

Orientalism in Post-9/11 Country Music



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Introduction to Postcolonial Studies

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Introduction

Discussing postcolonialism and as part of it, Orientalism, one might not instantly see a connection to the wide field of American country music. In this essay I will attempt to connect these two subjects and explain how they interact in a post-9/11 American climate. When most people think of contemporary American country music they think of guitars, harmonicas, fiddles, and banjos accompanied by a clear drumbeat and often simplistic lyrics that are easy to sing along with. The singers often appear wearing cowboy hats, blue jeans, and boots. Album covers feature corn and wheat fields, dirt roads, pickup trucks, bald eagles, and old glory flying in the breeze. Typically, lyrics are about small towns, the American dream, working on the farm, high school sweethearts and family. It represents a fictional image of the all-American cowboy, outlaw, gunslinger, the freedom loving small man who keeps the country running. Country music is no stranger to political messaging, during the Vietnam war groups like Creedence Clearwater Revival set the Vietnam war protest movement to music with hits such as Fortunate Son. These songs often highlighted the dramatic wealth and racial disparity between those who served and those making the policies that ended up costing nearly 60,000 American lives and countless Vietnamese casualties. Even with protest songs being a smaller, yet constant part of country music, the focus on representation of the American heartland still covers the vast majority of contemporary country music.

On a clear September morning not only country music but the world would change. Following the terrorist attacks on the World Trade Center in New York City on September 11th, 2001, the nation's entire attitude towards what would be considered patriotic took a turn. The initial military intervention in Afghanistan was largely supported by the public. (Newport) The later invasion of Iraq in 2003 caused a lot of discussion and controversy in the country. While fighting the Taliban regime in Afghanistan was a direct result of the Taliban refusing to cooperate with the U.S. government by helping capture Osama bin Laden, the mastermind of the 9/11 attacks, the invasion of Iraq did not offer any link towards the terrorist attacks 2 years prior. These two, often described as part of the War on Terror introduced an entirely new generation to the Middle East. Until then main source of knowledge, if it can even be called that, about the Middle East was based on the 1992 Disney movie Aladdin, which in turn was based on the 1940 classic, The Thief of Baghdad by producer Alexander Korda. Originally the protagonist's home was supposed to Baghdad, but the 1991 Gulf War caused Disney to change the name to Agrabah

instead. (Brockington) With phrases like “support our troops” seen on many bumper stickers across the United States, country music stars followed the trend and began what I describe as patriotic country. This change in theme was not only due to singers wanting to show support for the troops but also due to radio airtime. As Today reported in 2004, anti-war country songs got little to no playtime on the airwaves in 2004. (Today) This new patriotic country music did not limit itself to glorifying the men and women serving the United States but also featured jabs and at those they saw responsible for troubles in the Middle East. One can argue that with the 9/11 attacks and the following War on Terror a new flavor of Orientalism that mirrors the descriptions of Edward W. Said and other theorists has been created. Edward W. Said writes in the introduction to his 1978 book *Orientalism*,

“The Orient is an integral of European material civilization and culture. Orientalism expresses and represents that part culturally and even ideologically as a mode of discourse with supporting institutions, vocabulary, scholarship, imagery, doctrines, even colonial bureaucracies, and colonial styles. In contrast, the American understanding of the Orient will seem considerably less dense, although our recent Japanese, Korean, and Indochinese adventures ought now to be creating a more sober, more realistic “Oriental” awareness. Moreover, the vastly expanded American political and economic role in the Near East (the Middle East) makes great claims on our understanding of that Orient.” (Said 10)

This American political role, of which Edward W. Said already spoke of in 1978 has since dramatically been redefined following the attacks in New York City. This change is reflected in all forms of popular culture and everyday awareness.

The focus of this paper will be the effects this new form of orientalism has had on country music at the time. First, I will look at the song *Have you Forgotten?* by Darryl Worley as it illustrates the mindset many American patriotic country music artists were in and to an extent the mindset of a large portion of the United States population. After that I will look into two songs by Toby Keith, *Courtesy of the Red, White and Blue (The Angry American)* and *The Taliban Song*. All of the songs listed enjoyed wide broadcasting and were performed by mainstream contemporary country music icons.

Darryl Worley - Have You Forgotten?

Son of a Methodist preacher Darryl Worley released *Have You Forgotten?* in 2003 and it quickly rose to the top of the US Country charts. Even before officially released, live recording where immensely popular on the internet. Worley wrote the song after performing for U.S. Soldiers in Afghanistan during a USO performance (Mansfield). At first glance the title and main lyrics are a simple tribute to the victims of the 9/11 terror attacks and channel the popular slogan “Never Forget”. Unlike other artists, Worley doesn’t make direct comments about the people from the middle east that he sees as responsible for the attacks other than Osama bin Laden. The song begins with the line “I hear people saying we don’t need this war” (Worley). The war he is referencing in 2003 is the Iraq War, a war unrelated to the 9/11 terror attacks, the song continues pushing the idea that “[...] there’s some things worth fighting for [...] freedom and this piece of ground” (Worley). The general theme of freedom, not being free but something fought for and defended by for generations is a staple in country music as a whole. Worley goes on with the chorus,

“Have you forgotten how it felt that day
 To see your homeland under fire
 And her people blown away
 Have you forgotten when those towers fell
 We had neighbors still inside
 Going through a living hell
 And you say we shouldn't worry 'bout Bin Laden
 Have you forgotten” (Worley)

This is the first time in the song where he begins to conflate those deemed responsible for the tragedy that hit the nation. In Worley’s mind the opposition to the invasion of Iraq due to suspected weapons of mass destruction possessed by Iraqi leader Saddam Hussein was due to disinterest in apprehending Osama bin Laden. The rest of the section is an appeal to emotion. Without going to too much detail on the causes, reasons, and political motives that ultimately led to the Invasion of Iraq, it is clear from these lines in the song that to Worley Iraq and Afghanistan are simply just part of the same enemy, the Orient, the Other. Writer Maura Johnston from *The Village Voice* called this “a crass-in attempt to tie together the Sept. 11,

2001, terrorist attacks and the run-up to the Iraq War” In what she then goes on to call the 11th “Worst Songs of the ’00s,”. (Johnston) This lack of distinction between countries of the middle east is a typical aspect of the west’s disregard for even basic knowledge of geography in the area often seen as simply just the Orient. The fact that Iraq and Afghanistan are separated by Iran, one of the largest countries in the middle east and are therefore around 1500 km apart is lost in the process of othering and grouping these quite different countries together. Our western perspective doesn’t bother to differentiate. We prefer to summarize this culturally diverse region as simply the Orient or the Middle East. KSON-FM co-host Tony Randall describes the countries mood during this time as “everybody's viewing all the bad guys in a big bucket.” (Mansfield)

In this case Darryl Worley’s song is not much different than the paintings of Jean-Léon Gérôme or other painters who served themselves with generalized oriental themes. There is nearly little difference between the late 19th century romanization and the more aggressive style in the early 21st century when it comes to the clear disinterest in breaking cultural stereotypes. This newer aggressive style of orientalism is perfectly illustrated by verse,

“They took all the footage off my TV
 Said it's too disturbing for you and me
 It'll just breed anger that's what the experts say
 If it was up to me I'd show it everyday
 Some say this country's just out looking for a fight
 After 9/11 man I'd have to say that's right” (Worley)

In this section of the song, Worley is actively calling for war with the Orient, mocking attempts of experts to deescalate the public’s anger and anxiety. Instead, he proposes to further fuel both hatred and resentment by continuously reminding people of the terrible events. Some contemporary journalists went as far as to accuse him of playing the drum beat for a war. (Mansfield) Despite all the criticism the song received from critics, it was not just incredibly popular on country music radio as KILT station’s operations manager Jeff Garrison reported to the Chicago Tribune in 2003, saying “It's the most requested song I've ever seen in the history of KILT” (Dickinson), but also reached top 22 in the nationwide Billboard Top 100 singles charts. (Zaleski)

Toby Keith - Courtesy of the Red, White and Blue (The Angry American)

Originally meant as a tribute to his veteran father who died early in 2001 American country musician Toby Keith began writing *Courtesy of the Red, White and Blue (The Angry American)*. The song begins by declaring that “American girls and American guys” including himself will “always stand up and salute [and] always recognize when [they] see Old Glory flying.” (Keith) This appeal aims to address all those who see themselves as proud Americans. The main reason this song is interesting from an orientalism perspective is how Toby Keith describes the attack on the World Trade Center.

“Now this nation that I love has fallen under attack
 A mighty sucker punch came flyin' in from somewhere in the back
 Soon as we could see clearly
 Through our big black eye
 Man, we lit up your world
 Like the fourth of July” (Keith)

By describing Afghanistan as “somewhere in the back” he makes it clear how surprised he seemed with such a sophisticated attack originating from what he believes to be such an unsophisticated place. Many Americans, including Toby Keith were seemingly shocked that what they perceived to be *primitive* people without access to education or knowledge of the greater world were able to execute a meticulous attack against what they believe to be the most technologically superior nation. By using the term “sucker punch” he dubs the attack cowardly and unprovoked. The fact that Al-Qaeda linked terrorists had already attempted to destroy the World Trade Centers in 1993 and various smaller attacks on American troops and embassies abroad was swept aside because the idea that Al-Qaeda and to an extent *Orientalists* as a whole were even capable of such a chain of planned attacks seemed farfetched. This exact feeling towards *the Oriental* is what Edward W. Said describes as “the doctrines of European superiority, various kinds of racism, imperialism, and the like [...]” (Said 16) Said’s take on the wildly unquestioned European superiority is also applicable for the attitude of North Americans.

“From the beginning of the nineteenth century until the end of World War II France and Britain dominated the Orient and Orientalism; since World War II America has dominated the Orient, and approaches it as France and Britain once

did. Out of that closeness whose dynamic is enormously productive even if it always demonstrates the comparatively greater strength of the Occident (British, French, or American) [...].” (Said 12)

Especially after the attack on the Twin Towers, this feeling of superiority was vocalized in all levels of society. Functioning maybe as a kind of band aid for the absolute helplessness and the unknown feeling of vulnerability on their own soil. Keith summons strong depictions of American icons fighting back against the unknown.

“Hey Uncle Sam, put your name at the top of his list
 And the Statue of Liberty started shakin' her fist
 And the eagle will fly man, it's gonna be hell
 When you hear mother freedom start ringin' her bell
 And it feels like the whole wide world is raining down on you
 Brought to you courtesy of the red white and blue“ (Keith)

This vulnerability subconsciously comes through in the chorus of Keith’s song. While Uncle Sam has a notable history with war and the American military, the Statue of Liberty has always been a sign of freedom and prosperity that the United States could offer to it’s new arrivals. However, depicting the Statue of liberty with an aggressive stance is in stark contrast to her inscription “Give me your tired, your poor, your huddled masses yearning to breathe free [...]”. (Lazarus) In a way Toby Keith’s lyric imitates the vision of the Bush administration to “strengthen democracy and promote peace around the world” (White House Archives) by all means deemed necessary. Further in the song Keith even justifies armed conflict and intervention in Afghanistan and praises the projection of hard power as the American way.

“Justice will be served and the battle will rage
 This big dog will fight when you rattle his cage
 And you'll be sorry that you messed with
 The U.S. of A.
 'Cause we'll put a boot in your ass
 It's the American way” (Keith)

This mindset has been a key characteristic of not only U.S. foreign policy but also self-image of many Americans, ever since President Theodore Roosevelt termed the phrase “speak softly and carry a big stick; you will go far.” (Citation)

To this day the song is very popular, being featured on many country music playlists and boosting over 100 million plays on music streaming service Spotify. Furthermore, demonstrating the popularity of the mindset that the song projects.

Toby Keith – The Taliban Song

While less popular and widespread than the other songs, this Toby Keith song is maybe even more significant regarding the orientalist mindset of patriotic country music. It contains copious amounts of stereotypes toward the Afghan people and country. Written from the imagined perspective of an Afghan man who is unhappy with the outcome of the Afghan civil war and the resulting Taliban control over most parts of the war-torn country. The song was released as a bonus track on Keith’s 2003 4-time platinum album *Shock’n Y’all* recorded from a live performance. It begins with the line, “I’m just a middle-aged middle-eastern camel herdin’ man”(Keith) an allusion to the common pejorative racial slur Camel-Jockey towards Arabs. This introduction sets the tone for the rest of the song. Continuing with “I’ve got a little two bedroom cave here in north Afghanistan” (Keith), further insinuating the lack of infrastructure and national development in Afghanistan. The section was possibly also influenced by the widely publicized battle of Tora Bora in eastern Afghanistan during December of 2001 which entailed heavy U.S bombing of a vast Taliban and al Qaeda controlled cave system in them mountain region of Nangarhar Province. While the song is littered with offensive descriptions of the Afghans, primary target of ridicule are the Taliban. Impacts of the Taliban strict Islamic doctrine on Afghanistan from an American perspective are introduced with

“Things used to be real nice and they got outta hand
Since they moved in
They call themselves the Taliban” (Keith)

Of course, this ignores the violence of the Soviet invasion of the 1980s and the subsequent civil war in the region which caused countless deaths. Additionally American support of various militias and Mujahedeen fighters during this time are also clearly ignored. Keith attempts to crudely sympathize with the Afghan population when he sings the lines,

“I ain't seen my wife's face since they came here
 They make her wear a scarf over her head that covers her from ear to ear
 She loves the desert and the hot, white sand but now
 Man she just like me
 She can't stand the Taliban” (Keith)

With this he suggests that the people of Afghanistan would be thankful and welcome the invading U.S. forces because they promise to rid the country of the oppressive Taliban rule. While at first glance he might come across as caring for the wellbeing of Afghani people, the next line, “We should do just fine out around Palestine, Or maybe Turkmenistan”(Keith) demonstrates the widespread western attitude towards the Orient, by mixing and merging the entire region into one.

“Now they attacked New York City 'cause they thought they could win
 Said they would stand and fight until the very bloody end
 Mr. Bush got on the phone with Iraq and Iran he said now
 You sons a' bitches, you better not be doin' any business with the Taliban” (Keith)

Somewhat surprisingly Keith differentiated between the general Afghan population and the Taliban. While he does see the Taliban and Al-Qaeda as one and the same, this passage seems to highlight that the average Afghani is not responsible for the attacks on America and even goes as far as insinuate they may not approve of them. The most important part of the song might be the following,

“Now we prayed to Allah with all of our might
 Until those big U.S. jets came flyin' in one night
 They dropped little bombs all over the holy land
 Man you should've seen 'em run, like rabbits they ran, the Taliban” (Keith)

Going of the first and second line of this section it comes across as if the Afghan subject of the song is praying to Allah that the U.S. will come and bomb the country to rid it from the Taliban. Keith is strongly suggesting that the people of Afghanistan would be joyous of mass areal bombardment as path to their liberation. This troubling assertion strongly reflects the colonial mindset of the white man’s burden, “the duty formerly asserted by white people to

manage the affairs of nonwhite people whom they believed to be less developed” (White man's Burden). While not as extreme as Rudyard Kipling’s rendition, the base tone is still there. Keith essential legitimates the invasion of Afghanistan and the ensuing deaths of thousands in the quest of spreading freedom and democracy.

Connection to Edward W. Said’s *Orientalism*

As mentioned before, a form of Orientalism is very much alive within modern patriotic country music. The typical western perspective on how they view the orient as one single entity and not individual countries and nations with vastly differing religions, cultures, and customs is illustrated in all three of the songs discussed. Edward W. Said offers three qualifications to what constitutes orientalism to him. The first being that “It would be wrong to conclude that the Orient was essentially an idea, or a creation with no corresponding reality.” (Said 13) Stereotypes are often based on reality or superficial observation, it is wrong to then use those stereotypes when describing the corresponding cultures. While Taliban fighters at various points during the U.S. intervention may have hidden in caves or cave-like structures the idea that an average Afghan citizen would live in a cave with his wife as suggested in *The Taliban Song* is wildly fictitious.

Secondly, “Ideas, cultures, and histories cannot seriously be understood or studied without their force, or more precisely their configurations of power, also being studied.” (Said 13) Discussing the current state of an area without considering how it got there is disingenuous. In *Courtesy of the Red White and Blue (The angry American)* the more complex history of Afghanistan, with plenty of occidental influence is ignored in favor of simply calling it backward due to its own doing.

Finally, “One ought never to assume that the structure of Orientalism is nothing more a structure of lies or of myths which were the truth about them to be told, would simply blow away.” (Said 14) A persistent ignorance of reality due to a lack of interest and caring about the region as a whole, might serve the intention of simplifying a disturbing complexity in order to make a point and free oneself from any feeling of guilt.

These fundamental qualifications of what Edward W. Said call “Orientalism” are fulfilled by all three songs mentioned here and many more in the genre of American patriotic country music. While many of these songs call for the unity of Americans, it sometimes seems that only straight, white natural-born citizens are addressed. It is important to mention that racism, sexism,

xenophobia and anti-LGTBQ sentiments are often also part of country music, but investigation of these issues would be outside of the scope of this paper. In our context it is paramount to focus on the core message of us in the west versus them in the rest of the world, specifically the orient in relation to country music in a post 9/11 world. Said address this exact issue,

“Orientalism is never far from what Denys Hay has called the idea of Europe, a collective notion identifying “us” Europeans as against all “those” non-Europeans, and indeed it can be argued that the major component in European culture is precisely what made that culture hegemonic both in and outside Europe: the idea of European identity as a superior one in comparison with all the non-European peoples and cultures.” (Said 15)

As mentioned in the introduction and with the sole geopolitical hegemon that the United States has become following the collapse of the Soviet Union, this now also applies for Americans. Especially since starting in the second half of the 20th century the United States began heavily projecting both soft and hard power across the world, influence not only the orient but also Europe.

Conclusion

In conclusion, while at first glance Edward W. Said’s theories on Orientalism seem anchored in classical art and writings it has become relevant to American country music in a post-9/11 world. Many of the observations about Orientalism that Said makes can be directly applied to patriotic country songs. The three examples discussed in this paper offer and look at the escalation of how song lyrics evolved from being mostly ignorant to middle eastern geography and geopolitics in Darryl Worley’s *Have You Forgotten?* Over to Toby Keith’s courtesy of the Red, White, and Blue (the angry American) that dismisses western evolvments and results to calling the Orient backward. Finally concluding in Toby Keith’s, *The Taliban Song* featuring offensive stereotypes, further ignorance to politics and geography all the way to thinly veiled coverups of racial slurs towards middle easterners. All of these songs serve the same purpose, to make the listener feel superior in a way typical for western audiences who interact with orientalist media. The already prevalent *us versus them* attitude that has accompanied interactions between the occident and the Orientalism is never far from whorient for centuries was further fueled after the west saw direct blame for the 9/11 terror attacks on the orient. The blurred lines between misinformation and disinterest from the west and racism and xenophobia

towards the orient become even more blurred in times of crisis. What the future hold is uncertain, while song's like The Taliban Song are still available on streaming platform like Spotify and YouTube Music, most contemporary labels would most likely not greenlight such a song in the current political climate and the way we as a society view racism only 20 years later. With the rise in awareness of postcolonial struggles change is happening faster than ever.

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Appendix

Have You Forgotten – Darryl Worley

I hear people saying we don't need this war
I say there's some things worth fighting for
What about our freedom and this piece of ground
We didn't get to keep 'em by backing down
They say we don't realize the mess we're getting in
Before you start your preaching
Let me ask you this my friend

Have you forgotten how it felt that day
To see your homeland under fire
And her people blown away
Have you forgotten when those towers fell
We had neighbors still inside
Going through a living hell
And you say we shouldn't worry 'bout Bin Laden
Have you forgotten

They took all the footage off my TV
Said it's too disturbing for you and me
It'll just breed anger that's what the experts say
If it was up to me I'd show it everyday
Some say this country's just out looking for a fight
After 9/11 man I'd have to say that's right

Have you forgotten how it felt that day
To see your homeland under fire
And her people blown away
Have you forgotten when those towers fell
We had neighbors still inside
Going through a living hell
And you say we shouldn't worry 'bout Bin Laden
Have you forgotten

I've been there with the soldiers
Who've gone away to war
And you can bet that they remember
Just what they're fighting for

Have you forgotten all the people killed
Some went down like heros in that Pennsylvania field
Have you forgotten about our Pentagon
All the loved ones that we lost
And those left to carry on
Don't you tell me not to worry about Bin Laden
Have you forgotten

Have you forgotten
Have you forgotten

Courtesy Of The Red, White And Blue (The Angry American) - Toby Keith

American girls and American guys
We'll always stand up and salute
We'll always recognize
When we see Old Glory flying
There's a lot of men dead
So we can sleep in peace at night when we lay down our head

My daddy served in the army
Where he lost his right eye but he flew a flag out in our yard
Until the day that he died
He wanted my mother, my brother, my sister and me
To grow up and live happy
In the land of the free

Now this nation that I love has fallen under attack
A mighty sucker punch came flyin' in from somewhere in the back
Soon as we could see clearly
Through our big black eye
Man, we lit up your world
Like the fourth of July

Hey Uncle Sam, put your name at the top of his list
And the Statue of Liberty started shakin' her fist
And the eagle will fly man, it's gonna be hell
When you hear mother freedom start ringin' her bell
And it feels like the whole wide world is raining down on you
Brought to you courtesy of the red white and blue

Justice will be served and the battle will rage
This big dog will fight when you rattle his cage
And you'll be sorry that you messed with
The U.S. of A.

'Cause we'll put a boot in your ass
It's the American way

Hey uncle sam put your name at the top of his list
And the Statue of Liberty started shakin' her fist
And the eagle will fly it's gonna be hell
When you hear mother freedom start ringin' her bell
And it feels like the whole wide world is raining down on you
Brought to you courtesy of the red white and blue

Oh oh of the red, white and blue
Oh oh of my red, white and blue

The Taliban Song - Toby Keith

I'm just a middle-aged middle-eastern camel herdin' man
I've got a little two bedroom cave here in north Afghanistan
Things used to be real nice and they got outta hand
Since they moved in
They call themselves the Taliban
Ooo, ooo the Taliban, baby
I ain't seen my wife's face since they came here
They make her wear a scarf over her head that covers her from ear to ear
She loves the desert and the hot, white sand but now
Man she just like me
She can't stand the Taliban
Ooo, ooo the Taliban, baby
But you know someday soon we're both gonna saddle up and it'll be
Ride camel, ride
My ol' lady she'll be here with me
Just smilin' ride by my side
We should do just fine out around Palestine
Or maybe Turkministan
We'll bid a fair adieu and flip the finger to the Taliban
Now they attacked New York City 'cause they thought they could win

Said they would stand and fight until the very bloody end
Mr. Bush got on the phone with Iraq and Iran he said now
You sons a' bitches, you better not be doin' any business with the Taliban
Ooo, ooo the Taliban, baby
Now we prayed to Allah with all of our might
Until those big U.S. jets came flyin' in one night
They dropped little bombs all over the holy land
Man you should've seen 'em run, like rabbits they ran, the Taliban
Ooo, ooo the Taliban, baby
But you know someday soon we're both gonna saddle up and it'll be
Ride camel, ride
My ol' lady she'll be here with me
Just smilin' ride by my side
We should do just fine out around Palestine
Or maybe Turkministan
We'll bid a fair adieu and flip a couple fingers to the Taliban
We'll bid a fair adieu and give a big boner to the Taliban