under attack,” according to the Bush administration rhetoric, America chose to “strike back” with “restraint.” Thus the U.S. took a few weeks to strategize before sending planes to bomb Afghanistan. The military action was “thoughtful” and “just.” It was retaliatory, but framed as a way to “save” the people of Afghanistan. Therefore Bush appropriated liberal suggestions that the U.S. “drop food on Afghanistan instead of bombs” by doing both. This co-opted liberal sentiments to paint his conservative, militaristic agenda as a compassionate one. Much the same can be said of the Bush appeal to each America’s child to do extra chores to make a dollar to send to the children of Afghanistan. These rhetorical campaigns expressed the essential strategy of chameleon conservatism by blatantly hijacking liberal discourses in a move designed, not for “infinite” or even effective justice, but rather for selling the American people on war in Afghanistan as just and compassionate.
- 18 Perhaps the most effective and popular appropriation of liberal discourses to promote this militarism was the Bush use of feminist critiques of the Taliban regime to justify the Afghanistan war. In tow, the media narrated U.S. military action as a campaign to “save” women in Afghanistan who had been forced to live under the repressive regime of the Taliban. This was a blatant co-optation of feminism to justify the use of force. In particular, it tapped liberal feminism, which argues for the rights of women as human beings. This neo-conservative discourse uses U.S. feminist advances and the status of U.S. (white) women (privileged by class, nationality, and color) as a measure by which to judge the lives of Afghani women.
- 19 After September 11, many networks had broadcast specials about Taliban restrictions on women in Afghanistan. CNN presented *Inside Afghanistan: Behind the Veil* (2001), and NBC aired *The War on Women* (2001). Many of these reports were narrated by presumably “liberated” women residing in the West. Once again, the binary construction of the “uncivilized East” vs. the “civilized West” provided the ground against which these narratives took shape and gathered emotional appeal. On CBS, one special about the future of women in Afghanistan was promoted with the question, “Do they have one?” These were popular appropriations of liberal discourses to reinforce the idea that the women in



Afghanistan would not have a future unless the forces of the good and civilized West defeated the forces of the evil, barbaric, male-dominated East. An implication of this rhetoric was that, when the U.S. dropped its bombs, it was doing so not only for citizens of the U.S. but for women in Afghanistan as well. Feminist ideologies were mobilized and rewritten by an ever-changing, chameleon, conservative rhetoric to advance an ongoing militaristic agenda. The irony is that some of those bombs fell on the women the U.S. was supposedly saving, which was seldom acknowledged in the media coverage. More typical was an issue of *Time* that shows unveiled Afghani woman with Anglo features on the cover and presents U.S. military action as based on feminist ideals (Lacayo 2001).

- 20 Neither the U.S. government nor the U.S. media showed significant concern for Afghani women and their suffering under the Taliban. Despite attempts by feminist groups and a few media personalities (e.g., Mavis Leno) to draw global attention to the plight of Afghani women, the U.S. response had been practically non-existent. The U.S.-based Feminist Majority Foundation had been working in collaboration with the Revolutionary Association of the Women of Afghanistan (RAWA) for many years to raise awareness about women oppressed by the Taliban. In May 2001, the Bush Administration had pledged \$43 million to Afghanistan as “emergency aid” for drought, but directed it toward farmers affected by the ban on poppy cultivation that the U.S. government was trying to encourage (Crossette 2001). This ignored the call of feminist organizations to denounce the atrocities against women being committed by the Taliban, and it would have strengthened the hold of a regime that the U.S. did not even recognize officially.
- 21 Therefore it is not surprising that, although the U.S. government and the U.S. media co-opted feminist discourses post 9/11, only the aspects that serve U.S. interests got much attention. For example, the U.S. media continued to ignore abuses committed by the Northern Alliance, abuses documented by feminist organizations such as RAWA. The government and media construction of the Northern Alliance as outnumbered “revolutionaries” erased their abuses, allowing the U.S. government to align with them as “heroic fighters.” Co-opting the feminist critique of the Taliban, previously neglected for five years, helped to construct the West as “civilized” and “heroic” in saving racialized women from the “barbaric” and “evil” Islam of “radical” and “dark” men in the “East.”

- 22 Thus conservative rhetoric occupied a broader part of the political spectrum by co-opting and distorting liberal discourses. The use of binary constructions enabled an “us” vs. “them” orientation able to sustain oxymoronic conduct such as showing compassion toward a nation and bombing it at the same time. The appropriation of liberal discourses helped this conservative rhetoric combine a heroic sense of the American nation with compassion for Americans as underdogs and victims. An America unfairly victimized by evil men would have to strike back to protect “our” way of life. Likewise the distortion of liberal feminism let Americans believe that U.S. military action was meant to save Afghani women. They became merely one more convenient pretext for U.S. military action.

### **Reality TV and the Multicultural Face of U.S. Militarism**

- 23 Self-conscious and increasingly popularized notions of U.S. militarism have been emerging in the wake of 9/11. The Bush administration and the entertainment industry self-consciously joined forces in an effort to secure their mutual interests. “Last month, a White House contingent (including President Bush’s political advisor Karl Rove) met with executives from AOL Time Warner, Universal Studios, the Recording Industry Association of America, Viacom . . . and other entertainment industry types, during which Washington and Hollywood threw around some ideas on how to boost interest in the War on Terrorism.” These interests make the popular culture into an increasingly overt site of “government propaganda” for militarism (Chocano 2002, p. 2).
- 24 In the aftermath of the events of September 11, we saw more images of U.S. military action, and they tapped into a new conservative attention to pluralistic senses of multiculturalism. The formation of a new hero is emerging, a “common man” raised to the status of heroism, whose face is not necessarily white or even male. Within a chameleon-conservative discursive formation, competing and contradictory discourses are fused in this face: imperialistic and multicultural, militaristic and tolerant, individualistic and community-oriented, heartless and compassionate. As Richard Smith, *Newsweek* Chair and Editor-in-Chief, introduced the “Commemorative Issue” of the magazine, “On September 11, an act of hate changed all our lives, but amid the horror of those moments, and in the days and weeks since,

there have been thousands – millions – of individual acts of bravery and generosity, acts that testified to our profound sense of community. Ordinary people made extraordinary contributions. . . . A renewed sense of patriotism united the country, reaffirming our shared values of kindness, tolerance, diversity and liberty” (2001, p. 1). This “renewed sense of patriotism” articulates a set of “shared values” that draw on liberal notions of “kindness, tolerance, diversity and liberty.” Smith linked them to a newly “compassionate” face of military aggression. A few pages into this text, an image of U.S. sailors benignly “waving farewell before shipping out” serves as the unnamed backdrop of “revenge” for a host of stories about “Americans back on our feet” (Auchincloss 2001, pp. 15-16), revealing that these dovish values are contingent on a hawkish geo-political stance.

- 25 Certainly the images of U.S. aggression have proliferated since the unprecedented “attack on America.” Films such as *Black Hawk Down* (2001) gave the nation’s obsession with violence and domination a new sense of righteousness. Older military films are also being rerun, newly advertised and placed against other military programming. In 2002, for instance, movies such as *The Rock* (1996) were programmed immediately after *Combat Missions*, one of a new spate of reality programs focused on themes of U.S. militarism. Each commercial break within *The Rock* flashed to quick-cut shots from *Combat Mission*, collapsing images of the celebrity and the common man into heroic formations. This programming merges the Hollywood glorification of U.S. militarism with the more mundane struggles of “average” citizens in “real” situations.
- 26 Fusing the commercial and the “real” in forming national military heroes becomes a cultural theme. It travels seamlessly through film to reality TV then back on itself to influence the U.S. military and its recruitment practices. This formation naturalizes militarism through tropes of pluralism. It appropriates images of multiculturalism to form a new sense of patriotism that is “tolerant and diverse,” even as it is aggressively militaristic. On one hand, reality TV and the Army recruitment propaganda that has emerged in its wake democratize because they include “average people” in their popular dramas. On the other hand, they narrate U.S. military aggression. What is “democratized” is an inclusive, multicultural space for the U.S. military, suturing militarism and multiculturalism. Here the inclusive function of reality TV as a genre becomes a mechanism for popularizing militaristic themes. They grow in prominence after 9/11, and they blur contrasts

between “reality TV” and “military reality.” In its recruiting, the U.S. military combines tropes and production techniques from this genre with its multiculturalism of stereotyped citizens in a national project of militarism.

- 27 The popularity of the reality genre stems in part from audience identification with the genre’s subjects: ordinary citizens who gain instant celebrity. Coauthoring a book on reality TV with *Survivor*’s first winner, Peter Lance explains that Americans have passed through a phase of fascination with celebrities into period when they can become celebrities. “The whole reality TV thing was sparked by the desire of average people to become celebrities overnight” (Deggans 2002, p. 2). The genre democratizes by blurring distinctions between “average people” and elites. It provides a popular context that foregrounds characteristics “we” all possess and can recognize in ourselves.
- 28 In the aftermath of 9/11, reality television has helped to normalize a militarized America. Initially 9/11 threatened to discredit reality TV as not real enough. “The reality format’s resilience was tested last fall when the September 11 attacks seemed to render contrived reality shows as either silly or offensive. . . . Last year’s ratings sensations have cooled since September 11, and viewers and producers are more aware of the line between edgy and offensive.” Yet this “line” is being redrawn through military themes. “As many as 10 new series expected to turn up on the air in the next several months,” each calling on qualities that would make contestants good soldiers, reveal the inner workings of military operations, or tap themes of American imperialism (Carter 2002, p. 1).
- 29 Thus ABC executives decided that 9/11 made it inappropriate to air *The Runner*, a reality show about an individual “hiding out while the whole country tracked him,” but the network chose to run *The Chair*, a reality show that monitors the vital signs of contestants and penalizes them for “losing their cool” (Carter 2002, p. 2). Fox launched a similar series, *The Chamber*. What makes *The Runner* “inappropriate” and *The Chair* or *The Chamber* appealing in this historical moment? All three programs echoed the U.S. militarism in response to 9/11, but *The Runner* featured a figure interchangeable with Osama Bin Laden, a man hunted by “the whole country.” Would it evoke too much sympathy for – or too much rage at – the hunted individual? Either way, the program was liable to evoke responses unhelpful to American militarism. It might portray everyday people less as military heroes than as

victims of militarized man-hunts. *The Chair* and *The Chamber*, on the other hand, position average citizens in contexts that reward people who control bodily functions in the face of stress. Hence they valorize qualities that can make good soldiers.

- 30 These programs turn the display of military qualities into spectacles. Another set of reality shows make their militarism even more explicit. CBS has plans to run a reality series about fighter-pilot training; while the USA Network has been airing *Combat Missions*, a show where teams of “non-active military and/or law enforcement guys try to complete their ‘missions’ before the others” (Deggans 2002, p. 1). Producer Mark Burnett ties his USA show to the war in Afghanistan: “This war is perfect timing for *Combat Missions*. . . . This is the first exclusively special operations war. Our show was only for special operations troops . . . (so) people have a chance to meet and get to know these people for real . . . see them do everything from taking down a drug lord to rescuing someone. From the beginning, everyone understood, this was a really pro-military, patriotic show” (Deggans 2002, p. 1). With *Combat Missions* produced to be “pro-military” and “patriotic,” Burnett collapses the two. This is a familiar move of chameleon conservatism, treating support for military action as a proof of patriotism.
- 31 The move to militarize reality television is one among many rhetorical devices to much the same effect in American culture since September 11. In 2002, MTV aired a New Year’s Day celebration of the U.S. Armed Forces entitled *For the Troops: An MTV/USO Special*. It blends voices of celebrities and soldiers at the Ramstein Air Base in Germany. Featured guests such as Jennifer Lopez, Kid Rock, Ja Rule, and Carson Daly share their “deep thoughts on the all-around awesomeness of the war in general and the U.S. armed forces in particular.” Editing intersperses these words with outdoor footage of a concert for the soldiers and with “enthusiastic testimonials by young Air Force personnel, who never imagined that joining the Air Force could lead to a tête-à-tête with J. Lo herself” (Chocano 2002, p. 1).
- 32 Fans of Bob Hope know that the program was not unprecedented. What distinguishes it from the USO entertainments instigated by President Roosevelt in 1941 to boost troop morale in World War II is the way it celebrities the ordinary soldiers and their equipment: “This time, the Air Force is the star” (Chocano 2002, p. 1). By melding the popular and the mundane, *For the Troops* normalizes participation in the U.S. Armed Forces even as it

inflates this into spectacle. It configures Ramstein Air Base as a “regular club land” where military personnel “can party at a variety of hangouts, including a country bar and a hip-hop club” (Chocano 2002, p. 1). Yet it glamorizes military equipment as objects of fascination for the stars. Lopez climbs onto an F-16 and compares it to the plane in *Top Gun* (1986), then she expresses a desire to shoot her next video on a large aircraft. Kid Rock and Carson Daly playfully don gas masks, then Kid Rock thanks the U.S. military that he won’t ever have to wear the mask against his will. The overall effect is to frame the work and living spaces of the troops as a music-video playground, hyping the daily objects and practices of military life into a fantasy of ennobling and enjoyable play.

- 33 Ongoing media spectacles occasioned by matters military project the U.S. Armed Forces sites of desire, belonging, and personal growth for average viewers. They can identify with the military personnel, the “cool” qualities valorized, the military lifestyle glorified. The U.S. Army has generated a host of recruitment rhetorics that feed and tap into these desires. “Go Army” ads present young soldiers in hosts of war-game activities that excite by production techniques taken from MTV and reality TV. Quick cuts, unsteady camera shots, and truncated conversations of soldiers are prominent. Ads conclude with the announcement of an easy-to-remember website: “goarmy.com.” The homepage resembles another reality program, *Real World Chicago*. Both layouts picture a multicultural cast of characters in close-up face shots that capture a distinctive personality for each: a young white woman smiling full-faced into the camera, a Latino with his head tilted back, a smiling black man. Their first names are printed boldly beneath their photos.
- 34 *Real World Chicago* celebrates the mundane struggles of young people living in close quarters. “Go Army” projects such possibilities for a wide range of youths who seek places for growing and belonging. The website foregrounds “recruit profiles.” Through quick-cut videos and brief blurbs from each “recruit,” it treats “Basic Training” as a site where “An Army of One” gets made. “Follow the lives of six recruits,” it reads “as this real-life web series captures their nine-week journey from civilian to soldier. Join them each week, via video and multimedia installments, as they overcome their fears, realize their strengths, and master the challenges of basic training.” This user-friendly interface and the appropriation of postmodernist production techniques elevate the daily difficulties of individuals in basic training to the level of popular sagas where civilians become

soldiers and celebrities. As the mother of recruit Michelle Boatner says in one video, “Everyone at work’s been watching her. . . . They want to get her autograph.”

- 35 Click on each soldier’s name, and a “recruit profile” opens. It offers a photograph in a setting that depicts the person’s interests, a brief inscription that summarizes a personal challenge to be overcome in basic training, and a short description of the individual’s “decision to enlist.” A recruit profile also projects “Army Reserve and the future” and “basic training concerns.” It gives a block inscription of the soldier’s age, height, weight, hometown, “MO’s,” and interests. It even provides a series of photographs of the individual at critical points in basic training. Click on any photograph, and a video uses reality-TV style to portray racialized and gendered struggles that lead to a transformative moment for the individual. For Michelle, a young white woman, these are Proving Yourself Wrong, Gas Mask, Basic Rifle Marksmanship, Final Fitness Test, and Final Thoughts. Michelle struggles within each video to overcome her fear of being away from her family. “Proving something to herself” transforms her so that her “self-esteem is at an all-time high.” The challenges for Ever, a first generation immigrant from Mexico, include A Journey for Independence, Pugal Bout, Defensive Live Fire, and A New Respect. Ever grows closer to his mother, and Ever cries as he recounts his realization that “he deserves to be here.”
- 36 This multicultural military provides a site of national belonging for formerly excluded or stereotyped citizens such as blacks, Latinos, and women. Luis Sanchez writes, “The Latino community has constantly been bombarded with the idea that they do not belong and are not American. For this reason and a lack of economic opportunities, throughout history, many Latinos have joined the armed forces to prove their patriotism and support themselves. Since the 9/11 incident, Latinos have been forced once again to prove their patriotism” (Kim 2001, p. 4). Ever’s personal transformation through experiences in basic training attest that he has become an “Army of One.” He is a Mexican immigrant who has proven he belongs in the U.S. at a moment when his group has been under attack through such measures as California Proposition 187 and fortification of the U.S.-Mexico border as well as systematic abuses from the Border Patrol, INS, and employers.
- 37 These connections between reality TV, militarism, and multiculturalism provide a context for making sense of the popularity of U.S. military action in Afghanistan and Iraq. They

help to popularize militarism as a site of identity formation by turning mundane practices and people of the American military into spectacles and celebrities. They tap the rhetorical potential of reality television for democratic plots and multicultural images to present “average citizens” as stars in the U.S. Armed Forces. Thus they support a chameleon conservatism slippery enough to occupy so many positions available in American politics that it undercuts and marginalizes critiques of U.S. military aggression.

### **Containment of Dissent**

- 38 *Another World is Possible: Conversations in a Time of Terror* (Kim 2001) attests to the need for alternative media to open up spaces for dialogue that dissents from the U.S. military response to the events of September 11. As this collection suggests, any critics must envision “another world.” In the forward, Kofi Taha (p. xx) writes that all who witnessed the violence in New York City and Washington D.C. on September 11 were “injured to their human core.” Yet “not everyone believes that revenge will secure peace, that suspended civil liberties will secure safety, that getting back to business as usual is the best solution. Not everyone believes the roots of terrorism simply rest in a fanatical and irrational hatred for freedom, democracy, or the United States.” Therefore this collection “gives voice to the diverse perspectives that the American people did not have an opportunity to hear despite three days of commercial-free, 24 hour-a-day coverage on all major networks.”
- 39 In spite of such extensive coverage, the narration of nation in the current climate has been so truncated that alternative voices are heard with suspicion and hostility. This holds for almost any form of dissent from the inevitability of U.S. military aggression, any departure from the popular depiction of the Taliban and Osama bin Laden as irrational and evil, any criticism of the desire to kill in response to being “attacked.” Recently an email was circulated describing an incident at Princeton when Danny Glover talked against the death penalty. In response to a hostile question about bin Laden deserving death, Glover stated that he is unequivocally against government killing. He was booed off the stage, and many of his ensuing engagements were cancelled. Glover was silenced to a noticeable extent for his refusal to stand behind the public hatred toward bin Laden. In response to such situations, dissenters are left with fragmented tactics. E-mail seems the main medium for such stories, producing a sense of isolation and hopelessness



among those who depart from the conventional wisdom. Introducing the Kim collection, Luis Sanchez writes that he was revitalized to hear Angela Davis speak passionately in a collective space. It was not that he heard “anything new.” Rather “I was in a room full of people I felt connected to, not sitting alone in front of my computer. I was listening to someone speak passionately, not reading an email easier to delete than forward” (2001, p. 2).

- 40 The recent cultural production of “September 11” contains dissent by circumscribing the national narrative through several forms of erasure. Conspicuously absent are criticism, images or words of protest, and modes of mobilization other than military. Media coverage pathologizes people whose experiences, choices, or voices contest America’s liberal militarism. This trend emerges in popular stories of individuals incongruent with the hegemonic narrative: John Walker Lindh, April Ray, and Charles Bishop.
- 41 Each account draws upon tropes of the bizarre and inexplicable in an effort to explain the “un-Americanness” of a few “Americans.” This framing delegitimizes the critiques that these figures offer. Walker’s story is the widely published account of how a “bright, quiet kid from the heart of hot-tub country” becomes an “American Taliban” (Thomas 2001, p. 30). Ray, the “American wife of a bin Laden operative,” is an “enigma” – a “devout Muslim” who defends her husband’s innocence in the face of evidence linking him to “a plot that killed 250 people and injured 5,000 more” through an Embassy attack (Peraino 2001, p. 42). Bishop’s “troubled past” shows how he was “inspired by the terrorist attacks on the World Trade Center” (Dahlburg 2002, p. A1) to crash a private plane into a Bank of America Plaza building and why he left a suicide note “declaring support for Osama bin Laden (Listan 2002, p. 48).
- 42 The challenges to patriotism and the pathologies assigned to these people undermine the legitimacy of the counter-narratives that emerge within the stories of Walker, Ray, and Bishop. The accounts are framed in psychological terms, focusing on family problems that span lines of race and religion, but emphasize religious experiments that stray from Christianity. The tone alternates between pity and contempt as the lives of Walker, Ray, and Bishop are told in ways that render them powerless, pathetic, pathological. Let us focus on John Walker, whose story is the most widely publicized of the three.

- 43 Media stories frame the Walker family as permissive: liberal and tolerant in ways that gave him too little guidance, opening the way for his “extremist” turn. To be “nonjudgmental, even supportive” of John’s “conversion,” his parents financed his endeavors abroad – although they “balked at calling him ‘Suleyman,’” his chosen Islamic name (Thomas 2001, p. 34). John’s father, Frank Lindh is said to be “nonjudgmental” and “proud” of his son’s “alternative course.” He remarked on the *Early Morning Show*, “I don’t think John was doing anything wrong.” Then on *Good Morning America*, he said, “We want to give him a big hug and then a little kick in the butt for not telling us what he was up to” (Thomas 2001, p. 36). Yet such “gentle chiding” does not square with the hatred provoked for Walker’s “treason.” Letters to *Time* reveal a sense of violent outrage. As one writer put it, “I believe that if I had come upon him in Afghanistan, we wouldn’t have had to face the problem of what to do with him” (Houx 2002, p. 10). George W. Bush’s earlier comments on an ABC interview legitimated the contempt: “Make him leave his hair the way it is and his face as dirty as it is and let him go wandering around this country and see what kind of sympathy he would get” (Klaidman 2001, p. 21).
- 44 Walker’s family is not said to be unstable, but its liberal attitudes are condemned as too lenient, in contrast to the “tough liberalism” outlined in previous sections. Their irresponsible liberalism put them “out of touch with reality.” Walker came from the “most liberal, tolerant place in America, yet he was drawn to the most illiberal, intolerant sect in Islam, the Taliban” (Thomas 2001, p. 32). Such stories mark the limits of “liberalism” within broader discursive formations surrounding 9/11 as they pathologize the Walkers’ liberalism as “relativism.” Walker’s home in Marin County is “mocked by the cartoon strip *Doonesbury* as the epicenter of the self-esteem movement, a land of hot tubs, Rolfing, and a bastion of moral relativism where divorces were for a time listed alongside marriages in the newspaper” (p. 33). Marin County is “fringe country,” its values so different from those of “mainstream America.” The gap in “values” explains how Walker could turn “traitor.” Thus Walker’s story loses its power to either stand in for or mobilize wider discontent with U.S. geopolitics. Instead, he is dismissed as liberalism run rampant and turned surreal. He is not a result of what is “real,” because Marin is too preoccupied with self-indulgence to stay in touch with mainstream America. Walker’s story becomes the trivial tale of a whim by some upper-middle-class boy in search of himself, not a man who is disenchanted with the U.S. and its “freedoms.”

45 Non-Christian religious forms also become rationale for dismissal of the potentially radical choices made by the figures within these texts. Marilyn Walker “was a child of the ’60s who dabbled in Buddhism” (p. 33). She strays too far from an unnamed Christian core that safeguards against the relativism that opens the door to illicit explorations of identity and affinity. Supposedly as a result of lax parenting, John explored alternative modes of connecting with others, forming community, and challenging social norms. At the “height of his fascination with hip-hop,” he may have been exploring anti-racism. In an e-mail exchange, he “appeared to pose as an African American, writing, ‘Our blackness should not make white people hate us’” (p. 33). He seems to have experimented with resistive identities and ties related to criticism of the structures of power that he had occupied. His life was “transformed” at 16 when he read *The Autobiography of Malcolm X* (1973). “Some internet postings examined by *Newsweek* show that young Walker soon became pretty militant himself” (Thomas 2001, p. 33). The evidence for his “militancy” is an e-mail that challenges the notion of Nas as “a God.” Walker writes, “then why does he smoke blunts, drink Moet, fornicate, and make dukey music? That’s a rather pathetic ‘god,’ if you ask me” (p. 33). The story does not provide the connections between Walker’s email and his alleged “militancy.” Instead it makes a move of chameleon conservatism: Walker’s own conservative reading of Nas (as one who “drinks, smokes, and fornicates”) gets read as “militant.” The story slides from the standard conservative criticism of liberalism as permissive and relativist to treating Walker’s conservatism as militancy. This obscures the conservative constructions at work, it protects conservatism from criticism in connection with Walker, and it keeps Walker’s turn to the Taliban from implying any effective criticism of U.S. geopolitics.

46 The figures of April Ray and Charles Bishop have been pathologized in ways that mirror that of Walker. Their behavior is depicted as “mysterious,” then it is explained by unstable families and religious experiments. Because her mother was “married five times,” Ray “didn’t have much of a father figure growing up.” She “dabbled in Judaism and Buddhism before settling – finally, at 40 – on Islam” (Peraino 2002, p. 43). Ray was raised Islamic since the age of 15: roughly the time of Walker’s “conversion” and Bishop’s suicide. Ray’s marriage to Wadih El-Hage was arranged by her mother. On seeing his photograph, Ray is said to have worried, “This man’s going to beat me” (p. 43). Supposedly Ray has shifted between competing and incompatible identities. She has been “just another struggling young American mother,” yet she

also has been a potential traitor: “In parsing out Ray’s statements about her husband and his shadowy activities, it is difficult to sort out what may be psychological denial or stonewalling, and what is just blind faith” (p. 42). As a young “American mother” and a victim deluded by her “unstable upbringing,” she was correct to think that El-Hage would “beat her” in one form another. As a prospective traitor, however, she become an ominous threat. Either way, Ray is pathologized and discredited. Her claims that Bin Laden “was a great boss” and “not the monster that people make him out to be” can be presented as the prattlings of a madwoman.

- 47 Charles Bishop is depicted as “craving attention” (Rosenberg 2002, p. 40) because of his parents’ instability. Twice they attempted double suicide. Bishop’s father was an abusive Arab American who left the family when Charles was a boy, and his mother “moved around the country” a lot (Liston 2002, p. 48). The “despair beneath his wings” arose, at least in part, from his mixed race and religious background: “during the Gulf war [his mother] changed their name to Bishop to rid themselves of his father’s Arabic surname” (p. 48). Long after disappearing, the father tried to track him through the non-white name. The story frames its multicultural and interracial ingredients into impure affective investments and dangerous cultural crossings by good white Americans. They seem deadly for the children who result from such unions. The pathology of Bishop’s ethnic past overshadows even the criticism of his actions: crashing a plane into a Bank of America building, veering “menacingly over Tampa’s MacDill Air Base” (from which the war in Afghanistan has been directed), and leaving a suicide note sympathetic to Bin Laden.
- 48 Each of these cases show how the rhetoric of chameleon conservatism stifles dissent from the militarization of America. Chameleon conservatism frames dissidents as individuals, rather than representatives, then pathologizes them. It pre-empts wider histories of discontent, and it leaves little room for criticisms of “America” that could explain such deviant actions. Consistent with the encompassing formation after 9/11, the discourse of chameleon conservatism constructs these individuals as enigmatic, dangerous, and despised.

## **Conclusion**

- 49 The conservative agenda has achieved an unprecedented hegemony in the U.S. post 9/11 through its chameleon ability to co-opt critical discourses. Binary constructions of 9/11 have allowed chameleon conservatism to hijack feminist critiques of the treatment of women in Afghanistan, redirecting these into support for militarism. Chameleon conservatism has taken over liberal discourses about the U.S. as an open, plural society, turning those into a frame for U.S. military aggression as a response to evil and as an inevitable outcome of 9/11. Chameleon conservatism has misappropriated multicultural and democratic images of ordinary people as celebrities, making them into popular faces for military recruitment. Thus military mobilization merges with reality TV in popular media. All these moves marginalize voices of dissent and circumvent resistance to militarism in America. By pathologizing individuals whose actions, identities, and relations defy the dominant 9/11 narrative, the rhetoric of chameleon conservatism silences potential critics and disperses the constituencies that might heed them.
- 50 These strategies of chameleon conservatism co-opt feminist, liberal, and democratic discourses in order to militarize the nation and contain dissent. They have expanded the agenda of chameleon conservatism to occupy a large space in the political spectrum. To articulate oppositional stances to the chameleon form of conservatism becomes particularly difficult. It appears to slide across the spectrum in ways that sustain its hegemony, incorporating and often distorting dissident discourses to its advantage. There seems no space in mainstream media to formulate a critique of this conservative agenda. It is pervasive, changes forms, and appropriates oppositional discourses. Cultural critics do well to become aware of the chameleon properties of this neo-conservatism and to examine how it maneuvers the popular imaginary to silence dissent. It is hard to know exactly how these meanings might evolve and settle eventually within the national imaginary. Outlets that voice criticism pre-empted by mainstream media can become crucial at this historical juncture. Only they can create collective spaces for authors, readers, teachers, and students to form communities of resistance.

© Aimee Carrillo Rowe and Sheena Malhotra, 2003.

## References

- Auchincloss, Kenneth. 2001. "Back on Our Feet." *Newsweek*, Commemorative Issue, Fall, pp. 14-18.
- Bello, W. 1994. *Dark Victory: The United States, Structural Adjustment and Global Poverty*. London: Pluto Press with Food First.
- Berlant, L. 1997. *The Queen of America Goes to Washington City*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press.
- Bush, George W. 2001. "Address to a Joint Session of Congress and the American People," September 20, [www.whitehouse.gov/news/releases/2001/09/20010920-8.html](http://www.whitehouse.gov/news/releases/2001/09/20010920-8.html).
- Bush, George W. 2001. "President's Proclamation." *New York Times*, November 20, p. A14.
- Carter, B. 2002. "Reality Television Shows Demonstrate Resilience." *New York Times*, January 7, [www.nytimes.com/2002/01/07/business/media/07TUBE.html?ei=5040&en=fc791f3](http://www.nytimes.com/2002/01/07/business/media/07TUBE.html?ei=5040&en=fc791f3).
- Chocano, C. 2002. "MTV Wants You!" [www.salon.com/ent/tv/diary/2002/01/02/mtv\\_uso/print.html](http://www.salon.com/ent/tv/diary/2002/01/02/mtv_uso/print.html).
- Crossette, B. 2001. "Taliban's Ban on Poppy a Success, U.S. Aides Say." *New York Times*, May 20, Section 1, p.7.
- Dahlburg, J. T. 2002. "Boy Who Crashed Plane Carried Note of Sympathy for Bin Laden." *Los Angeles Times*, January 7, pp. A-1 and 16.
- Deggans, E. 2002. "Changing Reality TV." *St. Petersburg Times*, January 11, [www.sptimes.com/2002/01/07/news\\_ps/Floridian/Changing\\_reality\\_TV.html](http://www.sptimes.com/2002/01/07/news_ps/Floridian/Changing_reality_TV.html).
- Grossberg, L. 1996. "History, Politics and Postmodernism: Stuart Hall and Cultural Studies." In D. Morley and K. H. Chen, eds., *Stuart Hall: Critical Dialogues in Cultural Studies*. London: Routledge, pp. 151-173.

- Grossberg, L., C. Nelson, and P. Treichler. 1992. "Introduction." In L. Grossberg, C. Nelson, and P. Treichler, eds., *Cultural Studies*. New York: Routledge.
- Hall, S. 1997. "The Work of Representation." In S. Hall, ed., *Representation: Cultural Representations and Signifying Practices*. Thousand Oaks: Sage.
- Houx, M. 2002. "Letters to the Editor: The Case of John Walker." *Time*, January 14, p. 10.
- Kim, J., and others, eds. 2001. *Another World Is Possible*. New Orleans: Subway and Elevated Press.
- Klaidman, D., Michael Isikoff. 2001. "Walker's Rush with bin Laden." *Newsweek*, December 31, 2001 - January 7, 2002, pp. 20-21.
- Lacayo, R. 2001. "About Face." *Time*, December 3, pp. 34-49.
- Liston, B., and T. Padgett. 2002. "Despair Beneath His Wings." *Time*, January 21, p. 48.
- Morgenson, G. 2001. "Market Watch: Hands Out, Even in a Time of Crisis." *New York Times*, November 4, Section 3, p.1.
- Peraino, K., and Evan Thomas. 2002. "Odyssey into Jihad." *Newsweek*, January 14, pp. 40-48.
- Petchesky, R. P. 2003. "Phantom Towers: Feminist Reflections on the Battle between Global Capitalism and Fundamentalist Terrorism." In M. J. Alexander, L. Albrecht, S. Day, and M. Segrest, eds., *Sing, Whisper, Shout, Pray: Feminist Visions for a Just World*. Canada: Edgework.
- Rosenburg, D. 2002. "A Troubled Teenager's Tragic Final Flight Plan." *Newsweek*, January 21, pp. 40-41.
- Sanchez, L. 2001. "Introduction" to *Another World Is Possible*, J. Kim and others, eds. New Orleans: Subway and Elevated Press, p. 2.

- Segrest, M. 2003. "Introduction." In M. J. Alexander, L. Albrecht, S. Day, and M. Segrest, eds., *Sing, Whisper, Shout, Pray: Feminist Visions for a Just World*. Canada: Edgework.
- Smith, Richard. 2001. "Spirit of America." *Newsweek*, Commemorative Issue, Fall, p. 1.
- Taha, K. 2001. "Forward" to *Another World Is Possible*, J. Kim and others, eds. New Orleans: Subway and Elevated Press.
- Thomas, Evan. 2001. "A Long, Strange Trip to the Taliban." *Newsweek*, December 17, pp. 30-36.
- U.S. Army. 2002. "Basic Training: The Making of an Army of One." January 10, <http://www.goarmy.com/basic/index.htm>.
- X, Malcolm, and Haley, Alex. 1979. *The Autobiography of Malcolm X*. New York: Ballantine Books.