The Popular Geopolitical Wor(l)ds of Post-9/11 Country Music

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This study explores the ways in which country music has engaged with geopolitical issues surrounding the War on Terror. Using the idea of “popular geopolitics” as its theoretical point of departure, the intertext between the attitudes and understandings articulated in a corpus of “patriotic” post-9/11 country hits and those expressed in broader geopolitical discourse is considered. Although, on occasion, the sentiments expressed in country music work to disrupt dominant understandings, it is shown that country music has chosen to frame the War on Terror in ways that concur broadly with official (i.e. Bush administration) geopolitical discourse.

Forward Operating Base Marez, Mosul, Iraq

The staging was perfect: behind him, the Stars and Stripes; in front, America’s finest, the men and women of Stryker Brigade from Fort Lewis, Washington. Hanging on his every word, applauding enthusiastically, and finally erupting in loud cheers, energized by his rhetoric, inspired by his presence. This most high-profile of visits had been anticipated for days, and security was tight.

Of all the weapons available to the world’s superpower, he told them, the American soldier was the greatest. The messages the troops had wanted—had needed—to hear were the messages he gave them: America was defiant; justice was being served; thanks to them, freedom would prevail. The defiant patriotism, the optimistic plain-speaking, and the unconditional backing of the military resonated here as it had with a wider audience back home in the aftermath of 9/11.

For the troops, a memorable 25 minutes’ respite from the realities of life on the front line; for country music star Toby Keith, just the latest stop on his 2005 United Service Organizations (USO) tour of the Gulf (Misterek).

Introduction: The “Popular Geopolitics” of Popular Music

The affective power of popular music to (re)present political attitudes is well known (van Sickel). Country music in particular has been recognized as a significant
medium through which popular/populist messages about a whole range of political and “values”-based issues are mediated to a mass audience (Cobb; Jenkins). Touchstone geopolitical issues are no exception; America’s role in the “new” world order, and specifically the US-led War on Terror, has fallen squarely under country music’s gaze in the years since September 11, 2001. Country stars have sung (and indeed spoken) out about these subjects, with mixed results. On one side of the debate, the populist—and sometimes provocative—patriotic offerings from the likes of Alan Jackson, Toby Keith, and Darryl Worley have been rewarded with stints at the top of the country charts. On the other side, a single offhand criticism of the Commander in Chief by Dixie Chicks lead singer Natalie Maines consigned that act to the country music wilderness.

In this paper, I explore the various ways in which country music artists have chosen to engage with geopolitical issues surrounding the War on Terror. Critical geographers have a term for the ways in which “popular” sources mediate, and contribute to, geopolitical discourse: popular geopolitics. A key component of this “popular geopolitics” study, therefore, is a consideration of the linkages between the geopolitical understandings articulated in country music and broader, external geopolitical discourse (Power 184; Sharp 491). While there is no necessary one-to-one correspondence between “elite” geopolitical discourse and its re-presentation in “popular” culture, I will show that the popular geopolitical messages of post-9/11 country music concur, broadly, with official (i.e. Bush administration) framings of the War on Terror. However, the words of country artists—both in their songs’ lyrics and their extra-musical utterances—clearly do not (alone) produce and sustain these hegemonic understandings of America’s place in the world and the rights and wrongs of the War on Terror. Rather, their messages are superimposed on broader circulations of ideas in popular culture, and are linked recursively to elite/official discourse. This recognition of the complex interrelationships between text and context is the backdrop against which the following analysis is situated.

Country Music: From “Culture Wars” to Afghanistan

Historically, country music has tended to position itself in opposition to the “enemy within” (Fontenot 143), rather than the enemy without. Indeed, the war in country music was—and very often remains—the “culture war.” From Merle Haggard’s anti-hippie “Okie from Muskogee” in the 1960s, through Gretchen Wilson’s celebration of “Redneck Woman” in 2004, to Haggard and Wilson’s duet, “Politically Uncorrect” (2006), country artists’ definitional boundary between “us” and “them” has been drawn within the borders of the US. The patriotic post-9/11 songs considered here may, therefore, be characterized as representing a disjuncture in the discursive us/them dualism. In crude terms, the “us” now becomes “America”—or at least an Americanized identity onto which positive, “folk” values are projected (Ó Tuathail “Just Out” 861)—rather than a more abstract “country” identity defining itself in opposition to a liberal elite other within the United States.
The War on Terror is just the latest in a long line of military conflicts with which country music artists have engaged. Thus, it is worth noting that there exists a widespread perception that country music’s political “edge” has a tendency to come to the fore at times of war (see, for example, Patchett). Bell Wiley shows that for the Confederate soldiers in the Civil War “the favorite recreation...was music”—and that meant country music. In these early country songs, we can identify two typologies of geopolitical message: a “banal patriotism,” in which a (sub)national identity (the South) is valorized in its own right, versus a more active popular geopolitics formulating “our” (Southern) identity in contrast with an enemy (Northern) other. Although (perhaps) overly simplistic, these typologies remain relevant ways of characterizing country music output today. It is the latter model—the conscious relational definition of “our” role and “our” identity in contrast to an enemy other—that has been deployed most powerfully, and most controversially, in “war” songs from the War on Terror era.

**Boycotts, Bush-Bashing, and the Dixie Chicks**

The (geo)political dimension of country music is not confined to the lyrics of songs, as the Dixie Chicks controversy illustrates. When the trio’s lead singer, Natalie Maines, said on a London stage, on the eve of war in Iraq in 2003, that she was “ashamed the President of the United States is from Texas” (CBS), she was by no means President Bush’s most high-profile critic, nor his most scathing; the media reaction, though, was intense and “vitriolic” (Rudder 208). Between 2003 and 2006 the Dixie Chicks—the biggest selling “girl group” of all time, in any genre—all but disappeared from country radio. Their comeback single, “Not Ready to Make Nice” (2006), reignited the controversy, and limped to number 36 on the *Billboard* country chart.

This saga speaks to a perception that “Nashville,” institutionally, is—or at least “should” be—in some way different, at least from, say, “Hollywood.” While Hollywood may be expected to articulate anti-war views, different expectations exist about country music stars (and indeed fans) and their conservative/patriotic politics (Flippo). How else to explain the attention paid to Maines’s comments when far less subtle abuse of the Commander in Chief from (arguably better-known) celebrities such as Jennifer Anniston—branding him a “f***ing idiot” (Johnson 2)—received only marginal coverage?

The incident emphasizes further that country music songs do not exist in a vacuum, and that meanings are made both inside and outside the text (Ó Tuathail “Condensing”). Expectation matters; context matters; lyrics do not speak for themselves. The meaning of the Dixie Chicks’ successful Vietnam-themed song “Travelin’ Soldier” (2003), for example—conceivably glorifying the bravery and sacrifice of a young soldier, in a similar way to Trace Adkins’s reverential “Arlington” (2005)—bears re-reading in light of what we know about the politics of the song’s performers. The same point applies to those artists whose patriotic songs leave little
doubt about their politics. Both Darryl Worley and Toby Keith are heavily involved with the USO, performing for American troops around the world. Additionally, Darryl Worley has appeared at Bush campaign rallies and left little doubt about his (reciprocated) admiration for the President: “I’m honored you’re here, Darryl; I hope you like his music as much as I do,” Bush (“Weekly Compilation”) told a re-election event in Ohio in 2004. Back in Ohio on election day, country music’s biggest-selling duo of all time, Brooks and Dunn, were deployed, along with Laura Bush, to rally supporters one final time with the Republicans’ campaign song, “Only in America.”

The Country Audience(s)

Country music, perhaps as much as any other popular cultural product, can claim to have a truly national reach within the United States—a reach that belies myths about its rural, Southern constituency (Gill). Rather, country music radio is heard by 44 million Americans each week—more than for any other format—and leads the way in several large, urban markets far beyond its “heartland” (CMA). Ann Patchett argues that it is ideology, rather than geography, which unites country music’s audience. Indeed, for Walter Russell Mead, country music is the quintessential “product of Jacksonian culture” (Jacksonianism being a populist, patriotic, and self-reliant political tradition)—a product that, rather like this “Jacksonian populism,” has expanded significantly beyond its original spatial limits (Cobb).

However, simply demonstrating that country music reaches a wide audience has no significance if, methodologically, that fact is not used in some way, and this question of audiencing is highly complex. As Jason Dittmer attests, the “actual” effect of a popular cultural product on its audience is notoriously difficult, if not impossible, to measure (628). The crux of this problematic is two-fold. First, it arises from the observation that geopolitical perceptions and imaginations are produced and sustained through popular engagement with a whole constellation of sources, not just country music (or any other single source). Second, meanings are not simply contained within the lyrics of songs. As Van Sickel argues, the lyrics of a country song are the “core vehicle” of its message (316), but, I would argue, audience perceptions of those meanings are not fixed, predictable, or homogeneous. Rather, they are shaped by a whole range of overlapping contextual factors. Some of these factors—such as the known “politics” of the artist concerned—can, to some extent, be taken into account, but questions of audience response to such variables cannot easily be answered. It is important, therefore, to consider country music’s engagement with the War on Terror in a way sensitive to those historical, political, and institutional contexts of its production sketched above. By placing country music in this broader discursive context, we may leave aside the problematic audience research orientation and focus instead on both the production of popular geopolitical messages through country music and the ways in which these messages are linked with broader geopolitical understandings, rather than on questions of consumption. The relationships between discourse and language, context and text, are reciprocal: texts are in
part constituted by their discursive context and in part constitutive of that context (Fairclough 73).

The songs discussed here are selected because they speak to, or counter, dominant geopolitical storylines. The “objective” measures of songs’ suitability for inclusion were that the artists should be recognizable, contemporary country artists, and that the songs should have been released by major Nashville record labels between September 11, 2001, and mid-2006. The selected songs each achieved top ten positions as singles, or as a part of albums, on the applicable Billboard chart—the exception being Charlie Daniels’s “It Ain’t No Rag It’s a Flag,” which, despite generating substantial controversy, column inches, and airplay, was not released. The songs analyzed are:

2. Charlie Daniels. “It Ain’t No Rag it’s a Flag,” 2001
7. Lonestar. “Somebody’s Someone,” 2004

Analysis: Regions of Danger and the Evil Other

The “regions of danger” frame has been used widely to characterize not only Bush administration discourse, but also, more generally, “western” discourse on terrorism (Bankoff; Coleman; Kellner). Greg Bankoff, for example, argues that contemporary discourses on terrorism form part of a genealogy of “othering” in which non-western spaces have been characterized variously as regions of disease, underdevelopment, and “risk” more generally. Extending this analysis, Mat Coleman suggests that the very naming of “terrorism” and the USA’s identification of an “axis of evil” work, in similar ways, to territorialize the terrorist threat; by the same logic, it is argued, the delimitation of enemy regions strengthens and legitimizes the territorially defined homeland.

Pointing to Terrorism on the Map

In the same way that broader discourse on the War on Terror has defined “the enemy” variously as a diffuse “network” of non-state actors and asymmetrical threats (al Qaeda) and state-based enemies (the Axis of Evil), so country music’s construction of the enemy has worked both to reproduce but also to disrupt the “regions of danger” storyline. The positive effect of defining and naming the enemy, Samuel Huntington argues, is that “national unity is enhanced” in times of crisis; differences within the nation-state are collapsed (260).

America’s enemy is defined, in country music, both as a place in the world, out there, separate from America, and in more human terms as groups of individuals and
a set of values, differentiated from Americans and American values. The “place” of the War on Terror—the enemy—in post-9/11 country music is not, however, just, “out there.” Simultaneously with America’s enemies being brought to justice abroad, there is a battle at home too.

The “mapping” of global space is cartographically ambiguous, but its most striking feature is the clear and territorial demarcation between “us” (the homeland) and “them” (the terrorist enemy). The (former country) singer Steve Earle, it is worth mentioning, has bucked the trend by raising the issue of home-grown terrorism in “John Walker’s Blues” (2002), although his work is not considered here because of its marked lack of commercial success and the fact that “some would no longer regard him as a country artist” (Rudder 223). For Toby Keith, in “Courtesy of the Red, White and Blue,” the enemy of the American “nation that I love” is clear: after 9/11, “soon as we could see clearly through our big black eye/ Man we lit up your world like the fourth of July.” The terrorists—the group of individuals—who attacked America on September 11, 2001, thus become synonymous with the Taliban regime, and thus, territorially, with Afghanistan and later Iraq (the “shock and awe” campaign being the inspiration for Toby Keith’s album title Shock’n Y’all). For Toby Keith—echoing President Bush (“Speech on the USS Abraham Lincoln”)—to harbor al Qaeda terrorists and sympathies is morally equivalent to committing acts of terror; the terrorists attacked our world in New York and Washington, so we retaliated with an attack on “your world,” the terrorist world in Afghanistan and Iraq (Keith, “Courtesy”). In other words, America must “fight the enemy abroad, so we do not have to face them here at home” (for example, Bush “Speech on the USS Abraham Lincoln”). For other country artists, the place of the War on Terror is, similarly, distant and overseas: in his post-9/11 song “Have You Forgotten?” Darryl Worley sings: “I've been there with the soldiers/Who've gone away to war” (emphasis added). Likewise, in Charlie Daniels’s “This Ain’t No Rag It’s a Flag,” the “enemy” is warned: “You better know [the eagle is] headed your way.” The non-specificity of the “arena” for the War on Terror seems to serve an impression that the War is being fought in disparate and distant places overseas, “away” from America, places that Americans do not (need to) know about. Alan Jackson admits to this line of thinking in his 9/11-themed “tribute,” “Where Were You (When the World Stopped Turning)”: he’s “not a real political man,” and does not know the difference between Iraq and Iran.

Taken together, we see, in these examples, the complexities of the War on Terror distilled into simple core messages; the “geographical specificity and place-based particularity” (Ó Tuathail Critical 245) of particular facets of the War on Terror are subsumed under a general territorial logic of homogeneously hostile regions distant from the United States. The War on Terror is presented as, in some ways, an article of “faith” rather than a worked-out position of rational support—a hallmark of Jacksonian geopolitical culture according to Mead (qtd in Ó Tuathail “Just Out” 861).
Freedom-Loving “Rag Heads”? Debating America’s Enemies

In the immediate aftermath of 9/11, President Bush was careful from the outset to ensure that the War on Terror was not cast as a war against the civilian population of Afghanistan (and later, Iraq), or more generally as war on Islam (for example, Bush, “Speech at the Islamic Centre”). While some supporters of President Bush’s conduct of the War on Terror sought to argue that “the citizens of Afghanistan and Iraq are paying the heaviest possible price for supporting, abetting, and applauding the 9/11 attacks on the United States” (Foxell 129)—thus marking out the populations of these “terrorist regions” as, in total, complicit in their states’ actions—country music has not (always) sought to universalize America’s enemies in this way. A controversial example, however, of where the opposite is arguably true is Charlie Daniels’s “This Ain’t No Rag It’s a Flag,” which follows up its provocative title with the comment, “and we don’t wear it on our heads”—perhaps a reference to Arab dress. The remainder of the song, however, casts the difference between America and her enemies in value-based rather than racialized terms: Americans are the “good guys”; the enemy, by contrast, “broke all the rules.” This angry riposte to America’s enemies, feeding into the territorial logic outlined above, is balanced, however, by Toby Keith’s light-hearted “Taliban Song,” narrated from the perspective of an “ordinary” Afghan, a “middle-aged, Middle Eastern camel herding man.” Cultural stereotypes are in evidence (not least the “camel herding” and the “two-bedroom cave here in north Afghanistan”), but the general thrust is to support the idea of liberation rather than invasion/occupation, an attack on “their” (the Taliban’s) “Holy Land” rather than on Afghanistan more generally: “Man, you should have seen them run/ Like rabbits they ran, the Taliban.”

The idea of the territorialization of the enemy (Reuber) is thus disrupted: terrorism is abroad, but abroad is not necessarily “terrorist.” Neither is the divide between “civilized” and “uncivilized” spaces, but rather it is one between two sets of values; the Afghan civilian, the “camel herding man,” is, after all, on “our” side. Instead, the commentary is one of oppression versus freedom, and civilians in these terrorist regions are very much “like us” in wanting freedom. Toby Keith (“Taliban”) evokes the image of the Taliban’s oppression of women, before creating a peculiar image of an Afghan woman who “loves” the hot, white sand of the desert. In the same way that the issues of principle for the War on Terror are condensed into a simple message (good/evil, us/them, freedom/oppression), so the particularity of the Afghani situation becomes a simple imagination of a desert country of camels and oppression, its freedom-loving (and fundamentally American-like) people eager for US liberation.

Analysis: The Heroic “Folk” Community under Attack

National Character and National (Dis)unity

Former Mossad director Shabtai Shavit was “overwhelmed” by Americans’ “patriotism, unity, and support for the president” in the wake of September 11
Similarly, Huntington (264)—whose “clash of civilizations” thesis has been reeled out to account for post-9/11 American foreign policy framing (Kellner)—noted that a sense of collective purpose in the immediate aftermath of 9/11 blurred distinctions between “denationalized elites” and mass populations: “this gap was temporarily obscured by the suspension of dissent and the patriotic rallying after September 11,” he argues. This idea of the American people as a whole and their very “way of life” (Bush “Presidential Address”) under attack represents a powerful image of a united American nation. The phrase “folk community” is used by Mead to describe the ways in which the Jacksonian tradition conceptualizes the American nation. In post-9/11 country music we can, however, identify a dialogue between two distinct positions: that which supports this “America under attack” thesis, whereby America is treated as this united, coherent, “folk” nation, and a second position which represents an assertion of (sub)national identity where the experience and will of “mainstream” America is defined in opposition to liberal elites within the United States.

Darryl Worley’s “Have You Forgotten?” is referenced by Gearóid Ó Tuathail as indicative of the “instinct rather than ideology” that characterizes the culture of “affect-fueled desire for revenge and muscular reassertionism in the wake of 9/11” (“Just Out” 860). Darryl Worley, Ó Tuathail argues, Americanizes the attack on the World Trade Center, “evoking the organic folk community under attack” (“Just Out” 861). However, a closer reading of the song—and the contributions of other country artists—shows a level of ambiguity about this question of the American “nation” and, even, about who the target of “its” anger should be. For example, “Have You Forgotten?” expresses frustration with those within the United States who oppose military action in the War on Terror: “I hear people saying we don’t need this war,” it begins. The chorus is then addressed solely to these people. Telling them to stop “preaching,” it asks: “have you forgotten?”

Who are these people, undermining the War on Terror? In verse 2 we are given some idea: “the experts.” The use of pronouns, and the varying of address, of Darryl Worley’s song is interesting in that it sets up a clear division between, on the one hand, “you and me” and, on the other hand, “they” the “experts.” In short, it articulates a brand of Jacksonianism “profundely suspicious of elites” (Mead). In the title, “you” seems to address opponents of the war, and perhaps also implicitly those waverers among “us” disillusioned with the direction of American foreign policy who need reminding that the War on Terror is fundamentally “about” September 11.

Implicitly we see a questioning of the patriotism, or at least of the resolve, of those who seek to “preach,” deliberate, or weigh up options about an appropriate response. Not to support the war is to forget the attack on the homeland and to belittle the sacrifice of those “blown away” by terrorism; the “experts” are censoring, and denying the horror of the destruction of the World Trade Center. Darryl Worley himself expends significant time and energy supporting and being seen to support “our troops.” We see a popular Jacksonian eagerness to take decisive actions (Mead) stifled by “experts” and media elites. In this respect, Darryl Worley’s America is
defined by its values and justified outrage at the terrorist attacks rather than by a territorial logic of a united “national” homeland; even as it articulates support for the US government, so it positions itself in opposition to the “elites” within America. In disrupting the construction of “identity tropes of ‘them’ and ‘us’” (Dalby 658) in a state-based sense, the imagination expressed in “Have You Forgotten?” can be seen, in some senses, to run counter to hegemonic territorialized constructions of global political space. In Simon Dalby’s words, Darryl Worley emphasizes rather than obscures “differences within” the nation-state as opposed to “differences between” nation-states (658).

In contrast with “Have You Forgotten?” other country music artists’ engagements with the War on Terror have tended to emphasize the unity of America, both in terms of the shared “experience” of 9/11 and the shared values and unity behind particular geopolitical actions since. Charlie Daniels’s song “It Ain’t No Rag It’s a Flag” is perhaps the most unambiguous example of this. Laden with patriotic imagery (Old Glory, the eagle, the Stars and the Stripes, etc.) it declares: “when you mess with one, you mess with us all/Every boy, girl, woman, and man.”

The address—“you”—is aimed squarely at the enemy. As this enemy becomes the “coward,” the “fool,” the “dirty little mole,” so the American nation is united, “as one”; elsewhere, the American people stand proud, loyal, and strong. Here, the America under attack is an America which, universally under the flag, is provoked to action: belligerent, angry, but nevertheless reluctant (“we can do what we have to do”). Here we see a strong sense of moral outrage and a desire for justice and revenge. This desire, however, is cast in terms of a sense of “duty”—an instinctive reaction, one of the “amorphous set of feelings and dispositions” characteristic of the Jacksonian geopolitical tradition (O´ Tuathail “Just Out” 861)—in which it stands to reason, and is right, that a particular course of action has to be taken, and thus America will do what it has to do. While Charlie Daniels’s song in itself presents a determined and unified American nation in opposition to its “cowardly” opponents abroad, the idea of an “elite” within the United States opposing America from taking the necessary actions in the War on Terror is one that he raises in a widely reported statement—“An Open Letter to the Hollywood Bunch”—posted on his website in which similarly angry rhetoric is directed towards antiwar “celebrities”:

You bunch of pitiful, hypocritical, idiotic, spoiled mugwumps. Get your head out of the sand and smell the Trade Towers burning....America is in imminent danger. You’re either for her or against her. There is no middle ground. I think we all know where you stand.

This type of discourse—where the mainstream, majority view is defined in opposition to other groups within America—is an important way in which the territorialization of the War on Terror is disrupted even as it is reproduced. As Charlie Daniels (“It Ain’t”) echoes President Bush’s declaration that, in the War on Terror, it is necessary for nation-states to be either for or against the United States (for example, Bush “Speech on the USS Abraham Lincoln”), so he reproduces that logic at a more localized level: the War on Terror becomes as much a “battle of ideas”
within the United States as it is either between the shared values of the United States and extremist Islamist ideology or between the United States as a territorially defined homeland and its state enemies in the “axis of evil.” The tension between, on the one hand, a coherent America defined by its shared values and interests (as depicted in Daniels’s song) and, on the other, a culturally and ideologically divided America (as referred to in Daniels’s press release) reflects a broader debate about the type of American identity represented in country music: an inclusive national identity defined in opposition to a terrorist other, versus a (sub)national identity defined in opposition to Hollywood and media “elites.” Alan Jackson’s “Where Were You (When the World Stopped Turning)?” seems to characterize the events of 9/11—and importantly the reaction to them—as a shared, national experience. Aaron Fox, for example, implies that the reason for Alan Jackson’s success in receiving substantial airplay on non-country radio (compared with the other songs mentioned here) was the relatively uncontroversial, non-confrontational nature of its sentiments. Alan Jackson presents a range of “answers” to the question, “where were you?” Among them: “out in the yard with your wife and children” or “teaching a class full of innocent children” (as President Bush was pictured doing that morning). The breadth of American experience represented here is interesting, though, for what it excludes, as well as what it includes. Alan Jackson, unlike Darryl Worley and Charlie Daniels, avoids confrontation with either an evil enemy or with dissenting views within America, but nonetheless presents a particular interpretation of “legitimate” American experience of 9/11, and, arguably, a distinctively male perspective (“with your wife”) at that. Elsewhere in Alan Jackson’s song, there is a strong Christian element to the “reactions” to 9/11, which echoes the ways in which President Bush sought to make sense of, and to Christianize, the mourning process in the immediate aftermath of 9/11 (Bush “National Day of Prayer”). Written in close proximity to the events of 9/11, the Christian sentiments in Alan Jackson’s song can be seen to fit in with a “normal” pattern of rituals and “standardized displays of solidarity” (Collins 53) in the wake of terrorist attacks, of which seeking solace in religion is a significant example.

Rescaling the Nation: Individual Character and the Personification of the Nation

The discussion above began to identify a key theme in post-9/11 country music—a theme again consistent with Jacksonianism and the public statements of President Bush—namely the role of the individual American “hero,” and specifically “the figure of the heroic, male, blue-collar American worker, the man of few words and strong deeds [which] loomed up from the rubble of the World Trade Center” (Fox 172). Here, the “heroic American” is seen as a trope: an embodiment of national characteristics, or a body onto which particular values are projected. Country music’s representation of “heroic Americans” is part of a wider context in which American foreign policy is, on occasion, reduced to the level of the individual and understood in terms of personal objectives/bravery/integrity evocative of broader national values.
In the immediate aftermath of 9/11, this heroic American figure was the rescue worker, the firefighter, and the policemen lauded by President Bush at Ground Zero (Bush “Remarks…to Police Officers”). Later, during the Iraq war, “he” morphed into the figure of Private Jessica Lynch, the brave, heroic all-American PoW fearless in the face of her captors, rescued by her comrades—in the presence of television cameras (Kellner). The main “heroes” in country music, therefore, have been the victims of 9/11—as in “Have You Forgotten?”—along with the American military.

Toby Keith’s “American Soldier” is a prime example of the way in which high-tech warfare, geopolitical strategy, and nationalist rhetoric are reduced to the level of the mundane daily grind of the soldier, of the individual honor and sacrifice of ordinary Americans. Against an “aggressive, bullying and imperialist” (Kellner 57) American “military,” we see the real “human” face of the machine: the noble, dedicated, everyman American. A recurring theme in representations of heroic American figures is their normalcy. “American Soldier” begins by stressing the family man identity of the soldier back home. The “American Soldier” is thus an American first, a soldier second. There is a sense too in which we are reminded of the “human” face of war, the way in which ordinary people—American men, not faceless fighters—are asked to do extraordinary things, to, in the words of “American Soldier,” “take a stand,” secure our future, allow us to sleep in peace. Underneath the mundane drudgery, and the separation from one’s family, there is an underlying sense of duty, the potential for self-sacrifice in a wider cause. Toby Keith’s “American Soldier” declares that, although he (the soldier) does not want to die, he recognizes that “freedom don’t come free.” Equivalently, “Americans like these [do] not fight for glory, but to fulfill a duty,” President Bush told a Memorial Day service at the National Cemetery in Arlington, VA (Bush “Speech at a Memorial Day Service”). Trace Adkins’s song “Arlington” is, perhaps, even stronger on the theme of sacrifice in the cause of “the highest calling in history” (Bush “Speech at a Memorial Day Service”): “I’m one of the chosen ones/I made it to Arlington.” The balance between the harsh reality of life on the frontline and the “higher” values of self-sacrifice and defense of “our values” demystifies the reality of the high-tech War on Terror even as it affirms the ideals of patriotic Americans who will never defend those ideals militarily. Toby Keith’s role is to remind us of, and to celebrate, military heroism; the listeners’ responsibility is defined in and through this process.

Similarly, Lonestar’s “Somebody’s Someone” offers this heroic (“to you and me he is a hero”) everyman soldier as its only theme. Whereas Lonestar uses a father explaining the sacrifice and heroism of a (dead) American soldier to his “little boy,” Toby Keith (“American”) uses the first person, speaking as/for the American soldier. In both cases, roles are constructed for the listeners: Toby Keith’s soldier affirms the ideal of the brave, skilled American who shares the values and aspirations of those who support (but do not participate in) military actions; Lonestar emphasizes a role for American civilians (the father at home with his young son, while his peers give their lives “for our land”) in cherishing, explaining, and celebrating the military. In doing so, they perhaps also challenge the “‘me’ generation” at home in the US to
assess its “contribution” (or at least attitude) to the War in contrast with the sacrifice of the armed forces (Power and Crampton).

Furthermore, this heroic military figure is cast as relatively apolitical; references to the rights, wrongs, and intricacies of specific military actions are eschewed in favor of the overarching theme of the defense of broad American values (“liberty” and “freedom” recur). “I’m not a real political man,” sings Alan Jackson; thus, the shared values of the American people are not a matter of politics. Rather, some values are fundamental and some actions become right without the need for elaborate reasoning/understanding (Mead).

Discussion and Conclusion

I have illustrated the ways in which post-9/11 country artists have opted to portray America’s response to the terrorist attacks of September 11, and I have introduced country music as a popular music genre—among a constellation of other media and popular culture—shaping popular geopolitical discourse. In that respect, this analysis adds to a growing literature that recognizes the significance of country music in (re)presenting particular political attitudes to its mass audience. Using the idea of “popular geopolitics,” I have illustrated how country music provides a useful example of the ways in which “popular and elite forms of...reasoning collude with one another and then resonate through popular culture” (Dodds “Political” 473).

By using a “framing” approach, I demonstrated that post-9/11 country music to date provides a powerful, popular/populist medium through which dominant understandings of the War on Terror are, in general, reproduced, but also debated and contested. In terms of the first frame—“regions of danger and the evil other”—some key points from the analysis are worth reiterating. Country music’s engagement with the enemy reflects in many ways the ambiguity about the nature of America’s new terrorist adversary (Hoveyda 119); the enemy is cast variously as a territorialized other, a racialized other, or simply evil personified. The specificity of particular geopolitical engagements—particular “battles” in the “war” on terrorism—are collapsed to broader themes of good/evil and right/wrong; as I illustrate, country music artists have tended to echo President Bush in stressing the “duty” to spread and protect freedom, the importance of “American values,” and the idea of bringing justice to America’s enemies. The homeland is “peaceful,” “good,” and “free,” but, while the enemy is territorialized as abroad, the coherence/consistency of references to the place of terrorism, to evil regions, should not be overstated. We see, therefore, a mapping of terrorists’ regions rather than terrorist regions—places abroad where America’s enemies hide and operate, but regions where freedom-loving people “like us” (Toby Keith’s “camel-herding man”) welcome American liberation. The selection of a broad frame such as this illustrates ways in which conflicting meanings/interpretations simultaneously reproduce and resist dominant understandings.

The second frame—“the heroic ‘folk’ community under attack”—was shown to be generally applicable to the body of songs considered here. America is, unproblema-
tically, the victim and the defender of freedom/liberty/the homeland, and not the aggressor/invader/occupier. “American values” of honor, duty, and sacrifice are applauded and projected into/onto the persons of individual, ordinary Americans. As Private Jessica Lynch single-handedly took the fight to her Iraqi captors, so Toby Keith’s “American Soldier” and Lonestar’s deceased American soldier take the fight to America’s enemies on behalf of the heroes who died on 9/11 (Worley). Ordinary (male) Americans keep the homeland safe out of a sense of duty, a calling to fight “for the sake of others” (Bush “Speech at a Memorial Day Service”). The intertext between President Bush’s valuing of military service and country music’s celebration of the same is clear. The main way in which this script is disrupted within these songs, however, is the contrast between these high values embodied in the personnel of the American military—celebrated in and supported by country music—and the cowardice/non-patriotism of their detractors at home. A subtext therefore emerges linking this study’s findings to suggestions by John Bodnar and by Power and Crampton that the effect, in terms of the construction of a role for the consumer, is heightened by stressing the “ordinariness” of heroic military personnel. Brave American soldiers are fighting for our freedom; the “Hollywood bunch” is running the country down; where do “you” stand? what are you doing in the cause of good versus evil?

Using the idea of popular geopolitics, I have argued that popular understandings of geopolitical issues are mediated by popular cultural products such as country music, and it is by interrogating this intertext between “elite” and “popular” culture that we may be better able to understand how (and why) particular geopolitical understandings become dominant and common sense.

Works Cited


———. “Remarks by the President from Speech on the *USS Abraham Lincoln* on the Cessation of Combat Operations in Iraq: At Sea off the Coast of San Diego, California, May 1, 2003.” *We


