

Imagined as *us*-American: Patriotic Music, Religion, and Violence Post-9/11

David Kwon,
Saint Mary's University of Minnesota

Abstract: *With the common correlation of the patriotic music community to “America,” country music after 9/11, in many respects, could be seen as a site for the reinforcement and construction of American national identity. This article particularly explores the use of country music in the United States to represent and create a political ideology of “imagined” national identity in the time period between September 11, 2001 and the invasion of Iraq in the Spring of 2003. However, the nation, as imagined in these country song lyrics, has very specific dimensions. It is not just any nation. It is perceived (and valued, for that matter) as justifiably aggressive. It is a Christian nation defined in opposition to the Islamic “other.” This targeted racial and religious group is not just an outside foreign “other” but a heavily stigmatized foreigner from within their own country. The mapping of these particular concepts of nation and religion onto mainstream country music constitutes its primary imagined identity.*

Keywords: Patriotic Music, Country Music, Iraq War, Nationalism, Imagined National Identity, Religion, Violence, Post-9/11

Introduction

POLITICAL THEORIST BENEDICT ANDERSON, in his study of the rise of nationalism, argued that a nation is an imagined community: “[This community] is *imagined* because the members of even the smallest nation will never know most of their fellow-members, meet them, or even hear of them, yet in the minds of each lives the image of their communion.”¹ This concept of the imagined community is not limited to a nation and, as such, it can serve as a valuable lens through which to examine other imagined communities of various types and sizes. The goal of this analysis is to examine an imagined community with borders that are less clearly defined than those of a nation. This will illuminate some of the many ways in which this process of imagining actually takes place. The community in question is that of the producers and consumers of mainstream American country music. This analysis will be

¹ Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism*, rev. ed. (New York: Verso Books, 2006), 6; italics in original.



limited to the time period between the events of September 11, 2001 (9/11) and the early stages of the Iraq War in 2003.

The reasons for choosing this particular time frame are two-fold. First, a major crisis often precedes a time of construction or reformulation of a country's identity. This crisis is more apparent than the ongoing, daily process of identity construction that occur in times of noncrisis. By focusing on the historical context of 9/11 in particular, many of the specific cultural expressions that facilitate, as well as indicate, the imagining of a community become immediately recognizable in a way that is much less transparent in other situations. Focusing on these expressions will provide insight into the subtler ways in which communities in general are imagined. The second reason for limiting the analysis to this particular time frame is that it relates directly to both the event itself and the subsequent increase in militarism and nationalism. The memory of 9/11 and the Second Gulf War are constructed by many of the songs that will serve as the data for this analysis.²

What is being attempted is a sketching of the ambiguous boundaries that defined the mainstream country music industry in the wake of September 11, 2001. This is *not* an attempt to reify this community; rather, it is an attempt to analyze the country music trends that Americans "created" in the wake of these events. I will provide a general account of how this community imagined itself as indicated by the content of the music that this community produced and consumed. Since this is an analysis of the mainstream country music community, the data will be limited primarily to the lyrics of songs that were "popular" during this time period. Popularity of the songs is determined by airplay time on country music radio stations. For the airplay statistics, I have relied on the Billboard Hot Country and Singles Tracks charts, which are based on a national sample of roughly 150 country music stations that are monitored daily. Limited reference to music sales will also be included. The working assumption is that the popularity of these songs is a legitimate basis to make limited claims about country music's imagined community.³

² The American country music industry generally retained a pro-war stance until 2004 when popular opinion turned against the U.S. military campaigns in Iraq and Afghanistan. Since then, the narrative forms and features in these songs changed from the American metanarrative to personal stories about 9/11, patriotism, faith, and healing.

³ It should be noted that this analysis is only seen as a preliminary step in what has the potential to be a much larger project. Possible avenues for further investigation are enumerated at the end of this analysis.

Finally, it would be valuable to extend this analysis to the issue of race/whiteness and American national identity. One may find it interesting to read through the discussion of country music and its reception with an analysis of the overwhelming whiteness of all the artists (and presumably, their fans) examined in this paper. This future research is important to the argument being presented since it is looking at a particular racialized construction or imagining of American national identity. Of course, the white country artists may have fan bases beyond white evangelical communities, but there needs to be some discussion of the (largely hidden) racialization of both the music—as white—and what it represents. Although that does largely mirror the popular construction of American national identity—as explicitly white but somehow ideologically inclusive and non-racialized—this does need some extended discussion for future projects.⁵³ Despite these shortcomings, it has been demonstrated through the analysis of patriotic music after 9/11 that country music producers and consumers created an imagined community of *us-American*. Certainly, there was a response to these events that was particular to country music, even if much work remains to be done in order to grasp the full dimensions of what that response entailed.

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⁵³ Cf. the extensive literature on race, identity, and whiteness in America in Christopher M. Driscoll, *White Lies: Race and Uncertainty in the Twilight of American Religion* (New York: Routledge, 2015), <https://doi.org/10.4324/9781315693088> and Paul Harvey, *Bounds of Their Habitation: Race and Religion in American History* (New York: Rowman and Littlefield Publishers, 2016).

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

David Kwon is an Assistant Professor of Moral Theology and Ethics at St. Mary's University of Minnesota. Dr. Kwon received his Ph.D. in Theological Ethics from Boston College in 2018 where he worked with Rev. Kenneth Himes, Lisa Cahill, and Stephen Pope. He also holds an MBA and degrees in social work and social policy, and draws on his education and professional experience in these fields in his work as a social ethicist. Dr. Kwon's primary areas of teaching and research include the ethics of war and peace, immigration ethics, environmental ethics, health care ethics, and, more recently, business ethics, all of which he approaches from a global perspective. He is currently working up his dissertation, entitled *Jus Post Bellum: Human Security and Political Reconciliation*, for publication.