

Reimagining Traitors: Pearl Abraham's *American Taliban* and the Case of John Walker Lindh

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Pearl Abraham's 2010 novel *American Taliban* uses the "true" story of John Walker Lindh, a white US citizen captured fighting for the Taliban in Afghanistan in 2001, to reflect on the intense mediation of public trauma in the early days of the "War on Terror." This article discusses the significance of *American Taliban* as a post-“9/11” work of literary fiction which, by imagining individual agency and interrogating the relationship between a racialized “Americanness,” treason and sovereignty, invites its readers to be critical of historical, political and media narratives in the so-called “post-truth era.”

At the beginning of December 2001, in a segment of Comedy Central's *The Daily Show* titled “Operation Enduring Coverage,” American political satirist Jon Stewart challenged his viewers to “try wrapping [their] spinning heads around this one: meet twenty-year-old John Walker [Lindh], an American citizen turned Taliban soldier, recently captured after the prison uprising in Mazar-e-Sharif.”¹ Stewart was joined by American humorist Maurice “Mo” Rocca, who satirized Lindh’s biography as “a recipe for radical Islamic fundamentalism. An intelligent child, growing up with not one loving parent, but two loving parents, a family that’s making that difficult transition from upper middle class to lower upper class ... it’s textbook, Jon.”² Both

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¹ Jon Stewart, “Operation Enduring Coverage: John Walker Lindh,” *The Daily Show with Jon Stewart* on Comedy Central, 4 Dec. 2001, at www.cc.com/video-clips/wodc7w/the-daily-show-with-jon-stewart-operation-enduring-coverage---john-walker-lindh, accessed 10 Oct. 2016.

² Jon Stewart and Maurice Alberto “Mo” Rocca, “Operation Enduring Coverage: Privileged Upbringing?”, *The Daily Show with Jon Stewart* on Comedy Central, 4 Dec. 2001, at www.cc.com/video-clips/tckwo/the-daily-show-with-jon-stewart-operation-enduring-coverage---privileged-upbringing, accessed 10 Oct. 2016.

Stewart and Rocca play with the common misconceptions surrounding the “un-American Other,” who, in the post-“9/11” imagination, takes the shape of the “Islamic extremist” or “terrorist”;³ a necessarily repugnant figure, the “terrorist” appears as socially inept, a loner with reduced intellect and inferior education, originating from a broken family and an impoverished economic background. The *Daily Show* segment identifies the American public’s confusion when they were confronted with the paradox of an “all-American Other” soon after the beginning of the “War on Terror”: a white, young, Californian man from a wealthy, liberal family who was captured fighting for the Taliban – which, in the polarizing discourse of the Bush administration, was synonymous with fighting for Osama bin Laden himself.⁴

This early post-“9/11” confusion, amplified by the swift military response ambiguously named the “War on Terror,” brought into question the nature of “home” and belonging in the US. Literary critic Richard Gray alludes to the imaginary “Homeland” onto which US citizens were dislocated when he argues that, post-“9/11,” “Americans find themselves living in an interstitial space,” caught between “the culture(s) of the nation and the culture of the global marketplace,” a space made more radical by the “encounter with terrorism and the experience of counter terrorism.”⁵ Since the attacks, post-“9/11” American literature has been negotiating these encounters and attempting to diagnose the nature of the crisis in various ways. The consensus in “9/11” literary studies is that early novels, such as Jonathan Safran Foer’s *Extremely Loud and Incredibly Close* and Claire Messud’s *The Emperor’s Children*, although significant in the American literary landscape in their own ways, failed to abandon the exceptionalist lens which emerged in the immediate aftermath of the attacks.⁶ Gray is critical of such early literary “responses to crisis” because they failed, he argues, both formally and politically, to imagine survival after “the end of the world” without giving in to the “seductive pieties of home, hearth and family” and to “the equally seductive myth of American exceptionalism” –

³ Following from Jacques Derrida’s assertion that “when you say ‘September 11’ you are already citing” (Giovanna Borradori, *Philosophy in a Time of Terror: Dialogues with Jürgen Habermas and Jacques Derrida* (Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press, 2003), 85), throughout this essay I will use the label “9/11” inside quotation marks.

⁴ President George Bush Jr., Joint Session of Congress, 20 Sept. 2001: “We condemn the Taliban regime. It is not only repressing its own people, it is threatening people everywhere by sponsoring and sheltering and supplying terrorists. By aiding and abetting murder, the Taliban regime is committing murder ... The Taliban must act, and act immediately. They will hand over the terrorists, or they will share in their fate.” At www.theguardian.com/world/2001/sep/21/september11.usa13, accessed 10 Oct. 2016.

⁵ Richard Gray, *After the Fall: American Literature since 9/11* (Chichester: Wiley-Blackwell, 2011), 18.

⁶ Jonathan Safran Foer, *Extremely Loud and Incredibly Close* (Boston, MA: Houghton Mifflin, 2005); Claire Messud, *The Emperor’s Children* (New York: Knopf, 2006).

and, implicitly, without dissolving “public crisis in the comforts of the personal.”⁷

If, as Paul Petrovic argues, early fictional responses to “9/11” “occasionally silenced instances of political resistance and overly fetishized national victimhood,” towards the end of the first decade of the twenty-first century the “9/11” novel started undergoing a generic transition embodied in stories told through “a more pluralistic and ambiguous lens.”⁸ Later “9/11” novels incorporate wider sociohistorical contexts of key events within more inclusive paradigms of representation containing elements of “the fantastical, the allegorical, the ethnic, and the international.”⁹ “Second-wave” “9/11” novels, such as Shaila Abdullah’s *Saffron Dreams*, Giannina Braschi’s *United States of Banana*, and Cara Hoffman’s *Be Safe I Love You*, complicate the early “9/11” literary canon by moving away from the American-exceptionalist lens of victimhood and marginalization and towards a multiplicity of (possibly disparate) cultural perspectives – including military involvement in the “War on Terror,” immigrant experience and identity, and the empire as a dominant presence in the American imaginary.¹⁰ Another “wave” emerging out of the 2008–9 period has been suggested by critics like Richard Gray and Elleke Boehmer, who noted the new postcolonial context made visible particularly by Joseph O’Neill’s *Netherland* and Mohsin Hamid’s *The Reluctant Fundamentalist*; according to Gray, the novels pursue a “strategy of deterritorialization” which, “instead of stressing the opposition between, say, First and Third Worlds, West and East, the colonizer and the colonized, [concentrates] on the faultlines themselves, on border situations and thresholds as the sites where identities are performed and contested.”¹¹ Elleke Boehmer calls for a rethinking of terrorism as the postcolony’s act of resistance to the “colonial formations of sovereignty, policing, and surveillance” and argues that “the history of neoliberal globalization and America’s place within it” are “inextricably entwined” with what Hamid notes as the imperialist agenda of the “War on Terror.”¹²

In this article, I examine Pearl Abraham’s 2010 *American Taliban*, a novel which expands the “true” story of John Walker Lindh into a reflection on the

⁷ Gray, 17.

⁸ Paul Petrovic (ed.), *Representing 9/11: Trauma, Ideology, and Nationalism in Literature, Film, and Television* (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2015), x–xi. ⁹ Ibid., x.

¹⁰ Ibid., x–xvii; Shaila Abdullah, *Saffron Dreams* (Ann Arbor, MI: Modern History Press, 2009); Giannina Braschi, *United States of Banana* (Seattle: AmazonCrossing, 2011); Cara Hoffman, *Be Safe I Love You* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2014).

¹¹ Gray, 55, 65; Mohsin Hamid, *The Reluctant Fundamentalist* (San Diego, CA: Harcourt, 2007); Joseph O’Neill, *Netherland* (New York: Harper Perennial, 2008).

¹² Elleke Boehmer and Stephen Morton (eds.), *Terror and the Postcolonial* (Chichester: Wiley-Blackwell, 2010), 7, 14.

intense mediation of public trauma in a post-“9/11” world.¹³ The text’s thematic concerns both echo and complicate the early post-“9/11” novel’s generic propensity towards familial crisis. By highlighting themes such as the broken contract between the individual and the state, the problematic equivalence between “whiteness” and “innocence,” and the imperialist agenda of the “War on Terror,” *American Taliban* destabilizes the myth of American exceptionalism and subscribes to the categories which define the later stages of the post-“9/11” novel. With its focus on the interplay between fact and fiction, mythology and history, and state fantasy and resistance, Abraham’s novel is a timely warning against the oversimplifying discourses of the so-called “post-truth era”; the text asks what it means to be “American,” “un-American” or “anti-American,” and it encourages the reader to be critical of historical, political and media narratives. Within the post-“9/11” literary genre, *American Taliban* is innovative in its portrayal of the “all-white American” homegrown “terrorist,” a gesture of resistance against the discourse of white American innocence, victimhood and exceptionalism. As the point of origin for the as-yet endless “War on Terror,” in itself a product of the interplay between fact and fiction, the “9/11” moment continues to dominate contemporary discourses. As John Duvall and Robert Marzec argue, post-“9/11” literature matters because, “by imagining individual and political agency, contemporary narrative maps the fantasies that mediate the everyday experience of empire and at curious moments extends an invitation for us to think historically.”¹⁴ Works of post-“9/11” literary fiction such as *American Taliban* continue to resist these processes of mythologization and historical revisionism used to justify the United States’ imperialist agenda through stories that destabilize racial hierarchies and privileged viewpoints.

JOHN WALKER LINDH, THE WHITE “AMERICAN TALIBAN”: MEDIA NARRATIVES

John Walker Lindh was captured on 1 December 2001, following the violent confrontation in the Qala-i-Jangi fortress outside Mazar-e-Sharif between Northern Alliance troops, supported by US forces, and Taliban prisoners of war. As the first white-skinned American captured since the start of the “War on Terror,” Lindh became a liability for the Department of Justice and his story was singled out and widely reported in the mainstream media upon his return to the US. A Nexis search stretching from 11 September

¹³ Pearl Abraham, *American Taliban* (New York: Random House, 2010).

¹⁴ John N. Duvall and Robert P. Marzec (eds.), *Narrating 9/11: Fantasies of State, Security, and Terrorism* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2015), 3.

2001 until 1 May 2017 in US newspapers returns 581 results featuring John Walker Lindh's name in headlines and lead paragraphs;¹⁵ in contrast, the other US citizen captured at Qala-i-Jangi, Yaser Hamdi, a Saudi American born in Baton Rouge, Louisiana, was virtually invisible in US mainstream media, appearing only thirteen times in a search with the same parameters.¹⁶ John Lindh became the object of fascination, the "bad white" of Westerns who, despite failing to fully "attain whiteness" because of his association with nonwhite Others, nevertheless reasserts the complexity of white identity.¹⁷

Lindh's capture led to the rapid growth of two media narratives: one in which he was the supervillain, an American "traitor," and an "enemy within," and another in which he was a sweet, innocent, patriotic American boy who found himself in the wrong place at the wrong time. Initially, Lindh was taken to a nearby hospital, where, after receiving first aid and morphine, he was interviewed and filmed without his consent by CNN journalist Robert Young Pelton. Two carefully selected minutes of footage were broadcast via satellite the next day; the image of this dirty, bearded, long-haired, wounded and incoherent American prisoner of war was shown on television screens across the country confessing, "my heart became attached to [the Taliban]."¹⁸ Lindh's words were framed and delivered to the public as an admission of treason and as a pledge of allegiance to the most dangerous enemy of the US, Osama bin Laden.¹⁹ The day after the broadcast of Pelton's two-minute interview teaser, John Lindh's father Frank also appeared on CNN, on the talk show *Larry King Live*, where he inaugurated this second public narrative by describing his son as "nothing ... other than a kid, a boy really, who converted to a religion that I respect and seemed very healthy and good for him."²⁰ The *New York Post* oscillated between the two narratives and

¹⁵ Nexis search on "John Walker Lindh" in Headlines & Lead Paragraphs in US Newspapers, custom dates: 11 Sept. 2001–1 May 2017, at www.nexis.com/api/version1/sr?sr=%28%28head%28john+walker+lindh%29%29%29+and+date%28%3E%3D2001-09-11+and+%3C%3D2017-05-01%29&csi=140954&oc=o0240&shr=t&scl=t&hac=f&hct=f&nonLatin1Chars=true&crth=off, accessed 10 May 2017.

¹⁶ Nexis search on "Yaser Hamdi" in Headlines & Lead Paragraphs in US Newspapers, custom dates: 11 Sept. 2001–1 May 2017, at www.nexis.com/api/version1/sr?sr=%28%28head%28yaser+hamdi%29%29%29+and+date%28%3E%3D2001-09-11+and+%3C%3D2017-05-01%29&csi=140954&oc=o0240&shr=t&scl=t&hac=f&hct=f&nonLatin1Chars=true&crth=off, accessed 10 May 2017.

¹⁷ Richard Dyer, *White* (London and New York: Routledge, 1997), 35.

¹⁸ Abraham, 225.

¹⁹ "Transcript of John Walker Interview," CNN, 4 July 2002, at <http://edition.cnn.com/2001/WORLD/asiapcf/central/12/20/ret.walker.transcript>, accessed 21 Aug. 2016.

²⁰ Justin Pritchard, "Attorney of 'American Taliban' Held in Afghanistan Releases Letter to Family," *Associated Press*, 11 Dec. 2001, at www.nexis.com/docview/getDocForCuiReq?

called Lindh a “sweet American kid”²¹ one day and a “US rat” the next.²² *USA Today* dubbed Lindh a “self-proclaimed holy warrior for the Taliban,”²³ whilst the *Daily News* published a scathing piece on the online presence of the “turn-coat Yank.”²⁴ Partisan media picked their battles on both sides of the Atlantic, with left-wing, liberal broadsheet newspapers such as *The New York Times*, *The Washington Post* and *The Guardian* joining Lindh’s parents’ cause by publishing articles and opinion pieces advocating leniency in the case and lobbying for the presidential pardon as recently as the last year of the Obama administration.²⁵

Although problematic and elastic, the labels “American,” “un-American,” and “anti-American” indicate the type of identity assigned to an individual in a discourse or narrative, and they speak of the individual’s place in the hierarchical structure created by said discourse or narrative. The meaning of these descriptors depends on the ideological and mythological framework from which they originate. In the Lindh case, the meaning of the label “American” emerges from the media narratives on both conservative and liberal sides of the argument. Whether portrayed as a “traitor” or as a “patriot,” Lindh is discussed within a framework in which “Americanness” coincides with whiteness. In an article from 2006, Sean Brayton analyses the connotations associated with “race” in *Time* magazine’s coverage of the case and identifies Lindh’s conversion to Islam as a turning point in the media narrative. Lindh is afforded a type of “discursive redemption” in the shape of

²¹ [lni=44N3-DKMo-0o9F-R1JJ&csi=140954&oc=00240&perma=true](https://www.nexis.com/docview/getDocForCuiReq?lni=44N3-DKMo-0o9F-R1JJ&csi=140954&oc=00240&perma=true), accessed 6 March 2017.

²² Cathy Burke, “How ‘Sweet’ American Kid Joined Taliban,” *New York Post*, 3 Dec. 2001, at www.nexis.com/docview/getDocForCuiReq?lni=44K8-B8No-0o8R-F25N&csi=140954&oc=00240&perma=true, accessed 6 March 2017.

²³ John Lehmann and Niles Lathem, “U.S. Rat Gets Grilled as Two More Surface,” *New York Post*, 4 Dec. 2001, at www.nexis.com/docview/getDocForCuiReq?lni=44KX-FVFo-0o8R-F2NB&csi=140954&oc=00240&perma=true, accessed 6 March 2017.

²⁴ Martin Kasindorf and Jon Swartz, “Calif. Man’s Capture as Taliban Fighter Stuns Family,” *USA Today*, 4 Dec. 2001, at www.nexis.com/docview/getDocForCuiReq?lni=44KG-BWSo-01oF-K1K2&csi=140954&oc=00240&perma=true, accessed 6 March 2017.

²⁵ Helen Kennedy, “Internet Traces His Path to Taliban: Turncoat Yank’s Switch from Hip-Hop Fan to Islam,” *Daily News*, 11 Dec. 2001, at www.nexis.com/docview/getDocForCuiReq?lni=44MY-DVPo-0oTo-G4GT&csi=140954&oc=00240&perma=true, accessed 6 March 2017.

²⁶ See, for example, Frank Lindh, “America’s ‘Detainee 001’: The Persecution of John Walker Lindh,” *The Guardian*, 10 July 2011, at www.theguardian.com/world/2011/jul/10/john-walker-lindh-american-taliban-father, accessed 22 Aug. 2016; Jane Mayer, “Lost in the Jihad,” *New Yorker*, 10 March 2003, at www.newyorker.com/magazine/2003/03/10/lost-in-the-jihad, accessed 8 May 2017; and Paul Theroux, “Pardon the American Taliban,” *New York Times*, 22 Oct. 2016, at www.nytimes.com/2016/10/23/opinion/sunday/pardon-the-american-taliban.html, accessed 8 May 2017.

nostalgic stories about his “regular” childhood in a mythologized all-white, middle-class, Christian American suburbia – a story of redemption refused to racialized Others such as Yaser Hamdi.²⁶ In narratives about his upbringing, Lindh is distanced from American Muslims racially and geographically and portrayed within the parameters of an “unthreatening, unassuming,” and ultimately “innocent” whiteness.²⁷ Mary K. Bloodsworth-Lugo and Carmen R. Lugo-Lugo argue that a similar discursive “whitening” is employed in Lindh’s sentencing memorandum, where “racially-coded descriptors used by [expert witnesses such as Rohan Gunaratna] were employed strategically to detach Lindh from other enemy combatants suspected to be terrorists.”²⁸ Through these stories set in a mythologized, racially exclusive, pre-“9/11” nation, media discourses such as the one produced by *Time* magazine effectively rewrite the boundaries of the US as “quintessentially white.”²⁹

As Anne R. Slifkin argues in an insightful 2002 article, the Lindh case is a good example of collaboration between the political and journalistic discourses with the purpose of focussing “public attention” by “giving high-priority coverage” to a story through news and talk shows.³⁰ Slifkin aptly notes that both sides of the debate were problematic and oversimplified: the liberal media promoted the idea that a white, upper-middle-class young man could be nothing but profoundly innocent, whereas the conservative media called Lindh a “traitor” prior to the trial and without substantial proof.³¹ Right-wing publications, from *USA Today* to the *Daily News*, acted as a mouthpiece for the political discourse of the Bush administration by explicitly portraying Lindh as a high-profile “traitor,” especially prior to his indictment on 5 February 2002. Rudy Giuliani, then mayor of New York City, said, “I believe the death penalty would be an appropriate remedy to consider ... But I don’t know all the legal issues involved,” a statement which was reported by the *Daily News* under the headline “Rudy: Death if He’s Traitor; Says Evidence Suggests Taliban Yank’s Guilty.”³² The same newspaper reported Attorney General John Ashcroft’s statement about trying to build a case of

²⁶ Sean Brayton, “An American Werewolf in Kabul: John Walker Lindh, the Construction of ‘Race’, and the Return to Whiteness,” *International Journal of Media and Cultural Politics*, 2, 2 (2006), 167–82, 172–73.

²⁷ Ibid., 172.

²⁸ Mary K. Bloodsworth-Lugo and Carmen R. Lugo-Lugo, *Containing (Un)American Bodies* (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 2010), 49.

²⁹ Brayton, 176.

³⁰ Anne R. Slifkin, “John Walker Lindh,” *South Atlantic Quarterly*, 101, 2 (Spring 2002), 417–24, 418.

³¹ Ibid., 419.

³² Bill Hutchinson, “Rudy: Death if He’s Traitor; Says Evidence Suggests Taliban Yank’s Guilty,” *Daily News*, 17 Dec. 2001, at www.nexis.com/docview/getDocForCuiReq?lni=44P7-KPXo-ooTo-GooB&csi=140954&oc=00240&perma=true, accessed 6 March 2017.

treason as “Turncoat Could Get Death Penalty, Ashcroft Says.”³³ Although, in Giuliani’s case, the *Daily News* reported an exaggerated version of a personal, albeit overzealous, opinion, Ashcroft’s statement suggested the Department of Justice’s intention to hold Lindh responsible for the death of Johnny “Mike” Spann, a CIA officer killed during the Qala-i-Jangi confrontation. The first American combat fatality in the “War on Terror,” Spann was hailed by the CIA director, George Tenet, as “an American hero” and inscribed in myth by *Time*’s Alex Perry’s Hollywood-style account of the Qala-i-Jangi “battle.”³⁴ Given Spann’s reputation, Lindh was, indeed, charged with conspiring “to kill nationals of the United States.”³⁵

Historical narratives of the confrontation are by no means more straightforward than their media equivalents. A month after the Operation Enduring Freedom bombing campaign in Afghanistan started, the Northern Alliance troops captured Mazar-e-Sharif; Taliban troops lost control of major cities and thousands of fighters surrendered at Yerganak, where they were disarmed and loaded into trucks.³⁶ Around five hundred prisoners, including Lindh, were taken to Qala-i-Jangi to be interrogated by American intelligence agents; the remaining prisoners were stripped, tied up and locked into airtight truck containers headed for the Sheberghan prison. Accounts of the surrender and transportation of Taliban prisoners are incomplete and raise questions about American military involvement in practices that breach human rights, and US accountability regarding their allies’ conduct in the “War on Terror.”³⁷

The statements widely disseminated in the mainstream media prior to Lindh’s trial contributed to the creation of a hostile environment and helped the Bush administration legitimize and normalize torture in the case

³³ Corky Siemaszko and Richard Sisk, “Turncoat Could Get Death Penalty, Ashcroft Says,” *Daily News*, 16 Jan. 2002, at www.nexis.com/docview/getDocForCuiReq?lni=44XM-C2Do-ooTo-G3B5&csci=140954&oc=00240&perma=true, accessed 6 March 2017.

³⁴ Vian Bakir, *Torture, Intelligence and Surveillance in the War on Terror: Agenda-Building Struggles* (Farnham: Ashgate, 2013), 94. George Tenet, quoted in Duncan Campbell and Luke Harding, “CIA Agent Named as First American Fatality Killed at Beginning of Prisoner Revolt,” *The Guardian*, 29 Nov. 2001, at www.theguardian.com/world/2001/nov/29/afghanistan.duncancampbell, accessed 17 Aug. 2016. Alex Perry, “The Battle of Qala-i-Jangi,” *Time*, 1 Dec. 2001, at <http://content.time.com/time/magazine/article/0,9171,1001390-1,00.html>, accessed 17 March 2016.

³⁵ *United States of America v. John Philip Walker Lindh* [2002], Indictment (US District Court for the Eastern District of Virginia, Crim. No. 02-37-A, 5 Feb. 2002), at <http://news.findlaw.com/hdocs/docs/lindh/uswlindh020502cmp.html>, accessed 18 March 2016.

³⁶ John Barry, “The Death Convoy of Afghanistan,” *Newsweek*, 26 Aug. 2002, at <http://europe.newsweek.com/death-convoy-afghanistan-144273>, accessed 16 Aug. 2016.

³⁷ Ibid.; see also James Risen, “US Inaction Seen after Taliban POWs Died,” *New York Times*, 10 July 2009, at www.nytimes.com/2009/07/11/world/asia/11afghan.html, accessed 16 Aug. 2016; and *Afghan Massacre: The Convoy of Death* (dir. Jamie Doran, ProbeTV, 2002).

of suspected “terrorists.”³⁸ John Lindh was allegedly tortured by the US military for fifty-four days before landing on American soil. At Camp Rhino, where Lindh was held in a shipping container, military personnel took two pictures of him, one showing the prisoner naked, blindfolded and tied to a stretcher; the other showing five soldiers surrounding Lindh, whose blindfold bears the inscription “shithead.” Lindh’s lawyers released both pictures to the public as soon as they were granted access to them in April 2002, although the “shithead” photo is no longer in the public domain.³⁹ Peter Jan Honigsberg notes that, although Lindh was mistreated, he was eventually “provided with access to [his] attorneys and the due process protections necessary for meaningful hearings,” which “demonstrates that the administration could have done it right for all detainees.”⁴⁰ The high-profile character of this case resulted in a harsh conviction for John Lindh, but it also saved him from becoming what Donald E. Pease identifies as the “exception to the human condition” or, in Giorgio Agamben’s words, the “legally un-nameable and unclassifiable being” created by the USA Patriot Act.⁴¹ From a legal standpoint, despite initial interference, Lindh was afforded due process as a US citizen. In the media, however misrepresented, he was always recognized as “American,” because his whiteness rendered him visible in political, legal and media discourses.

“AMERICAN,” “ANTI-AMERICAN” OR “UN-AMERICAN”?

The anxiety triggered by Lindh’s conversion from “American citizen” to “Taliban soldier” is traceable back to Samuel P. Huntington’s thesis of the “clash of civilizations” between the “West” and the “East.”⁴² Writing shortly after the end of the Cold War, Huntington locates “a central focus of conflict for the immediate future” in the “clash” between the “West” and “Islamic–Confucian states.”⁴³ David Holloway notes that the thesis became popular after “9/11” as a “reassuring abstraction” which verged on “outright romanticism” in its appeal to “an essential selfhood rooted in

³⁸ Bakir, 100–1.

³⁹ Ibid., 97–99.

⁴⁰ Peter Jan Honigsberg, *Our Nation Unhinged: The Human Consequences of the War on Terror* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2009), 197.

⁴¹ Donald E. Pease, *The New American Exceptionalism* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2009), 175; Giorgio Agamben, *States of Exception*, trans. Kevin Attell (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2005; first published 2003), 3–4.

⁴² Samuel P. Huntington, “The Clash of Civilizations?” *Foreign Affairs*, 72, 3 (Summer 1993), 22–49; and Huntington, *The Clash of Civilizations and the Remaking of World Order* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1996).

⁴³ Huntington, “The Clash of Civilizations?”, 48.

collective, ‘blood’-based notions of identity.”⁴⁴ For the general public, the phrase “clash of civilizations” appeared to simplify the incomprehensible domestic and international context of the 1990s and rendered it more manageable.⁴⁵ Huntington’s preference for binaries appealed not only to American television (and to a President eager to attract fresh blood for the US military in preparation for an open-ended “War on Terror”), but also to Osama bin Laden – USA’s number one enemy post-“9/11.”⁴⁶

The “West/Islam” binary distilled from Huntington’s thesis became, in the aftermath of the 11 September 2001 attacks, the foundation for a contract between the American state and US citizens famously summarized by President Bush as “either you are with us or you are with the terrorists.”⁴⁷ To explore such contracts, Donald E. Pease introduced the concept of “state fantasy” into the field of American studies; building on Jacqueline Rose’s work of the correlations between states and fantasy in political theory, Pease repurposed the concept of “state fantasy” to discuss the relationship between citizens and the symbolic order inaugurated by the political structures in power since the end of the Cold War.⁴⁸ Pease defines “state fantasy” as “the dominant structure of desire out of which US citizens imagined their national identity,” and persuasively argues that “American exceptionalism” was the fantasy which regulated the relationship between citizens and the “Cold War state” between 1945 and 1989.⁴⁹ The 11 September 2001 attacks provided a definitive conclusion to the Cold War and allowed the Bush administration to inaugurate a new symbolic order at the “Ground Zero” site and implicitly a new state fantasy, the “Homeland” – a state of emergency and exception which “required the public to sacrifice their civil liberties in exchange for the enjoyment of the state’s spectacular violations of the rights of other sovereign states.”⁵⁰

It was American mythology, Pease argues, that provided the “master fictions” the President Bush used to validate the state’s actions. Master fictions and mythological themes “transmit a normative system of values and beliefs from generation to generation” and are used by policymakers to shape citizens’ “understanding of political and historical events.”⁵¹ Pease maintains that “9/11” destroyed the “fantasy that the nation was founded

⁴⁴ David Holloway, *9/11 and the War on Terror* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2008), 10–11.

⁴⁵ Ibid., 11.

⁴⁶ For a detailed exploration of how Huntington’s “clash-of-civilizations” thesis influenced Osama bin Laden please see Al Jazeera’s documentary *The 9/11 Decade: The Clash of Civilisations?* (2001), Al Jazeera English, at www.aljazeera.com/programmes/aljazeera-world/2011/10/2011102075124103401.htm, accessed 19 May 2017.

⁴⁷ President George Bush Jr., Joint Session of Congress (20 Sept. 2001), at <http://edition.cnn.com/2001/US/09/20/gen.bush.transcript>, accessed 19 May 2017.

⁴⁸ Pease, 1.

⁴⁹ Ibid., 1–7.

⁵⁰ Ibid., 154–70, 171.

⁵¹ Ibid., 157.

on Virgin Land” and brought back the “suppressed historical knowledge of the United States’ origins in the devastation of native peoples’ homelands.”⁵² The state’s “symbolic response” to “9/11,” inaugurated by President Bush’s address to a joint session of Congress and to the nation on 20 September 2001, replaced “Virgin Land” with “Ground Zero” and the “Homeland” “as the governing metaphors through which to come to terms with the attack”;⁵³ the metaphors started becoming historical facts through the military campaigns in Afghanistan and Iraq.

The media narrative of an all-white America facilitated by the Lindh case constitutes an attempt to revive the Cold War image of a country in which, in Pease’s words, “gender, class, race, and ethnic differences were massively downgraded as threatening to national unity,” an ideal of national identity built “out of exceptionalist norms [which] had deployed the coordinated myths of the Frontier and the Melting Pot in which the state’s assimilationist paradigm overrode questions of diaspora, cosmopolitanism, and multiculturalism.”⁵⁴ It is out of this mythological framework that Lindh’s “anti-American” character emerges: his family’s liberal approach to parenting, which afforded their son access to a multicultural, multiracial America (at least in virtual environments, if the proximity of Lindh’s all-white suburbia did not allow for it), coupled with Frank Lindh’s “failed” masculinity (Lindh’s parents’ divorce on grounds of Frank’s homosexuality is a recurrent trope in media narratives about Lindh’s childhood), is used, in *Time* articles and in mainstream media in general, as overarching causes for Lindh’s “anti-American behavior.”⁵⁵ Lindh’s conversion to Islam during his adolescence is constructed as a reaction to these “flaws” in his upbringing – an assumption which implies and reasserts his intrinsic “innocence” (i.e. whiteness). Brayton argues that Lindh’s harsh sentencing punishes not only legal transgressions, but also a “betrayal of whiteness,” a disavowal of “the boundaries of American normativity” in a post-“9/11” US riddled with cultural anxiety.⁵⁶ In Lindh’s case, the label “anti-American” is necessarily linked to his “Americanness,” to his “whiteness,” because it implies a disavowal of the “all-white America” myth and of the American exceptionalist fantasy “retroactively assigned to the distant origins of America.”⁵⁷ As a member of this racially exclusive “Virgin Land,” Lindh also complicated the parameters of the newly inaugurated “Homeland” state fantasy, which permitted the state of emergency to extend its jurisdiction to the entire globe under the pretense of protecting an already “displaced” nation from foreign violations.⁵⁸

⁵² Ibid., 161.

⁵³ Ibid., 158.

⁵⁴ Ibid., 69.

⁵⁵ Brayton, “An American Werewolf,” 174–75.

⁵⁶ Ibid., 179.

⁵⁷ Pease, 10.

⁵⁸ Ibid., 158–59.

Yaser Hamdi's case is a good example of an "un-American" presence as defined within the parameters of the mythological and ideological framework of the "Homeland" state fantasy. If, in the media narratives surrounding John Walker Lindh, "American" is synonymous with white and "anti-American" implies a white American's disavowal of whiteness, "un-American" is a label which describes a presence deviant from this imagined American order. In Hamdi's case, his "un-American" nature is reasserted in the absence of "discursive-redemption" narratives in the media, virtually complete invisibility both in the media and in the legal system (and, implicitly, the absence of due process and the immediate allocation of the "enemy combatant" status), and the contesting of his citizenship by civilian groups. Pease identifies this "entrenched distinction between white Americans' governmental belonging and the passive belonging of minoritized populations" as part of a hierarchical structure of social rankings, which allows for "ad hoc exemptions from the law on the basis of race and cultural difference."⁵⁹ In the post-“9/11” state of emergency, the citizenship of white Americans appears to have priority over nonwhite forms of citizenship, especially, as Bloodsworth-Lugo and Lugo-Lugo note, over “those already associated with criminality.”⁶⁰

After being interrogated by American agents and passing various post-capture screenings, during which he openly stated his place of birth, Yaser Hamdi was sent to Guantánamo Bay in February 2002, where he remained for almost three months before officials recognized his US citizenship. He was the first American citizen to be declared an "enemy combatant" and he was held incommunicado, without access to counsel or to his family, and with no charges filed against him.⁶¹ After two years of detention on naval brigs in Virginia and South Carolina, a Supreme Court trial, and a plea agreement with the government in which he consented to renounce his US citizenship, Hamdi was eventually released and deported to Saudi Arabia. Although Lindh and Hamdi were captured at the same time, the latter remained invisible to the public eye and was not afforded due process; his story did not kindle the media's imagination to the same extent Lindh's did.

Although mostly absent from newspapers, Hamdi's story did catch the eye of a non-profit group, Friends of Immigration Law Enforcement. With a mission to prove Hamdi's "un-Americanness," the group contested the validity of his US citizenship in court. They filed a motion arguing that the Fourteenth Amendment does not cover children born from migrants residing in the US on temporary work visas (as was the case of Hamdi's family) – with

⁵⁹ Ibid., 211, 13, 235 n. 15.

⁶⁰ Bloodsworth-Lugo and Lugo-Lugo, *Containing (Un)American Bodies*, 50.

⁶¹ Honigsberg, *Our Nation Unhinged*, 41–42.

the addition that Hamdi was “not an American in any real sense of the word.”⁶² By contrast, despite his Irish ancestry and refusal to identify himself as an American when interrogated by CIA operatives at Qala-i-Jangi, Lindh’s own US citizenship never came into question.⁶³ Put side by side, the stories of the two American Taliban prisoners of war captured by US troops on 1 December 2001 could not be more different. Hamdi’s citizenship was ignored, contested and eventually stripped away after three years of incarceration without any charges, because the colour of his skin and his ancestry did not match his captors’ idea of what “American” looks like.

As Pease demonstrates, the constructions of racial or ethnic difference have been used historically to underline the American/un-American dichotomy and to support structuring metaphors of the American experience, such as “Virgin Land” or “Manifest Destiny,” including exceptionalist convictions that the US was different from European empires in its refusal to acquire colonies.⁶⁴ Traumatic historical realities of both domestic and foreign policies disavowed from twentieth-century historiography – such as massacres of native populations; slavery; lynchings; ethnic cleansing of migrants; the economic exploitation of refugees; “the struggles of Asian, Hispanic, and American Indian groups for recognition of their equal rights”; internment camps for Japanese Americans; attacks on civilians in Dresden, Tokyo and My Lai; nuclear holocausts in Hiroshima and Nagasaki – tell of the racialized Others onto whom the state displaced its “social catastrophes” and of the ways in which the US achieved “imperial governance” whilst continuing to define itself in opposition to European imperial powers.⁶⁵ Lindh’s case complicates these fantasies, not only because he needs to be “racialized” in media discourses to appear threatening, but also because he was captured in the so-called “Middle East,” an Othered geographic and symbolic space onto which the state of exception displaced the trauma of “9/11.”

JOHN WALKER LINDH VERSUS JOHN JUDE PARISH

Pearl Abraham uses details of Lindh’s biography to create a narrative inspired by the idea of a white-as-universal American identity, or what she calls, in an essay detailing the creative process behind writing the *American Taliban* novel, “the American religion,” which starts not with “unknowable jihad, but with Emerson and American Transcendentalism, [and] with Whitman’s celebrated

⁶² “Group Files Motion in U.S.-Born Taliban’s Case; Moves to Have Yaser Hamdi Declared a Non-citizen.” *U.S. Newswire*, 22 Aug. 2002, at www.mexis.com, accessed 10 May 2017.

⁶³ Mark Kukis, “*My Heart Became Attached*: The Strange Odyssey of John Walker Lindh” (Washington, DC: Brassey’s, Inc., 2003), 122. ⁶⁴ Pease, 13.

⁶⁵ Ibid., 38, 13, 90, 235 n. 15.

search for the self.”⁶⁶ In this seemingly problematic statement, the writer claims the universality of a specific “America,” a homogeneous space spiritually and culturally inaugurated by white Christian men and historically devoid of other belief systems – more specifically, of Islam, swiftly relegated to the status of “un-American” through the phrase “unknowable jihad.” However, in *American Taliban*, Abraham uses this imaginary white American space not to endorse the Manichean “us-versus-them” discourse of the Bush Doctrine, but rather to interrogate and complicate it. By linking individualism or “the celebrated search for the self” with this homogeneously white America, Abraham recognizes what Richard Gray calls “the challenges to selfhood posed by various forms of injustice – the denial of people as individuals because they were of the ‘wrong’ race or gender.”⁶⁷ The writer demolishes Huntington’s “clash-of-civilizations” thesis by locating the source of the conflict not in Othered culture, but in the United States’ historical disavowal of its “nonwhite” citizens’ individuality and selfhood.

John Jude Parish, the protagonist of *American Taliban*, is an able-bodied, heterosexual, wealthy white American teenager growing up in a liberal and secular nuclear family. He inhabits what Donald Pease identifies as the symbolic order structured by the myth of the “Virgin Land” associated with the national security state of the Cold War and with the American exceptionalism state fantasy of the pre-“9/11” US. Pease traces the origins of the “Virgin Land” metaphor, which “refers to a space that coincided with the nation’s pre-revolutionary origins wherein European settlers’ grounding assumptions about America were inscribed,” to the 1950s, the early days of American studies as an academic discipline.⁶⁸ The “Virgin Land” metaphor supported American exceptionalism by turning the landscape into a “blank space, understood to be the ideal surface onto which to inscribe the history of the nation’s Manifest Destiny.”⁶⁹ In Abraham’s narrative, the protagonist’s worldview, motives and actions are fuelled by his faith in the American exceptionalism state fantasy. The novel stretches from August 2000 to May 2002, from Outer Banks, North Carolina to Islamabad, Pakistan, and, post-“9/11,” to Washington, DC, offering a fictional narrative which charts the transition from the “Virgin Land” metaphor of the national security state to the “Ground Zero” myth of the Homeland security state.

In the same essay on “The Making of *American Taliban*,” Abraham explicitly states her intention to tackle a question she believes has been repeatedly

⁶⁶ Pearl Abraham, “The Making of *American Taliban*,” [pearlabraham.com, 14 Dec. 2009](http://pearlabraham.com/the-making-of-american-taliban)), at <http://pearlabraham.com/the-making-of-american-taliban>, accessed 5 Sept. 2016.

⁶⁷ Richard Gray, *A History of American Literature*, 2nd edn (Chichester: Wiley-Blackwell, 2012), 134. ⁶⁸ Pease, 155. ⁶⁹ Ibid., 160.

asked by the American public and tentatively answered by the media: why would an educated, wealthy American like Lindh commit to violent jihad?⁷⁰ Her stated authorial interest lies in approaching the story from a new angle by following the protagonist's spiritual journey from secularism to Islam – a task also undertaken by writer Jarett Kobek, who published, a year after the release of *American Taliban*, a fictional re-creation of “9/11” hijacker Mohamed Atta’s life through the lens of architectural theory. Abraham’s reflections on her creative process offer a starting point for elucidating the structure of *American Taliban*, a novel which, unlike Kobek’s *ATTA* or even Don DeLillo’s *Libra*, does not focus on a fictional version of a real historical figure, but rather on a “duplicate.”⁷¹ *American Taliban* does not rewrite John Walker Lindh’s personal history; if anything, John Jude appears as an “enhanced” version of Lindh, “cleaned” of some of the “flaws” the mainstream media identified as having led to the Californian’s “anti-American” behavior: John Jude’s parents, Bill and Barbara Parish, are in a happy, heteronormative marriage; John Jude himself is less spiritually inclined and more confident than Lindh is said to have been. Moreover, John Walker Lindh is introduced as a different character in the later chapters of the novel, allowing for an exploration of how the American public perceived him and of the media narratives emerging after his capture. Introducing Lindh as a different character enables Abraham to refrain from providing a resolution to the story; John Jude Parish remains pristine and it is up to the reader to decide how his story ends.

American Taliban’s pre-“9/11” narrative focusses on John Jude, an eighteen-year-old who attempts to negotiate both his own identity and his parents’ expectations of him; for example, he rejects the “American Dream” doctrine of financial success and the idea of “a life of earning and acquisition,” meaning that, to satisfy his parents’ ambitions, he believes that “proof of [his] achievement would have to come from the media, with features in newspapers, magazines, radio, and television.”⁷² Although narrated in the third person, John Jude’s story foregrounds his point of view – and it is his conviction that his parents see him as the human embodiment of the notion of American exceptionalism, since he is expected to be distinctive, unique, and exemplary: “what they looked for from their son was originality and intellectuality and a lifestyle shaped by the liberal humanist ideas in which, as [his mother] Barbara liked to point out, he had been immersed from the instant of his inception.”⁷³ John Jude begins to define himself in opposition to

⁷⁰ Abraham, “The Making of ...”.

⁷¹ Jarett Kobek, *ATTA* (South Pasadena, CA: Semiotext(e), 2011); Don DeLillo, *Libra* (New York: Viking Press, 1988).

⁷³ Ibid., 22.

⁷² Abraham, *American Taliban*, 20, 22.

what he perceives as his parents' image of him and rejects their secularism, which he criticizes as a negative consequence of modernity: "in their attempt to grow beyond superstition, in their enlightened embrace of the rational, [humans] abandoned knowledge of the extraordinary, the hidden, the transcendent, the whatever."⁷⁴

Yet these gestures of rebellion quickly dissolve when met by his family's unmitigated support: his parents enthusiastically encourage him to pursue anything he finds intellectually stimulating and they provide financial backing for John Jude's plans to move away, first to Brooklyn, then to Peshawar. With virtually no obstacles in his path, the protagonist develops his own fantasy, in which he would become what Robert Jewett and John Shelton Lawrence call the "superhero" of the "monomyth" prevalent in the American pop culture of the late twentieth century, a "supersaviour" replacing a Christ figure rendered unconvincing by scientific rationalism.⁷⁵ The "superhero's" self-proclaimed role is to return "a hope of divine, redemptive powers" to a secular world where faith has been "eroded," a world which matches John Jude's criticism of his own immediate surroundings.⁷⁶ Attracted to knowledge and faith in equal measure, but unable to define himself in opposition to a fixed Other within the boundaries of an unconditionally accepting community, John Jude commits to a fluid identity and refuses to follow an established path: he challenges himself "to remain eternally in process, to forever become though he doesn't yet know what," and "to pursue only what is of immediate personal interest."⁷⁷ He formulates his ethos as "Whitmanian all-embrace. He would be all-knowing, omnivorous, omniscient, omnificent."⁷⁸ Through this, the interplay between fact or "reality" and fiction (as well as the "slippage" from one to another) is established from the beginning as one of *American Taliban*'s key themes.

There is no moment in the novel representing a more powerful actualization of this blurring of lines between what is "real" and what is imagined than the post-“9/11” scene (set on 3 December 2001) in which Barbara Parish learns about the capture of an American citizen called John Walker Lindh. By this point, John Jude had been missing for months; the scene shows his mother reading the front pages of morning newspapers, all featuring “an American. Named John. Naked. All bones. And bleeding. But why were his hands twisted and bound between his legs?”⁷⁹ Barbara is confronted with the image of a tortured body, bound, broken and bleeding, which not

⁷⁴ Ibid., 14.

⁷⁵ Robert Jewett and John Shelton Lawrence, *The American Monomyth* (Garden City, NY: Anchor Press/Doubleday, 1977), xx. ⁷⁶ Ibid. ⁷⁷ Abraham, *American Taliban*, 20.

⁷⁸ Ibid., 43.

⁷⁹ Ibid., 223.

only embodies the brutality of the state's response to the 11 September 2001 attacks, but also bears a striking resemblance to her missing son. The visual proof that the American state punished one of its own people, and implicitly broke the contract between the nation and the state established through the discourse of the "Homeland" fantasy, is simply inconceivable for Barbara; a nation which perceives itself as traumatized and displaced by foreign attackers, as well as completely innocent, could not, Abraham suggests, withstand such a shock.

Barbara attempts to reconcile this traumatizing realization with the more personal tragedy of her missing son by imagining that the "American Taliban" the headlines refer to is indeed John Jude, a line of thought inaccessible to her husband Bill:

This isn't John, he said.

Read it, Barbara heaved. It's John.

Yes, but not our John, not John Jude.

It could be, she sputtered.

But it's not.

It might be.

What do you mean? Bill asked. What are you talking about?⁸⁰

When Barbara insists that the body on the front page "could" or "might" belong to John Jude, she reasserts her conviction that the state will not protect American citizens, as it promised, and thus her son, and anyone else's child, is in danger of being punished. Through this moment and its narrative consequences, the novel *American Taliban* imagines a scenario in which the bond between the individual and the state fantasy breaks through the intervention of personal tragedy. Although the image of the captured "American Taliban" on the front page of newspapers evokes a "real" photograph taken by military personnel at Camp Rhino, Abraham's novel employs a chronology which deviates from the timeline of historical events: not only were the Camp Rhino photographs not taken until 7 December 2001, but they also remained classified until April 2002, when Lindh's lawyers filed a motion for discovery.⁸¹ Such historical inaccuracies are woven into the theme of the broken contract between individual and state fantasy, destabilizing the novel's initial claims of faithfully replicating a slice of history.

This unsettling of the timeline embedded in the "official" historical narrative, and implicitly of the fact-fiction binary, is also apparent in the story of the surrender and the uprising of the captured Taliban fighters at the Qala-i-Jangi prison. Although the historical narrative places the Taliban fighters' surrender

⁸⁰ Ibid., 223–24.

⁸¹ Bakir, *Torture, Intelligence and Surveillance*, 96–99.

on Saturday, 24 November, and the prison uprising between 27 November and 1 December, the fictional account condenses the week-long confrontation into the twenty-four hours of Thanksgiving Day, on 22 November 2001. These anachronisms accelerate the progression of events, bringing the storyline up to date with the historical date of Lindh's capture on 1 December, whilst conveying the extreme distress of the Parishes, for whom John's absence from the family dinner provides the absolute confirmation that their son is in danger, since "Thanksgiving was John's favorite holiday, he had never missed a single one, and if he could, if he were anywhere near an Internet connection, he would send turkey tidings. Or he was on his way home to surprise them."⁸² The interrupted family Thanksgiving tradition provides a domestic vignette exemplifying the displacement of the individual from the American exceptionalism state fantasy governed by the myth of the "Virgin Land"; in the fictional universe of *American Taliban*, the son's absence from the family Thanksgiving dinner table inaugurates a new space in which myths of family, national unity and tradition have been abandoned in favour of a "War on Terror."

This symbolic order inaugurated in the novel's fictional universe deviates considerably from the one on which the "Homeland" fantasy is built. Superficially, the displacement of the national population, which provides the foundation of the "Homeland" state fantasy, is present in the shape of both the missing son and the grieving parents who have lost their place in the world. However, the novel destabilizes the historic American mythologies post-“9/11” by refusing to validate the Manichean worldview at the core of the fantasy, the “us versus them,” the “clash-of-civilizations” thesis and, essentially, the imperialist assumption that there is a hierarchical structure which establishes white lives as superior to the lives of racialized Others. This is evident in the narrator's exposition of Barbara's subjectivity: "This country was at war, and even when there were no reports of anything particularly significant, there was death. Somewhere overseas someone's son was dying. Somewhere in the world a mother would grieve. This kept [Barbara] awake."⁸³ The character's grief, which starts with her son but extends to all the victims of American aggression, disrupts the "Homeland" fantasy, reliant on "spectacles of violence" meant to remedy the traumatic memory of "lawless violence" against native peoples (suppressed, prior to "9/11," by the Virgin Land myth) by transforming the American public "into the perpetrators rather than the victims of foreign aggression."⁸⁴ Within the symbolic order of the "Homeland" fantasy, these spectacles, performed in Afghanistan and Iraq, "redescribed imperial conquest as a form of domestic defense."⁸⁵ However,

⁸² Abraham, *American Taliban*, 216.

⁸⁴ Pease, *The New American Exceptionalism*, 173.

⁸³ Ibid., 216.

⁸⁵ Ibid., 172.

by explicitly refusing to find pleasure in or to endorse the need for such aggression, and by implicitly disavowing the chance to participate in the state's power, the character of Barbara destabilizes the myths of American innocence, displacement and need for protection embedded in the "Homeland" fantasy.

American Taliban uses scenes which re-create the media coverage of the early days of the "War on Terror" both to provide the illusion of verisimilitude, of a historical narrative about the Lindh case faithful to the facts, and to destabilize the truth claims of its own narrative constructions – since these scenes tamper with the "real" media narratives prevalent in the months following "9/11." This echoes Jean Baudrillard's reflection that, since "reality is everywhere infiltrated by images, virtuality and fiction," it is necessary to acknowledge that "reality and fiction are inextricable, and the fascination with the attack is primarily a fascination with the image," turning "9/11" into "something like an additional fiction, a fiction surpassing fiction."⁸⁶ A constant slippage between fact and fiction, a device which fulfils the double role of warning the reader against accepting any singular, homogeneous narrative and of criticizing the practices of mainstream media, is visible in the resulting fictional universe. Following from Pease's development of the "state fantasy" concept, Duvall and Marzec argue that "the successful constitution of the nation depends on an essential relationship to fiction and forms its existence in forms of fictionalization."⁸⁷ This "fictive formalism" is actualized in the literary text in a scene which shows Bill and Barbara "stunned in front of their television sets tuned to CNN," watching a fragment of Pelton's interview with Lindh;⁸⁸ a block of nonfictional text indented from the main body accurately reproduces an excerpt from the interview transcript. In this case, the fictional re-creation of the Lindh interview is a perfect duplicate of the "real" footage; however, by mimicking media practices of framing the story by means of decontextualizing footage, the novelistic discourse omits to describe the circumstances under which the interview took place.

An earlier moment in the novel sees Barbara and Bill watching the news coverage on the Qala-i-Jangi uprising on Thanksgiving evening; the report highlights "real" historical events, such as the loss of an "American CIA agent," "the first American casualty of the Afghan war," and the fact that US military fighter planes "were sent in to help the Northern Alliance regain control of the prison compound."⁸⁹ The death of "Mike" Spann, referred to in the coverage, did not occur until 25 November, three days after the fictional dramatization of the media report is set. By means of

⁸⁶ Jean Baudrillard, *The Spirit of Terrorism and Other Essays*, trans. Chris Turner (London: Verso, 2003), 28–29.

⁸⁷ Duvall and Marzec, *Narrating 9/11*, 3.

⁸⁸ Ibid., 3; Abraham, *American Taliban*, 225.

⁸⁹ Ibid., 220.

such interventions in the timeline of the historical narrative that the novel claims to replicate, Abraham warns the reader against accepting one fixed, coherent story about the “War on Terror” (even the one offered by her novel) and encourages them to seek facts from multiple sources.

A critique of mainstream media practices also emerges from such scenes depicting the characters’ experience of media coverage. The report on the Qala-i-Jangi confrontation casts Afghanistan in the role of the aggressor and the US in the role of the victim; it ignores all non-American casualties, emphasizing the death of an American intelligence agent as the single most significant loss of life. The story normalizes the United States’ engagement in asymmetric warfare, presenting the use of advanced military planes against a limited number of unarmed and wounded prisoners of war as an “American” victory. Barbara’s reaction is critical of US forces (“This is awful, she said. How can they?”), whereas Bill advises caution against accepting a single, coherent, media narrative: “this is only one story. There are surely ten unreported variations on this one.”⁹⁰ The narrator counters this partisan perspective by reimagining the surrender of the foreign Taliban fighters in terms which humanize them: “with aching bellies, exhausted and undernourished … sick with dysentery, thirst, and the hundred-mile trek to Tahkt, they climbed into the waiting Toyotas and stretched their useless legs … packed and layered and marinated in Toyota sardine cans, paid for by oily Soviet and US greed.”⁹¹ The narrator’s interventions are not packaged as media reports to remind the reader of the American media’s propensity in the early days of the “War on Terror” towards promoting the myth of American innocence and maintaining the official discourse of US military aggression against Afghanistan as an act of retaliation and humanitarianism. On the domestic front, Bill’s scepticism towards mainstream media practices turns into “disgust” as he switches between various CNN channels broadcasting reruns of post-“9/11” Larry King interviews with “the widowed and the suffering,” “the motherless, fatherless, wifeless, husbandless, childless, shameless,” and footage of the Twin Towers falling in slow motion.⁹² The narrator describes Bill’s and Barbara’s distress as a means of criticizing mainstream media practices of emotionally manipulating audiences and of reinforcing a hierarchy of suffering within which the trauma inflicted by foreign aggressors on US soil is replayed ad nauseam, whilst the trauma inflicted by US forces “abroad” is conveniently ignored.

⁹⁰ Ibid., 220–21.

⁹¹ Ibid., 218.

⁹² Ibid., 221.

PEARL ABRAHAM'S *AMERICAN TALIBAN*: "AMERICAN,"
"ANTI-AMERICAN," "UN-AMERICAN"

In the context of the John Walker Lindh case, the label "American" was synonymous, in media and legal narratives, with whiteness, whereas the "anti-American" label was brought about by a disavowal of whiteness, and the "un-American" identity was linked to a deviation from an imagined "all-white America." The historical moment out of which these labels emerged coincided with the aftermath of "9/11," the early days of the "War on Terror" and the inauguration of the "Homeland" state fantasy. Whilst *American Taliban* features an attempt to reimagine what these labels signified immediately prior to and after "9/11," the novel, published in 2010, also incorporates the more critical interrogations of "Americanness" which emerged towards the end of the twentieth century's last decade.

Much like the Marin County, California that Lindh grew up in, imagined in media narratives as a suburban utopia, the pre-"9/11" world that John Jude inhabits in Outer Banks, North Carolina is racially exclusive and quintessentially white, populated by surfers with "bleached white" hair and white skin which has been tanned by the summer sun to a "dark honey" hue.⁹³ For John Jude, as well as for the slice of the United States he grows up in, "Americanness" is, yet again, equivalent to "whiteness" – although this is not spelt out in the narrative until he moves to Brooklyn to study Arabic at a school primarily frequented by "nonwhite" Muslim American teenagers: "though they all spoke English and appeared American, they also didn't seem fully American; they were like some kind of hybrid. Maybe it had something to do with Brooklyn. They were urban, but not D.C.-style urban."⁹⁴ John Jude perceives his classmates within fixed racial parameters: they are "urban," a label which carries the implication that they are "not white," and implicitly not "fully American," despite speaking English as a native language and wearing emblematically American Levi's jeans; the homogeneous group, who "eyed him warily," also appears somewhat threatening.⁹⁵ The protagonist's thinking is framed by racial hierarchies, thus replicating the meanings attached to the labels "American" (i.e. white) and "un-American" (i.e. a deviation from the imagined "all-whiteness" of the US) in media narratives on John Walker Lindh.

Post-"9/11," the novel's narrative focus switches from John Jude's encounters with Otherness to how Bill and Barbara Parish negotiate their own moral grounds relative to the "American," "un-American" and "anti-American" assigned identities within the newly instated symbolic order. For example,

⁹³ Ibid., 24.

⁹⁴ Ibid., 67.

⁹⁵ Ibid., 67.

Barbara is concerned that “John would be returning to a changed world, a different America,” in which his affinity with Islamic culture and his friends of Muslim faith would not be tolerated; although she acknowledges the sense of injustice underlying this “different America,” she nonetheless lays the blame on her son’s “new friends,” who, she believes, convinced him to fight “for someone else’s cause that he didn’t begin to understand.”⁹⁶ Similarly, Bill notes that “9/11” politicized both local and global communities to the extent that “no Arab institution anywhere in the world was without a position,” yet he starts from the assumption that the institution his son attended in Brooklyn could be responsible for sparking John Jude’s interest in “Islamic politics.”⁹⁷ Both Bill and Barbara struggle to uphold liberal values in the context of their son’s disappearance; although they are both sceptical towards their son’s “innocence,” they maintain the belief that his status as an “American” is exceptional. In *American Taliban*, the 11 September 2001 attacks function as a pivot, leading both Barbara and Bill to recast the actions and traits they deemed “American” in their son as “anti-American.”

If John Walker Lindh’s capture validates the Parishes’ unspoken conviction of John Jude’s culpability, it also marks the moment when Bill and Barbara adopt radically different perspectives in how they define their son relative to the “American” and “anti-American” identities. More specifically, for his father, who grounds his convictions in the legal system, John Jude is, like Lindh, a “traitor” who will eventually be caught fighting with the enemy in times of war, whereas Barbara begins to see John Jude as an “American” hero. Bill’s approach is pragmatic: he assumes that John has been captured by US military personnel and contacts a reputable criminal defence lawyer in preparation. Barbara fills in the gaps using her imagination and links her son to Lindh, because the two “probably know each other with their same smartass talk.”⁹⁸ The televised interview with Lindh leads her to perceive “this John” as a replica of “her John”; she interprets Lindh’s statements as boastful and disrespectful, and she is “repelled [by], attracted [to], and afraid all at once” of these attributes which bring to mind her son, whom she thinks of as an embodiment of the quintessentially “American” rebellious spirit.⁹⁹

An obstacle in Barbara’s quest for answers is what she perceives as Lindh’s “death wish”: “To be an American and speak so calmly of your own death, to offer yourself up as a martyr for Islam, to make martyrdom your goal, it was incomprehensible, especially for a contemporary American, unaccustomed to such sacrifice.”¹⁰⁰ By associating “martyrdom” with “suicide terrorism,” instead of military service, she draws a direct link between Lindh and the

⁹⁶ Ibid., 219.

⁹⁷ Ibid., 214.

⁹⁸ Ibid., 225.

⁹⁹ Ibid., 227.

¹⁰⁰ Ibid., 227.

perpetrators of the 11 September 2001 attacks; she is more sympathetic, but she sees both Lindh and her son as “terrorists.” Barbara uses Christian references to decode the story of the “American Taliban”; she interprets the front-page photo of a captured Lindh, tied to a stretcher, as a representation of both Christ and her son John Jude: “with his wounds and his nakedness and the bindings that nailed him to the stretcher, [he] resembled Jesus Christ, resembled her own John.”¹⁰¹ W. J. T. Mitchell’s analysis of the Christian symbolism of torture and mockery echoed in the Abu Ghraib photographic archive of tortured bodies is pertinent here; Mitchell notes that, because Christ is simultaneously a torture victim and an enemy of the state (who “represents a rival claim to sovereignty”), his crucifixion has to assume the shape of a “mock coronation,” a “carefully choreographed spectacle that simultaneously ‘raises him up’ as a crowned sovereign, and ‘brings him down’ to the level of a common thief.”¹⁰² This association allows Barbara to attach meaning to her loss and it pushes the reader to reflect on the subtler ideological and iconographical nuances of the “War on Terror.”

Barbara is critical of what she assumes to be the government’s decision to disseminate the photograph in the public domain because it makes martyrdom attractive by employing well-known Christian tropes: “she would have censored this image for evoking what every child knows as Christ on the cross, what every child comes to understand: that Christ fulfils himself in his crucifixion, becomes distinguished in death,” and, at the same time, the photograph constitutes “a photo-op for jihad.”¹⁰³ She is critical of Lindh himself for having modelled himself after “all martyrs,” from “Jesus [to] Jeremiah [to] John Brown,” and for “proving himself their descendant”; she is enraged by what she perceives to be the successful transcendence of his human condition: “he has created himself in the image of martyrdom, with features in symmetry, eyes well paired with nose, nose with mouth, a harmonious face good to look at.”¹⁰⁴ As the image of a captured Lindh gradually becomes superimposed onto the fading memory of John Jude, Barbara finds solace in the belief that her son was “a genius” deemed “a danger to non-man, the system.”¹⁰⁵ By incorporating the facts about John Walker Lindh communicated by the mainstream media into a mythological framework of “American” heroes and Western Christianity, Barbara creates a personal fantasy in which her son John Jude features as an “American Christ” figure. John Jude, impenetrable in his presence only as a memory, emerges again, for Barbara at least, as an “enhanced,”

¹⁰¹ Ibid., 228.

¹⁰² W. J. T. Mitchell, *Cloning Terror: The War on Images, 9/11 to the Present* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2011), 152–53. ¹⁰³ Abraham, *American Taliban*, 228.

¹⁰⁴ Ibid., 228. ¹⁰⁵ Ibid., 252.

flawless version of Lindh, one who did not give into the temptation and was therefore not corrupted by the “enemy.”

This personal fantasy also acts, as the novel approaches its conclusion, as a replacement for the “Homeland” state fantasy which validates, in Pease’s terminology, the emergency state’s “monopoly over the exception,” or exemption from the rules it enforces.¹⁰⁶ Initially, Barbara does not interrogate the circumstances in which the “American Taliban” photo was taken or its purpose, and she does not even consider the possibility that Lindh was tortured by US agents. Convinced that the American judicial system is fair and humane, in contrast to “barbarian” Middle Eastern equivalents, Barbara argues, “I’d rather have my son incarcerated anywhere in the US than leave him rotting in some tribal prison.”¹⁰⁷ Her failure to imagine that US institutions could employ torture, refuse due process, and generally engage in breaching human rights, especially in the case of an American detainee, is a type of reaction embedded in the “Homeland” state fantasy, a tacit acceptance of the fact that the state must do whatever is necessary to protect its population from an enemy constructed as fighting by different rules. As 2002 starts with divisive statements from the Bush administration and constant transfers of “enemy combatants” to Guantánamo Bay, Barbara becomes increasingly more critical of the US government. She ceases to perceive the US as a guarantee of freedom and safety and develops the conviction that John has already been captured or killed by either American or Afghan forces: if he was captured by the US military, “they weren’t telling”; if he remained in Afghanistan, “he’d been left behind as Dostum’s prisoner, and he was now without arms and legs or minus his tongue so that he couldn’t write or couldn’t talk. Or he was one of the many dead in the compound at Qala-i-jangi.”¹⁰⁸ She imagines US guards as efficient, clinical and concealed, and their Afghan counterparts as partial to brutality, torture and dismemberment. As she perceives both sides as violent, unjust and entirely unaccountable for their actions, Barbara reaches a point of disavowing the emergency state.

As the contract between individual and state fantasy deteriorates and Barbara negotiates her traumatic experience by creating a new fantasy, the most “anti-American” presence as the novel concludes is the emergency state itself. In line with the presence at the core of Barbara’s fantasy, which emerges out of superimposed images of Lindh and memories of John Jude, a key concluding scene, set on 1 May 2002, focusses on Lindh’s life in prison. In a unique switch in narration from third person to first person, the scene features the most explicit critique of the post-“9/11” US in the novel:

¹⁰⁶ Pease, *The New American Exceptionalism*, 175.

¹⁰⁷ Abraham, *American Taliban*, 229.

¹⁰⁸ Ibid., 238–39.

“This is the age of oil, the age of the corporation, the age of terrorism, the age of martyrdom. It is surely not an accident that I am describing one and the same age.”¹⁰⁹ This statement draws a direct link between America’s economic hegemony, global ambitions and aggressive foreign policy as the narrator portrays the state as a perpetrator of terror.

The scene, set in the cell block where Lindh is detained, shows a prison guard interrupting the Muslim inmates’ collective prayer: “Where do you think you are? Where DO they think they are? This is no mosque in Medina, this is an American prison goddammit paid for by the American people, so keep it down, shutthefuckup.”¹¹⁰ This scene explicitly represents Muslim detainees being deprived of their human rights. The narrator reminds the reader, not without irony, that the scene was set “in an American facility nine miles from the White House, where our president worships his own God.”¹¹¹ As demonstrated by both the prison scene and the earlier reference to a photograph of Lindh captured which was printed on the front pages of national newspapers almost immediately after being taken, *American Taliban* offers a story which is not about acts of torture taking place in the shadows, away from the public eye; instead, the novel proposes a narrative in which tortured bodies come into focus almost immediately after the “punishment” was inflicted, a narrative dominated by so-called “terrorists” in which the American state emerges as the most “anti-American” character. Abraham’s novel interrogates and complicates the “American,” “un-American” and “anti-American” identities assigned to Selves and Others both pre- and post-“9/11” and encourages the reader to do the same.

American Taliban is innovative in its approach to problematizing the home-grown “terrorist” character that emerges straight out of an imagined “all-white America,” as well as in its thematic treatment of the broken contract between the individual and the “Homeland” state fantasy in a post-“9/11” world. “9/11” US novels generally avoid representing the “terrorist” character and, when they do, they focus on “nonwhite” Arab or Arab-American presences. A notable exception is David Goodwillie’s 2010 novel *American Subversive*, which features a female white protagonist, Paige Roderick, who is perceived as an “ecoterrorist” because of her involvement in violent protest actions such as arson and damage to private property. However, even when understood as an antistate gesture, environmental action remains associated with white Western citizens and is not charged with the same Othering, “clash-of-civilizations” nuances and racial hierarchies.

A substantial source of inspiration for American writers interested in creating “terrorist” characters in post-“9/11” novels can be found in the

¹⁰⁹ Ibid., 249.

¹¹⁰ Ibid., 249–50.

¹¹¹ Ibid., 150.

biographies of the perpetrators of the attacks themselves. For example, Mohamed Mohamed el-Amir Awad el-Sayed Atta, the hijacker and pilot who crashed the American Airlines Flight 11 plane into the North Tower of the World Trade Center on 11 September 2001, is represented in three significant “9/11” novels: Don DeLillo’s 2007 *Falling Man*, Andre Dubus III’s 2008 *The Garden of Last Days*, and Jarett Kobek’s 2010 *ATTA*. *Falling Man* features a cameo from Atta, described by Hammad, a fictional Iraqi character who becomes one of the “9/11” hijackers, as “the man who led discussions, this was Amir and he was intense, a small thin wiry man who spoke to Hammad in his face ... This was Amir, his mind was in the upper skies, making sense of things, drawing things together.”¹¹² In *The Garden of Last Days*, Bassam, a fictional version of a “9/11” hijacker, refers to Atta as “Amir, who never smiles, who always watches the money and wears too much cologne and never smokes.”¹¹³ Whilst DeLillo and Dubus imagine Atta through the lens of their fictional characters, suggesting he is unrepresentable, Jarett Kobek makes Mohamed Atta the protagonist of his novel, the highly educated and conflicted (anti)hero of a quest for redemption, and attempts to provide a counternarrative to the state-sanctioned and media-disseminated Othering story of “radicalization.”

In the case of novels which steer clear from using the “real-life” perpetrators of the 11 September 2001 attacks as inspiration and rely instead entirely on fictional constructions, the “terrorist” characters are still imagined as racialized Others. Arguably the most famous novel centered on an Arab American in the process of becoming a “terrorist” is John Updike’s 2006 *Terrorist*; much like *American Taliban*, *Terrorist* features a teenage protagonist, Ahmad, who attempts to negotiate his own relationship with religion and politics – although, unlike John Jude Parish, Ahmad carries his “un-Americaness” on his skin and the world he learns to navigate is a highly divided American society rather than an all-white suburban utopia. A more nuanced portrayal of “nonwhite” Muslim individuality and the role of US foreign policy in shaping a sense of selfhood, Mohsin Hamid’s 2007 *The Reluctant Fundamentalist* is also more ambivalent about the “terroristic” nature of its protagonist, whose experience is understood in the context of traumatic historical moments in both the US (“9/11”) and India (the attack on the Indian Parliament) in 2001. The influence Changez decides to exercise on his students cannot be easily pinpointed as a “call to arms,” an intellectual challenge, or something in between; this allows *The Reluctant Fundamentalist* to intervene in the literary landscape of US “9/11” novels as a force which complicates

¹¹² Don DeLillo, *Falling Man* (London: Picador, 2007), 79–81.

¹¹³ Andre Dubus III, *The Garden of Last Days* (London: William Heinemann, 2008), 23.

the racialized, Othered Muslim subjectivity oversimplified in novels such as Updike's *Terrorist*.

The fiction of “crisis” of the early “9/11” novels tends, in David Holloway’s words, to “sublimate contemporary anxieties about state activity, and about the state’s jeopardizing of the safety of its citizens,” into stories about family and the failure of parents to protect their children.¹¹⁴ When discussed within Pease’s theoretical framework, early “9/11” US fiction helped consolidate the “Homeland” state fantasy by uncritically promoting the idea that the foreign attacks violently displaced the entire population and destroyed Americans’ “way of life.” In its preference for a narrative which starts as a teenage coming-of-age story set in a pre-“9/11” United States and develops into a more explicit critique of the state’s response to the 11 September 2001 attacks, *American Taliban* offers an allegory for the transitions of the “9/11” literary landscape, but engages with the historical and political “9/11” moment explicitly. In early literary works, the attacks are merely alluded to or sublimated entirely in allegorical narratives, whereas in post-2008 novels like *American Taliban* “9/11” is the pivot event at the core of the crisis. That is not to say that early literary responses to “9/11” are completely depoliticized; as Arin Keeble argues, when read outside the “reductive binary” of trauma/politics, narratives of domesticity provide appropriately politicized reactions to “9/11” and contain numerous elements of political, international or transnational agendas.¹¹⁵

It is true that, by switching focus from John Jude to Barbara and Bill Parish, the *American Taliban* narrative echoes the early post-“9/11” novel’s propensity towards the familial-crisis theme; nonetheless, Abraham’s novel complicates this theme of domesticity by following Barbara’s rejection of the “Homeland” state fantasy and by the stylistic choice of both representing media coverage of the “War on Terror” and allowing the narrator to intervene with historical exposition at key moments in the plot. Using these devices, *American Taliban* fashions itself as a literary response to “9/11” with a specific agenda: to encourage the reader to contextualize the historic moment, problematize historic narratives, and become more critical of media and political discourses. By switching focus from John Jude Parish and introducing John Walker Lindh as a separate character in the later sections of the book, the narrator breaks the relationship of causality within the fictional world: the former’s actions have no consequences, whilst the consequences the latter endures are not linked to any known actions. More broadly,

¹¹⁴ Holloway, *9/11 and the War on Terror*, 108.

¹¹⁵ Arin Keeble, *The 9/11 Novel: Trauma, Politics and Identity* (Jefferson, NC: McFarland & Co., 2014), 10–13.

this broken causality suggests a critique of the legal environment prevalent in the US during the “War on Terror”: the state’s abuse goes unpunished (actions without consequences), whereas the “unlawful combatants” held at Guantánamo Bay are detained without trial (consequences without actions).

Pearl Abraham’s *American Taliban* reimagines this historical scenario to fill in the blanks of the Lindh case and problematizes the labels of “traitor” and “Other” as fleshed out by the dominant “War on Terror” discourse. Questions related to the possibility of fiction as a diagnostic tool, the role of the media in contemporary myth production, the break of the cause–effect relationship between historical events, and the influence of dominant political ideologies on contemporary fictional and nonfictional discourses are central to Abraham’s text. If the United States can produce “all-American” traitors like John Walker Lindh, transgressive to the point of being perceived as “the enemy within” a nation, is it possible that US presence and influence outside the political borders of the country can also produce “homegrown terrorists”? In this case, a theoretical precedent is provided by Richard Gray’s concept of “the deterritorialising America.”¹¹⁶ According to Gray, works of literary fiction can show “how trauma, crisis may provide an intercultural connection … either through exploration of the interface between cultures in the United States,” “or through the mapping of America’s extraterritorial expansion (the global reach of American culture and power), or both.”¹¹⁷ This hypothesis could provide the possibility of interesting future avenues for research. How would the “American,” “anti-American” and “un-American” assigned identities change when discussing literary texts which originate from “an America situated *between cultures*”?¹¹⁸ What would a “homegrown terrorist” character exterior to the political borders of the US look like in a “second-wave” post-“9/11” novel? Until sufficient distance from such recent texts is possible, it is important to consider the benefits of adding to the critical canon novels that previously eluded scholarship. Not only will they bring a fresh perspective on the “9/11” genre, but they will also offer clues about the evolution of American mythologies in the twenty-first century and ways to resist the “Homeland” fantasy by destabilizing its claim to power.

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¹¹⁶ Gray, *After the Fall*, 17.

¹¹⁷ Ibid., 17, original emphasis.

¹¹⁸ Ibid.

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