

Patriotism, Courtesy of Toby Keith:  
The Voice of Country Music After September 11

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Thesis submitted to the faculty of the Virginia Polytechnic Institute and State University  
in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of

Master of Arts  
in  
Communication

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25 April 2006  
Blacksburg, Virginia

Keywords: epideictic, symbolic convergence, dramatism, Toby Keith, September 11, country music

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ABSTRACT

In releasing the songs *Courtesy of the Red, White and Blue (The Angry American)* and *American Soldier* in the aftermath of September 11, country artist Toby Keith enacts a tradition that has been established in the world of country music since the Civil War, that of producing wartime songs of patriotism. I conducted an organic analysis of both songs as rhetorical acts produced and consumed within a particular rhetorical context. Because country music is fundamentally a discourse that celebrates the attitudes, values and experiences of its audience, I first analyzed these two songs as instances of epideictic rhetoric. As an epideictic rhetor, Keith reinforces the traditional values of the country music audience, uniting them in celebration of the communal identity that renders them a **rhetorical community**. That shared identity enables Keith to advance a **rhetorical vision** of a post-September 11 reality, attributing meaning to the events of September 11 and the ensuing conflicts in Afghanistan and Iraq. I use pentadic analysis to illuminate the vision presented in each song, and I utilize both media coverage and the *Billboard* charts to determine how well this vision “chained out” amongst the country music audience. Lastly, I utilize media coverage to explore the **rhetorical context** in which these songs were written and consumed.

## DEDICATION

It is an honor to dedicate this project to each and every soldier  
who has faithfully and selflessly served this great nation, past and present,  
particularly my brother, LCPL Jesse Fleeman,  
Unit HMM-774 (the “Wild Geese”) of the Marine Corps.  
***Greater love has no one than this, that he lay down his life for his friends.***  
You are all my heroes.

## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

First and foremost, I would like to give thanks to my Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ, with whom all things are possible. You are my strength and my song. *And whatever you do, whether in word or in deed, do it all in the name of the Lord Jesus, giving thanks to God the Father through Him.*

I would like to thank all of the faculty in the Department of Communication who lent me their support throughout this entire process. I am truly grateful to this department for inducting me into the discipline of Communication and kindling in me the desire to work as an academic professional in this field. I will never forget you.

Thank you to Dr. Rachel Holloway, who encouraged me to look to my interests for inspiration in the conception and development of this project, who introduced me to the wonderful world of rhetoric, and who always had a moment to spare for me despite the many demands on her time.

Thank you to Dr. Beth Waggenpack, who always found time to help me hammer out ideas for this project and others (even ones that involved Burke), and who taught me so much about the kind of academic professional I hope to become.

Thank you to Dr. Denton, who gave me his enthusiastic support for this and future projects in the same vein.

Thank you to Dr. Tedesco, who was never too busy to chat and always had a smile for me, even after he realized I would never do quantitative research.

I would like to thank my office mate and dear friend, Ana Constantinescu, in whom I have truly found a kindred spirit. You have been an integral part of my experience here, making me think, making me smile, making me laugh. I will miss you dearly.

I would like to thank my family – Mom, Dad, Sarah and Jesse – who have always faithfully supported and encouraged me, no matter what the dream. You are the greatest blessing I have ever been given. I love you all so much more than I can ever express.

Finally, I would like to thank my husband Jay, yin to my yang, for being my shoulder to cry on, my messy at-home office mate, my sounding board and, most of all, my dearest friend. I love you. MMB.

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## CHAPTER 1. INTRODUCTION

### **“I dig being the flag-waving redneck.”<sup>1</sup>**

Just how did a former oil rigger and semi-pro football player from Oklahoma become the voice of patriotism in country music today? Although Toby Keith has been a recognizable and consistent country hit-maker since 1993, his 2002 mega-hit *Courtesy of the Red, White and Blue* (*The Angry American*) propelled him from fame to infamy, conferring upon Keith the honor of being America’s most outspoken “redneck patriot.”<sup>2</sup> Written in under an hour just days after September 11, 2001, *Courtesy* is partly a tribute to Keith’s father, a Korean War veteran, who had been killed in a hit and run accident six months earlier. On his official website, Keith recalls that his father “always flew a flag to show his patriotism.”<sup>3</sup> Keith was inspired to write the song when he considered how his father, “one of those who went over there and gave his all to save his country,” would have reacted to the attacks perpetrated on American soil.<sup>4</sup> “I thought about how angry he would have been,” Keith recalls, “...then I just told my story.”<sup>5</sup>

That story incited two highly publicized feuds: one with ABC news anchor Peter Jennings, the other with country trio, the Dixie Chicks, and earned Keith notoriety as “country’s resident rouge.”<sup>6</sup> Ironically, Keith never intended to record the tune. In an interview with *Time* magazine, Keith explains, “I wrote it so that I had something to play for our fighting men and women.”<sup>7</sup> Calling it “a gift to the troops,” he debuted the song in early 2002 at the U.S. Naval

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<sup>1</sup> Willman, Chris. “The Patriot Act: Is the tough-talking, rabble-rousing, pot-toking, beer-swilling country star Toby Keith really as mean as he looks?” *Entertainment Weekly* 31 Oct. 2003: 38.

<sup>2</sup> Tyrangiel, Josh. “America’s Ruffian: Toby Keith is either a crazy redneck patriot or country music’s best actor.” *Time* 1 Mar. 2004: 75.

<sup>3</sup> *Toby Keith: Official Website*. 2006. <<http://tobykeith.musiccitynetworks.com>>

<sup>4</sup> Baca, Richardo. “Toby Keith changed key in patriotic ode about 9/11.” *The Denver Post* 26 June 2002: F-07.

<sup>5</sup> Binelli, Mark. “The Battle Hymn of Toby Keith.” *Rolling Stone* 22 Jan. 2004: 43-44.

<sup>6</sup> Tyrangiel, 75.

<sup>7</sup> Tyrangiel, 75.

Academy in Annapolis, Maryland to an overwhelmingly enthusiastic response.<sup>8</sup> Encouraged by several high-ranking officers to include the song on his upcoming album, *Unleashed*, Keith mulled the possibility. According to *Rolling Stone*, he asked himself, “are you willing to fuss and fight with people so other people who need to hear the song can hear it?” He predicted, “this song’s gonna rub a lot of people the wrong way.”<sup>9</sup> Likewise, he told *Time* magazine that once he decided to include it on *Unleashed*, “I knew there was going to be trouble.”<sup>10</sup>

*Courtesy of the Red, White and Blue* certainly did bring Keith trouble. But it also brought him unprecedented fame and an unforgettable (if controversial) reputation he embraced and cultivated with a second patriotic anthem, *American Soldier*. Keith observes, “The biggest reward that I ever got was when there’s the most stakes risked on the table.”<sup>11</sup> Indeed, in late May 2002, three months before *Unleashed* hit store shelves, *Courtesy* debuted at number 41 on the *Billboard* country charts.<sup>12</sup> In mid-June, Keith revealed that he had been dropped from ABC’s Fourth of July special because news anchor Peter Jennings objected to the song’s lyrics.<sup>13</sup> While ABC claimed that they had never officially booked him for the gig, Keith told CNN’s Wolf Blitzer that he was “cut at the 11<sup>th</sup> hour” because “the people who booked us on the show... said Mr. Jennings didn’t like the lyrical content.”<sup>14</sup> In the ensuing media blitz, it only took two weeks for *Courtesy* to break into *Billboard*’s top 10, and by July 20, it was number 1 – a month prior to the album release.<sup>15</sup>

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<sup>8</sup> Binelli, 44.

<sup>9</sup> Binelli, 44.

<sup>10</sup> Tyrangiel, 75.

<sup>11</sup> Mansfield, Brian. “Keith’s quiet intensity fits him like a 10-gallon hat.” *USA Today* 24 July 2002: 10D.

<sup>12</sup> “Hot Country Singles.” *Billboard* 25 May 2002: 35.

<sup>13</sup> Mansfield, Brian. “Toby Keith: I got the boot from special.” *USA Today* 13 June 2002: 1D.

<sup>14</sup> De Moraes, Lisa. “Sunday’s Best.” *The Washington Post* 14 June 2002: C07.

<sup>15</sup> “Hot Country Singles.” *Billboard* 29 June 2002: 42; “Hot Country Singles.” *Billboard* 20 July 2002: 29.

When *Unleashed* was officially released in August 2002, it debuted at number 1 on the *Billboard* country album chart, and was certified platinum in just sixteen days.<sup>16</sup> The album grabbed the top spot once again nearly a year later in May 2003, amidst Keith's second public feud, this time with the Dixie Chicks. Keith and Dixie Chicks' lead singer, Natalie Maines, traded shots at one another in the media while the Chicks weathered the fall-out from Maines' public criticism of President Bush and Operation Iraqi Freedom. Keith was among several country artists who publicly admonished Maines for her remarks, but the squabble between Keith and Maines escalated rapidly.<sup>17</sup> During a performance at the 2003 Academy of Country Music Awards, Maines wore a shirt featuring a derogatory slogan to take a very public jab at Keith.<sup>18</sup> The following week, *Unleashed* landed at number 1 on the *Billboard* country album chart, almost a year after its release, and was certified triple platinum the week after that.<sup>19</sup> Undoubtedly, the controversy over *Courtesy* helped make it Keith's most well-known song, and it secured Keith's status as country's most outspoken patriot, making Toby Keith "a household name."<sup>20</sup> *Entertainment Weekly* reports that Keith is "reconciling himself to being the guy who did that song."<sup>21</sup>

With the momentum of *Unleashed* behind it, Keith's next album *Shock 'N Y'All* debuted on the *Billboard* country chart at number 1 in late November of 2003.<sup>22</sup> This album included Keith's next patriotic tune, *American Soldier*, which Keith described to CNN's Larry King as

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<sup>16</sup> "Top Country Albums." *Billboard* 10 Aug. 2002: 31; *Recording Industry Association of America (RIAA)*. 2006. <<http://www.riaa.com>>

<sup>17</sup> Fox, Aaron A. "'Alternative' to What? O Brother, September 11 and the Politics of Country Music." *Country Music Goes to War*. Eds. C.K. Wolfe and J.E. Akenson. Lexington: The University Press of Kentucky, 2005. 164-191.

<sup>18</sup> Stark, Phyllis. "Keith flap pits radio against Chicks again." *Billboard Radio Monitor* 30 May 2003: UPFRONT.

<sup>19</sup> Stark, 2003; "Top Country Albums." *Billboard* 31 May 2003: 57; *RIAA*

<sup>20</sup> *Toby Keith: Official Website*

<sup>21</sup> Willman, 38.

<sup>22</sup> "Top Country Albums." *Billboard* 22 Nov. 2003:38.



“my support for the American fighting men and women.”<sup>23</sup> *American Soldier* spent four weeks at the top of the country singles chart in the midst of Operation Iraqi Freedom, and cemented Keith’s image as the most patriotic of country artists. *Shock ‘N Y’All* held the number 1 spot on the *Billboard* country albums chart for thirteen weeks, and was certified quadruple-platinum within a year.<sup>24</sup> *Shock ‘N Y’All* sold a quarter of a million *more* albums in the first week than *Unleashed*, but undoubtedly benefited from the success (and controversy) of the album preceding it.<sup>25</sup> Keith was named “Entertainer of the Year” by the Academy of Country Music in both 2003 and 2004, and he acknowledges that his reputation as “a flag-waving redneck” played a significant role in his success.<sup>26</sup> Keith told *Time* magazine, “Most people think I’m a redneck patriot. I’m ok with that.”<sup>27</sup>

### Country Music and War

With the release of *Courtesy of the Red, White and Blue* and *American Soldier*, Keith joined the ranks of other country artists, like Ernest Tubbs, Elton Britt and Merle Haggard, who have penned notable patriotic tunes in times of war, a tradition that stretches back as far as the Civil War. Daniel Decatur Emmett penned the now infamous *Dixie* before the outbreak of the Civil War, and, once the war got underway, it quickly became “a regional anthem, a celebration of the South” amongst the Confederate soldiers.<sup>28</sup> Jimmie Rodgers, widely considered to be the father of country music, recorded *Soldier’s Sweetheart* during World War I to memorialize a friend who had died during the conflict.<sup>29</sup> Elton Britt’s *There’s a Star Spangled Banner Waving*

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<sup>23</sup> *Larry King Live: Interview with Toby Keith*. Host Larry King. CNN. 21 Jan. 2004.

<sup>24</sup> “No Shock: Keith Tops 5 Recaps.” *Billboard: Year in Music and Touring*. 25 Dec. 2004: 14.

<sup>25</sup> “Billboard Bulletin.” *Billboard* 13 Nov. 2003: 1.

<sup>26</sup> “Billboard Bulletin.” *Billboard* 22 May 2003: 1; “Billboard Upfront.” *Billboard* 5 June 2004: 7; Willman, 38.

<sup>27</sup> Tyrangiel, 75.

<sup>28</sup> *CMT Greatest Patriotic Songs*. Ex. Prod. Lewis Bogach. Narr. Charlie Daniels. CMT Productions. Nashville. 2005.

<sup>29</sup> *CMT Greatest Patriotic Songs*.

*Somewhere*, which aptly “summarized the patriotic feelings of most Americans during World War II,” became the first gold record in country music.<sup>30</sup> The most well known song of the Korean War era is the Louvin Brothers’ *From Mother’s Arms to Korea*, which captured the anguish of a soldier fighting an unpopular and misunderstood war.<sup>31</sup> Barry Sadler’s *Ballad of the Green Berets* lent both pride and support to the soldiers fighting in Vietnam, while Merle Haggard’s mega-hits, *Okie from Muskogee* and *Fightin’ Side of Me* challenged the antiwar protesters for disrespecting the troops.<sup>32</sup> Lee Greenwood’s *God Bless the USA*, originally written and released in 1983, reappeared in 1991 to become “the anthem of Operation Desert Storm.”<sup>33</sup>

Since the Civil War, “country music was frequently drafted, or enlisted itself, to serve in wartime as a symbolic discourse of nationalist feeling.”<sup>34</sup> Characterized by “conservative attitudes toward social, marital and personal behavior,” country music “offers similar views toward patriotism and serving the country in time of war.”<sup>35</sup> The reason for this is simple: the music is created by and for a constituency that lauds “traditional working-class patriotic nationalism,” particularly when the United States is at war.<sup>36</sup> The September 11, 2001, terrorist attacks and subsequent wars in Afghanistan and Iraq are no exception. “Country music rushed into the discursive opening the attacks created, asserting as in wars past a privileged claim to speak for the nation in the voice of working-class experience.”<sup>37</sup> As with earlier wars, American country music positioned itself as the voice of patriotism.

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<sup>30</sup> Hatchett, L. and McNeil, W.K. “There’s a Star Spangled Banner Waving Somewhere: The Story Behind it’s Success.” *Country Music Goes to War*. Eds. C.K. Wolfe and J.E. Akenson. Lexington: The University Press of Kentucky, 2005. 33-42.

<sup>31</sup> *CMT Greatest Patriotic Songs*.

<sup>32</sup> *CMT Greatest Patriotic Songs*.

<sup>33</sup> *CMT Greatest Patriotic Songs*.

<sup>34</sup> Fox, 172.

<sup>35</sup> Rogers, Jimmie N. *The Country Music Message: Revisited*. Fayetteville: University of Arkansas Press, 1989, 175.

<sup>36</sup> Fox, 173.

<sup>37</sup> Fox, 172.

Country artists Alan Jackson, Charlie Daniels and Darryl Worley each penned songs memorializing September 11. The first post-September 11 song to be released, Alan Jackson's *Where were You (When the World Stopped Turning)?*, enjoyed as much initial success as Keith's *Courtesy* - with none of the controversy. Jackson's album, *Drive*, was certified double platinum just one month after its January 2002 release, and spent six weeks at number 1 on the *Billboard* country album charts.<sup>38</sup> In addition, *Where were You* hit number 1 on the *Billboard* country singles chart more than a month before the release of the album.<sup>39</sup> Of course, Keith's flap with the Dixie Chicks generated a later renewed interest in *Courtesy* that Jackson's soothing ballad did not experience. Darryl Worley's *Have You Forgotten?* propelled his album of the same name to debut at number 1 on the *Billboard* country album chart in May 2003.<sup>40</sup> Notably, Worley lost the top spot in four weeks to Keith's *Unleashed*, which was enjoying a second round of success. More recently, John Michael Montgomery, Trace Adkins, Chely Wright and Clint Black each contributed a patriotic tune addressing the ongoing wars in Afghanistan and Iraq. Montgomery's *Letters from Home* enjoyed the most commercial success of this round, topping out at number 3 on the *Billboard* country album charts in May 2004.<sup>41</sup>

Toby Keith is the only country artist to release two such songs, namely *Courtesy of the Red, White and Blue (The Angry American)* and *American Soldier*, with the former written and released in the immediate aftermath of September 11, and the latter released in November 2003, after Operation Iraqi Freedom began. None of the post-September 11 songs received as much attention or stirred as much controversy as Keith's, making them a significant source for rhetorical study. How can we account for their rhetorical impact? How does Keith appeal to his

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<sup>38</sup> *RIAA*; "Top Country Albums." *Billboard* 9 Mar. 2002: 35.

<sup>39</sup> "Hot Country Singles." *Billboard* 29 Dec. 2001: 38.

<sup>40</sup> "Top Country Albums." *Billboard* 3 May 2003: 42.

<sup>41</sup> "Top Country Albums." *Billboard* 8 May 2004: 38.

audience? How does he define patriotism? How does he explain and/or describe the terrorist attacks and the ongoing wars? What role did Keith's image and the surrounding controversy play in the impact of these songs?

In order to evaluate the rhetorical impact of *Courtesy of the Red, White and Blue (The Angry American)* and *American Soldier*, I offer an organic rhetorical analysis of both songs within the context of the media coverage surrounding them. Because country music relies on a common system of values to appeal to its audience (particularly in times of war), I examine the song lyrics as examples of epideictic rhetoric. I identify the value appeals made by Keith and discuss how the country music audience constitutes a rhetorical community. I explore how Keith identifies with the country music audience by projecting a persona both within the songs' lyrics and within the media coverage. I use pentadic analysis to illuminate how these songs, as part of a rhetorical vision, provide the audience with an understanding of a post-September 11 world, and I utilize both media coverage and the *Billboard* charts to determine how well this vision "chained out" amongst the country music audience. Lastly, I utilize media coverage to explore the rhetorical context in which these songs were written and consumed.

## CHAPTER 2. THEORETICAL FOUNDATIONS AND METHODS OF ANALYSIS.

### **Music as Rhetoric**

The rhetorical analysis of song is by no means a new idea. More than three decades ago, Irvine and Kirkpatrick called for the development of “a theoretical system that accounts for the rhetorical impact of music on contemporary culture.”<sup>42</sup> They contend that, “the musical artist is engaged in a rhetorical activity to the extent to which he manipulates a symbol system... to react to and modify the dominant philosophical, political, religious and aesthetic values of both general and specific audiences.”<sup>43</sup> They reason that music is often not recognized for its rhetorical power because it does not appear in rhetoric’s “normal discursive state.”<sup>44</sup> Because the message appears in the form of a song rather than a traditional argument, “one is less prepared to argue in opposition to the projected message.”<sup>45</sup> Thus, it is precisely because listeners are not expecting to be persuaded that they become “ready recipients of the rhetorical statement without being aware of its complete implications.”<sup>46</sup> Clearly, music can and should be examined for its rhetorical possibilities. Below, I include a review of how music has been conceived and analyzed as rhetoric. I follow this review with a discussion of the implications this previous research has for the analysis of country music in general and this analysis in particular.

### ***Lyrical Analysis***

While numerous scholars have acknowledged and explored music’s rhetorical potential, they disagree as to the best way to approach such analysis. For example, lyrics often take center

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<sup>42</sup> Irvine, James R. and Kirkpatrick, Walter G. “The Musical Form in Rhetorical Exchange: Theoretical Considerations.” *Quarterly Journal of Speech* 58 (1972): 272.

<sup>43</sup> Irvine and Kirkpatrick, 272.

<sup>44</sup> Irvine and Kirkpatrick, 273.

<sup>45</sup> Irvine and Kirkpatrick, 273.

<sup>46</sup> Irvine and Kirkpatrick, 273.

stage in rhetorical criticism,<sup>47</sup> but scholars have increasingly offered critiques that incorporate an analysis of instrumental accompaniment and melodic structure of song<sup>48</sup> - even offering analyses of music with no lyrics whatsoever.<sup>49</sup> Sellnow and Sellnow argue, “The rhetorical power of music can only be ascertained effectively by considering both lyrical content and musical score.”<sup>50</sup> Accordingly, they offer a method for analyzing music called the “Illusion of Life,” based on the assumption that reality in song is distorted by the artist’s perspective. The combination of lyrics and instrumentation enable the artist to accentuate and enhance emotions with patterns of intensity and release. The music and lyrics work together, therefore, to persuade.

Nevertheless, most scholars privilege lyrics when examining country music.<sup>51</sup> “Country music is somewhat unique in that its lyrics generally overshadow the music.”<sup>52</sup> Peterson and McLaurin observe, “the chord structure is simple and predictable, the melodic range is slight, the rhythm is regular and the orchestration is sparse or at least clearly in the background so that the

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<sup>47</sup> For examples, see: Booth, Mark W. “The Art of Words in Songs.” *Quarterly Journal of Speech* 62 (1976): 242-249; Knupp, Ralph E. “A Time for Every Purpose Under Heaven: Rhetorical Dimensions of Protest Music.” *The Southern Speech Communication Journal* 46 (1981): 377-389; Chesebro, James W., Foulger, Davis A., Nachman, Jay E., and Yannelli, Andrew. “Popular Music as a Mode of Communication, 1955-1982.” *Critical Studies in Mass Communication* 2 (1985): 115-135.

<sup>48</sup> For examples, see: Holmberg, Carl Bryan. “Toward the Rhetoric of Music: Dixie.” *The Southern Speech Communication Journal* 51 (1985): 71-82; Gonzalez, Alberto and Makay, John J. “Rhetorical Ascription and the Gospel According to Dylan.” *Rhetorical Criticism: Exploration and Practice*. Ed. S.J. Foss. Prospect Heights, IL: Waveland Press, Inc., 1989. 49-65; Sellnow, Deanna D. “Rhetorical Strategies of Continuity and Change in the Music of Popular Artists Over Time.” *Communication Studies* 47 (1996): 46-60; Meister, Mark. “Drama and Tragedy on Contemporary Folk Music: Nanci Griffith’s ‘It’s a Hard Life Wherever You Go.’” *Communication Studies* 47 (1996): 62-71; Sellnow, Deanna and Sellnow, Timothy. “The ‘Illusion of Life’ Rhetorical Perspective: An Integrated Approach to the Study of Music as Communication.” *Critical Studies in Mass Communication* 18.4 (2001): 395-415.

<sup>49</sup> For examples, see: Francesconi, Robert. “Free Jazz and Black Nationalism: A Rhetoric of Musical Style.” *Critical Studies in Mass Communication* 3 (1986): 36-49; Sellnow, Deanna D. and Sellnow, Timothy L. “John Corigliano’s ‘Symphony No. 1’ as a Communicative Medium for the AIDS Crisis.” *Communication Studies* 44 (1993): 87-101.

<sup>50</sup> Sellnow & Sellnow, 2001, 396.

<sup>51</sup> For examples, see: Gritzner, Charles F. “Country Music: A Reflection of Popular Culture.” *Journal of Popular Culture* 11.4 (1978): 857-64; Peterson, Richard A. and McLaurin, Melton A. “Country Music Tells Stories.” *You Wrote My Life: Lyrical Themes in Country Music*. Philadelphia: Gordon and Breach Science Publishers, 1992. 1-14; Buckley, John. “Country Music and American Values.” *Popular Music and Society* 6.4 (1979): 293-301; Lewis, George H. (1976) “Country Music Lyrics.” *Journal of Communication* 26.4 (1976): 37-40.

<sup>52</sup> Gritzner, 859.

words can be understood.”<sup>53</sup> In fact, Buckley contends that country music lyrics are “unambiguous,” since “both performer and audience clearly understand the meaning of the song.”<sup>54</sup> Gritzner agrees, arguing that the country audience does not have to work to hear the message in the music. “The essence of a country song is the story,” explains Lewis, “hence, lyrics... are dominant.”<sup>55</sup> Buckley affirms, “The instrumental is subordinate to the vocal.”<sup>56</sup> Thus, a rhetorical critic ought to direct attention to lyrics when analyzing country music messages.

### *Audience*

Not all research has focused exclusively on song content to understand the rhetorical potential of music. Root, for example, offers a three-pronged paradigm to illustrate the interaction of music and audience, the main components of which are *composition*, *performance* and *response*.<sup>57</sup> The composition is comprised of the song lyrics, the melody and the overall arrangement. Performance refers to the speaker (in this case, the artist), the subject of the music, and the audience. Finally, the response incorporates the occasion in which the music is consumed, as well as the personal taste and judgment of audience members. In this model, Root emphasizes both the purpose of the artist in creating the message, and the role of the audience as the consumer of that message. As Rybacki and Rybacki suggest, “the message of a song results from a combination of the rhetor’s work and its reception by the audience.”<sup>58</sup>

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<sup>53</sup> Peterson & McLaurin, 2

<sup>54</sup> Buckley, 294.

<sup>55</sup> Lewis, 1976, 38.

<sup>56</sup> Buckley, 293.

<sup>57</sup> Root, Jr., Robert L. “A Listener’s Guide to Rhetoric of Popular Music.” *Journal of Popular Culture* 20.1 (1986): 15-26.

<sup>58</sup> Rybacki, Karyn and Rybacki, Donald. “The Rhetoric of Song.” *Communication Criticism: Approaches and Genres*. Belmont, CA: Wadsworth Publishing Company, 1991. 302.

Several studies have explored how music is meant to be consumed by a particular audience. For example, both Aldridge and Carlin, and Watts explore the relationship of rap music to black culture within the United States.<sup>59</sup> By far, however, the most popular resource for the rhetorical analysis of song is protest music, research clearly indicating that the audience plays a significant role in the rhetorical impact of song. Kosokoff and Carmichael investigate the persuasive potential of protest songs when used in conjunction with speeches.<sup>60</sup> Carter analyzes how songs of the Industrial Workers of the World were used to promote unity between and express the discontent of the workers.<sup>61</sup> Knupp examines protest music as “pre-eminently in-group messages designed to reinforce feelings of solidarity.”<sup>62</sup> Each of these studies reveals that songs work together with their intended audiences to create social reality.

Stewart, Smith and Denton offer perhaps the most comprehensive analysis of protest music, examining over 700 songs employed by social movements throughout U.S. history.<sup>63</sup> They found that the majority of protest songs are aimed at the “in-group” in that they “seem to talk a great deal about the opposition than to the opposition.”<sup>64</sup> In song, the members of the movement are depicted as “innocent victims of circumstance and forces beyond their control,” while the movement’s antagonists are “nebulous, unnamed evil forces.”<sup>65</sup> These songs often contain appeals to “join and unite in the struggle against evil,” and to “remain committed.”<sup>66</sup> The

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<sup>59</sup> Aldridge, Heather and Carlin, Diana B. “The Rap on Violence: A Rhetorical Analysis of Rapper KRS-One.” *Communication Studies* 44 (1993): 102-116; Watts, Eric K. “An Exploration of Spectacular Consumption: Gangsta Rap as Cultural Commodity.” *Communication Studies* 48 (1997): 43-58.

<sup>60</sup> Kosokoff, Stephen and Carmichael, Carl W. (1970) “The Rhetoric of Protest: Song, Speech and Attitude Change.” *Southern Speech Journal* 35.4 (1970): 295-302.

<sup>61</sup> Carter, David A. “The Industrial Workers of the World and the Rhetoric of Song.” *Quarterly Journal of Speech* 66 (1980): 365-374.

<sup>62</sup> Knupp, 377.

<sup>63</sup> Stewart, C.J., Smith, C.A., and Denton, Jr., R.E. “The Persuasive Functions of Music in Social Movements.” *Persuasion and Social Movements*. 3<sup>rd</sup> ed. Prospect Heights, IL: Waveland Press, Inc, 1994. 203-223.

<sup>64</sup> Stewart et al., 218.

<sup>65</sup> Stewart et al., 210, 208.

<sup>66</sup> Stewart et al., 216, 219



music then is created by and for group members, once again assigning audience members an active role in the rhetorical process of song.

Country music, perhaps more than any other musical genre, is intimately tied to the culture from which it springs. “Country music is a derivative of the people to whom it belongs.”<sup>67</sup> For Lewis, country music is “a manner of viewing or reflecting life, and to many, it is itself a way of life.”<sup>68</sup> He observes, “successful country songs reflect, usually from an intimate sort of perspective, the everyday trials, troubles, hopes, fears and dreams of their audience.”<sup>69</sup> Likewise, Gritzner calls country music “a kaleidoscopic self-portrait of a substantial segment of American popular culture set to lyrics and music.”<sup>70</sup> He continues, “country music speaks and the country audience listens. The sounds they hear are those of their own collective voice”<sup>71</sup> Clearly, any investigation of country music as rhetoric must account for the country audience. But, just who comprises that audience?

Not surprisingly, much has been written about this often-misunderstood musical consumer. “Once the folk music of the white, rural South,” writes Lewis, “country music is now a billion dollar American industry.”<sup>72</sup> While still strongly associated with the South, country music is foremost the music of the American working class. Gritzner explains that “the dominant themes of country music tend to satisfy the psychological and entertainment needs of a primarily ‘blue-collar,’ working class audience.”<sup>73</sup> He continues, “It is their music: they live it, they write it, they vocalize it and they listen, understand and appreciate and relate to it.”<sup>74</sup> Thus, country

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<sup>67</sup> Gritzner, 860.

<sup>68</sup> Lewis, 1976, 38.

<sup>69</sup> Lewis, George H. “Duellin’ Values: Tension, Conflict and Contradiction in Country Music.” *Journal of Popular Culture* 24 (1991): 103-117.

<sup>70</sup> Gritzner, 857.

<sup>71</sup> Gritzner, 858.

<sup>72</sup> Lewis, 1976, 37.

<sup>73</sup> Gritzner, 857.

<sup>74</sup> Gritzner, 858.

music is created by and for a specific culture of people, a group united not by geography, but by a system of values and a common life experience. Rogers explains, “The desire to hear songs about themselves is a key to understanding the country audience.”<sup>75</sup> Edwin Black argues that the critic can “extract” from a discourse “the audience it implies,” meaning that the discourse itself can tell us much about the intended audience at which it is aimed.<sup>76</sup> Accordingly, we can tell much about the values of fans of country music simply by examining the messages in their music of choice.

Buckley examines the relationship between country music and the values of the country audience, suggesting that the music “offers a symbolic world with which audience members may identify.”<sup>77</sup> He identifies eight themes consistently present in country music, noting that, while multiple themes can emerge in a single song, one theme will likely dominate. In addition, he points out that, while other musical genres can and do include some of these themes, country music alone encompasses all eight. These themes include: (1) satisfying and fulfilling love relationships, (2) unsatisfactory love relationships, (3) home and family, (4) country, (5) work, (6) individual worth, (7) rugged individualism, and (8) patriotism. Buckley observes that patriotism receives the most attention in both popular and scholarly critiques, but is usually the least prevalent theme within country music overall. He concludes, “The lyrics of country songs reflect the values of its audience. The fictive world created by country music is not the same as the real world of audience members, but it is one they can easily understand and with which they can identify.”<sup>78</sup> In other words, the country audience sees aspects of itself in the world depicted by country music lyrics.

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<sup>75</sup> Rogers, 227.

<sup>76</sup> Black, Edwin. “The Second Persona.” *Quarterly Journal of Speech* 56.2 (1970): 112.

<sup>77</sup> Buckley, 293.

<sup>78</sup> Buckley, 300.

### *Artist Persona*

Other studies, while not discounting the active participation of the audience, have emphasized the role of the artist in the rhetorical potential of music. Mackey-Kallis, for instance, analyzes the public persona of the band U2 to argue that the ethos of the artist is central to understanding the rhetorical impact of song.<sup>79</sup> Similarly, Makay and Gonzalez discuss how Bob Dylan cultivates his own persona as an outsider through depictions of the outlaw-hero in his songs.<sup>80</sup> In fact, Irvine and Kirkpatrick argue that the “ethical reputation of the source” of the message – i.e. the artist – is “the prime determinant of the rhetorical capacity of the musical message.”<sup>81</sup> Here, the audience relies on what they already know about the artist to determine if the message the artist delivers is congruent with his/her pre-existing reputation and the values of the group. Essentially, the audience evaluates whether the artist is ‘qualified’ to construct and convey the message of the song. First and foremost, the artist has to be a representative of the group.

Similarly, Booth suggests that a song “fosters some degree of identification between the singer and audience.”<sup>82</sup> Songs often rely on narratives that Booth describes as “stories a people tells itself.”<sup>83</sup> In other words, narrative songs “speak on behalf of the audience” by telling stories “the audience already knows and affirms.”<sup>84</sup> The lyrics, then, “are sung for us in that [the artist] says something that is also said somehow in extension of us, and we are drawn into the state, the pose, the attitude, the self offered by the song.”<sup>85</sup> The artist offers the audience a picture of itself,

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<sup>79</sup> Mackey-Kallis, Susan. “‘How Long to Sing this Song?’ The Rhetorical Vision of U2’s ‘Holy’ Community.” *Popular Music and Society* 15 (1990): 51-58.

<sup>80</sup> Makay, John J. and Gonzalez, Alberto. “Dylan’s Biographical Rhetoric and the Myth of the Outlaw-hero.” *The Southern Speech Communication Journal* 52 (1987): 165-180.

<sup>81</sup> Irvine & Kirkpatrick, 274.

<sup>82</sup> Booth, 246.

<sup>83</sup> Booth, 247.

<sup>84</sup> Booth, 247.

<sup>85</sup> Booth, 246-7.

a collective self to which the artist him/herself also belongs. Accordingly, song lyrics “do not lend themselves readily to the appreciation of a cultural outsider with anything like the satisfaction available to the audience for whom those words affirm something.”<sup>86</sup> As in-group activity, songs function to create social reality for both the artist and the audience.

In light of this, critics of country music ought to consider how the artist attempts to connect with his/her audience by projecting a particular persona. “Each country singer comes to be identified with a particular perspective in his or her songs.”<sup>87</sup> Planer explains, “country music fans identify closely with the persona of the performer, and interviews and articles develop that image.”<sup>88</sup> In fact, “the listener’s interpretation of the story [within the song] will be grounded in the persona of the artist.”<sup>89</sup> In other words, country music fans are well aware of the source of the music they embrace, and will consider that source when contemplating his/her message. Consequently, “the first priority of a country singer is to assure the listener that he or she is an acceptable source.”<sup>90</sup> Because of this, country music lyrics “are often an attempt at identification.”<sup>91</sup> The country music artist has to demonstrate that he/she is ‘one of the them’ in order for the message to resonate with the country audience.

### *Context*

In addition to the audience and the artist, a few scholars have suggested that the context in which the music was produced is fundamental to ascertaining the rhetorical power of song. Irvine and Kirkpatrick, for example, argue, “The musical message must be viewed as a response

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<sup>86</sup> Booth, 248.

<sup>87</sup> Peterson and McLaurin, 6.

<sup>88</sup> Planer, John H. “Function in the Country Song ‘Tight Fittin’ Jeans.’ *Popular Music and Society* 15 (1990): 45.

<sup>89</sup> Peterson and McLaurin, 6.

<sup>90</sup> Rogers, 16.

<sup>91</sup> Buckley, 294.

by the artist to particular feelings, needs and desires of the group to which he is appealing.”<sup>92</sup> Likewise, Matula contends that critics must consider context “because much of music’s rhetorical impact originates in sources located outside the delineated text, and the response to music is heavily influenced and framed by these contextual elements.”<sup>93</sup> Music is “always already imbedded in and inseparable from the web of contextual references that inform its production and consumption.”<sup>94</sup> Thus, a song is best understood as part of a larger context, which Matula argues includes the culture that shares its “ideological and aesthetic assumptions.”<sup>95</sup> Hence, in order to fully understand their rhetorical potential, songs ought to be considered as part of a larger external situation.

Any consideration of country music as rhetoric, then, must incorporate an understanding of the circumstances in which it was created and consumed. In his paradigm for analyzing music as rhetoric, Root includes “occasion” as fundamental to understanding the response to a song.<sup>96</sup> Irvine and Kirkpatrick also cite the “structure of the communicative situation” as a variable that greatly influences the impact of any musical message.<sup>97</sup> As with any variety of music, “what listeners hear is greatly influenced by the culture and experience they bring into the listening event.”<sup>98</sup> The messages of songs of all genres are often time bound, meaning that, “after the rhetorical situation is resolved or decays, the message is no longer meaningful and the song loses its popularity.”<sup>99</sup> Simply put, songs are situational, or at the very least, have a situational

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<sup>92</sup> Irvine & Kirkpatrick, 276.

<sup>93</sup> Matula, Theodore. “Contextualizing Musical Rhetoric: A Critical Reading of the Pixies’ ‘Rock Music.’” *Communication Studies* 51.3 (2000): 218.

<sup>94</sup> Matula, 219.

<sup>95</sup> Matula, 220.

<sup>96</sup> Root, 17.

<sup>97</sup> Irvine and Kirkpatrick, 276.

<sup>98</sup> Matula, 222.

<sup>99</sup> Rybacki and Rybacki, 276.

component. To understand the message within the song, regardless of the musical genre, the critic must consider the external context in which the song was written and heard.

### ***Summary***

In sum, previous research suggests that a rhetorical analysis of country music should privilege lyrical content over musical accompaniment. Additionally, because country music is a reflection of the audience that consumes it, an analysis should consider how country music works together with its intended audience to create social reality. Moreover, an analysis ought to consider how the artist functions as a representative of the culture of the audience, including how the artist's persona reflects the values of the group and how the artist attempts to identify with the group. Finally, as with any musical genre, an analysis of country music should include an investigation of the context in which the music was created and consumed.

### **Epideictic Discourse**

I contend that *Courtesy of the Red, White and Blue* and *American Soldier* are best understood as instances of epideictic discourse. Chesebro et al. examined popular music from the 1950's through the 1980's as epideictic rhetoric, arguing that music "creates socially shared meanings by exploring and celebrating in a state of awareness or consciousness which a particular audience identifies with as an expression of its emotional and moral precepts."<sup>100</sup> As previously discussed, mainstream country music is created by and for a specific culture of people, a culture that has outgrown its Southern roots to represent the values and experiences of the working class, regardless of geography.

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<sup>100</sup> Chesebro, et al., 116.

Rogers reasons that we can learn much about the country audience by “examining the messages that the members of that audience choose to hear.”<sup>101</sup> We have already seen that “audiences of country music want to hear songs about themselves,” meaning that country music is fundamentally a discourse that celebrates the attitudes, values and experiences of its audience.<sup>102</sup> In light of this, it is only fitting to classify country music as epideictic, a brand of discourse that (among other functions) “invites [the audience] to participate in a celebration of the tradition, creating a sense of communion.”<sup>103</sup> Because there are many disparate perspectives as to what constitutes epideictic discourse, I will first briefly discuss some of the varying points of view and then specify which perspective I have adopted in my examination of *Courtesy of the Red, White and Blue* and *American Soldier*.

### ***Ancient Conception***

Prior to Aristotle, epideictic rhetoric was characterized as an “oratory of display,” an expendable feature of festivals, performed by non-citizens, that served a purely aesthetic purpose.<sup>104</sup> While Aristotle did not eliminate this display function, he did expand the definition of epideictic to include an objective of *praise and blame* – that is, commending excellence and/or condemning imperfection - thereby distinguishing it from deliberative and forensic rhetoric.<sup>105</sup> Aristotle’s epideictic is “ceremonial rhetoric” in which audience members are invited to witness ritual celebration rather than pass judgment, to act as “observers” rather than “judges.”<sup>106</sup> Aristotle also distinguished epideictic from his other two categories of rhetoric by defining its

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<sup>101</sup> Rogers, 38.

<sup>102</sup> Planer, 37.

<sup>103</sup> Sullivan, Dale L. “The Ethos of Epideictic Encounter.” *Philosophy and Rhetoric* 26.2 (1993): 118.

<sup>104</sup> Chase, J. Richard. “The Classical Conception of Epideictic.” *Quarterly Journal of Speech* 47.3 (1961): 294.

<sup>105</sup> Sullivan, Dale L. “The Epideictic Rhetoric of Science.” *Journal of Business and Technical Communication* 5.3 (1991): 229-245.

<sup>106</sup> Sullivan, 1991, 230.

focus on the present; while forensic rhetoric reflects on *what was* and deliberative rhetoric contemplates *what will/should be*, epideictic rhetoric seeks to establish *what is*.<sup>107</sup>

Plagued by misconceptions that characterize it as “trivial entertainment,” epideictic has been unfairly disparaged as either an inconsequential class of discourse, or a catchall category for those discourses that fail to fulfill the requirements of deliberative or forensic rhetoric.<sup>108</sup> Nevertheless, numerous modern scholars have set out to rescue epideictic from its sullied status, breathing new life into this ancient genre by restoring, refining or expanding its traditional definition. The literature reveals three persistent conceptions of epideictic, each of which I will explore in turn: (1) epideictic rhetoric is more than “mere display,” (2) epideictic rhetoric is closely tied to ritual, and (3) epideictic rhetoric is primarily concerned with reinforcing values.

### ***More than “Mere Display”***

Epideictic rhetoric has been criticized as “mere display” by those who would define it solely “on the basis of the role performed by the audience addressed.”<sup>109</sup> The epideictic audience, in this light, is passive, simply observing “a speech which no one opposed on topics which were apparently uncontroversial and without practical consequences.”<sup>110</sup> Epideictic rhetoric then is a “work of artistic virtuosity,” serving only to display the talents of the rhetor.<sup>111</sup> Perelman characterizes this conception of epideictic as “a degenerate kind of eloquence with no other aim than to please and to enhance.”<sup>112</sup> He is not alone in arguing that epideictic has been unjustly

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<sup>107</sup> Sullivan, 1991.

<sup>108</sup> Oravec, Christine. “‘Observation’ in Aristotle’s Theory of Epideictic.” *Philosophy and Rhetoric* 9.3 (1976): 162; Chase.

<sup>109</sup> Perelman, Chaim and Olbrechts-Tyteca, L. *The New Rhetoric*. Trans. J. Wilkinson and P. Weaver. Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1969, 21.

<sup>110</sup> Perelman and Olbrechts-Tyteca, 48.

<sup>111</sup> Perelman and Olbrechts-Tyteca, 48.

<sup>112</sup> Perelman and Olbrechts-Tyteca, 48.



conceived as a frivolous showcase of speaking talent, a perception that has often rendered it inferior to the other types of rhetoric.

Chase points out that, since a speaker's style can be displayed in all three types of rhetoric, it cannot be the feature that defines epideictic. Rosenfield takes another approach, arguing that display *is* the essence of epideictic, "display not of speaker, but of the luminosity of noble acts and thoughts."<sup>113</sup> He argues that epideictic rhetoric constitutes the recognition of "virtue, goodness, [and] the quality inherent in object or deed," meaning that the object or deed's intrinsic goodness demands that the speaker acknowledge it.<sup>114</sup> A speech recognizing courageous deeds, for example, does not praise the men for their courage; instead, the inherent nobility of courage "makes a claim on men's respect for all time."<sup>115</sup> For both Chase and Rosenfield, the audience role does not define epideictic.

Other scholars have emphasized the active role of the audience in order to understand epideictic rhetoric. Oravec, for example, points out that Aristotle's epideictic audience is comprised of *theoroi*, or individuals who "look at, behold, contemplate, speculate or theorize."<sup>116</sup> This conception of the epideictic audience signifies more than simple observation: it implies "judgment and comprehension as well as the perception of theatrical display."<sup>117</sup> Similarly, Beale defines epideictic as "rhetorical performative," suggesting that epideictic discourse constitutes an act that "participates in the reality to which it refers," rather than merely commenting on it.<sup>118</sup> Thus, both rhetor and audience are active participants in an epideictic exchange. For Oravec and Beale, audience members are more than spectators; they too have a role to play.

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<sup>113</sup> Rosenfield, Lawrence W. "The Practical Celebration of Epideictic." *Rhetoric in Transition*. Ed. Eugene E. White. University Park: Penn State University Press, 1980, 134.

<sup>114</sup> Rosenfield, 135.

<sup>115</sup> Rosenfield, 135.

<sup>116</sup> Oravec, 164.

<sup>117</sup> Oravec, 163.

<sup>118</sup> Beale, Walter H. "Rhetorical Performative Discourse: A New Theory of Epideictic." *Philosophy and Rhetoric* 11.4 (1978): 226.

## ***Ritual***

Scholars have also argued that epideictic can and should be understood in terms of ritual.<sup>119</sup> In fact, Carter maintains that epideictic rhetoric can only be successful when it functions as ritual, and, consequently, can *only* be understood as such. Originating in the religious customs of the ancient Greeks, epideictic has been divorced from its original context because, according to Carter, modern scholars fail to grasp what purpose such rituals served for the ancients. Rather than the “empty, mindless, even neurotic behavior” that is often associated with ritual, Carter argues that, “ritual achieves meaning and function that is beyond the potential or ordinary, pragmatic behavior and language.”<sup>120</sup> Thus, Carter contends that epideictic-as-ritual has the potential to confer upon its audience transcendent and primordial knowledge that provides individuals with a sense of order and meaning, as well as a sense of communal identity and guidance for everyday living. In short, epideictic’s function as ritual sets it apart from the other types of discourse, affording it a unique and exceptional purpose.

Sullivan also defines epideictic by highlighting how it serves to sustain cultural identity through ritual.<sup>121</sup> He contends that epideictic allows the established members of the group to induct others into their worldview, while enabling new members to borrow from the reputation of the group to construct individual identity. Additionally, it provides the opportunity to reinforce communal values through ritual presentations, and to honor the group’s collective heritage by commemorating its past triumphs and heroes. Epideictic even encompasses the acclamation of accomplishments of group members and denouncement of opposing views.

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<sup>119</sup> Carter, Michael F. “The Ritual Functions of Epideictic Rhetoric: The Case of Socrates’ Funeral Oration.” *Rhetorica* 9.3 (1991): 209-232; Sullivan, 1991; Rosenfield, 1980.

<sup>120</sup> Carter, 212.

<sup>121</sup> Sullivan, 1991.

According to Sullivan, epideictic serves these ritual functions in order to furnish groups with the means to sustain and perpetuate their culture.

### *Values*

The reinforcement of values is the most common thread among all the modern conceptions of epideictic rhetoric. Carter observes that epideictic “does not attempt to change beliefs but to strengthen the beliefs that already form a bond among the participants.”<sup>122</sup> Sheard agrees, writing, “Epideictic rhetoric can be seen as both beginning and ending in agreement.”<sup>123</sup> Perelman argues, “The purpose of epideictic is to increase the intensity of adherence to values held in common by the audience and the speaker.”<sup>124</sup> Accordingly, Sullivan points out that the epideictic rhetor has to be recognized as a representative of the group, possessing a public image that personifies the communal identity and heritage.<sup>125</sup> “The audience must think of the rhetor as one of their own,” Sullivan maintains.<sup>126</sup> In fact, the epideictic audience “usually comes to hear epideictic speakers with the expectations that they will say what they want to hear.”<sup>127</sup> Thus, the epideictic speaker, as a member of the group, appeals to the values already espoused by both speaker and audience.

The defining purpose of epideictic, therefore, is to affirm and perpetuate cultural values through the building of community. Speaker and audience work in tandem, achieving communion through the celebration of their shared worldview. Oravec calls epideictic a “joint creation” in which “the rhetor receives common values and experiences from his audience,

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<sup>122</sup> Carter, 226.

<sup>123</sup> Sheard, Cynthia Miecznikowski. “The Public Value of Epideictic Rhetoric.” *College English* 58.7 (1996): 766.

<sup>124</sup> Perelman & Olbrechts-Tyteca, 52.

<sup>125</sup> Sullivan, 1993a

<sup>126</sup> Sullivan, 1993a, 126.

<sup>127</sup> Sullivan, 1993a, 124.

and... returns these experiences heightened and renewed.”<sup>128</sup> Sheard maintains that epideictic “strengthens social or institutional cohesion by generating a kind of communal knowledge, a set of palatable cultural truths.”<sup>129</sup> Epideictic enables the group to create the world around them according to their values and then inhabit that very world by continually reinforcing their point of view.

We have already seen that country music is foremost a reflection of its audience, that the country audience prefers to hear songs about themselves. Since country music is fundamentally a discourse that celebrates the values, attitudes and experiences of its audience, it follows that country music is best understood as epideictic rhetoric. Country music as epideictic discourse has a ritualistic quality in that it seeks to preserve and perpetuate the communal identity of the country audience by the continual rehearsal of a shared social reality. In addition, country artists function as epideictic rhetors, positioning themselves as representatives of the group, qualified to speak both to and for the country audience. As epideictic rhetors, country artists build and sustain the country audience as a community, reinforcing what both rhetor and listener already believe and value, and even interpreting new circumstances in terms of this established point of view.

In my examination of *Courtesy of the Red, White and Blue* and *American Soldier*, I have adopted what I call a contemporary conception of epideictic, which focuses on the ritualistic reinforcement of values to maintain community. In my analysis, I identify the value appeals made by Toby Keith and discuss how *Courtesy* and *American Soldier* rely on a common system of values to constitute the country audience as a community, particularly in light of a post-September 11 world. This is where epideictic meets symbolic convergence, a point I will expand

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<sup>128</sup> Oravec, 171-2.

<sup>129</sup> Sheard, 775

upon in the next section as I discuss how its notions of rhetorical visions and rhetorical communities can inform my analysis of country music as epideictic rhetoric.

### **Symbolic Convergence**

Symbolic convergence theory (SCT) attempts to explain how communication can create group consciousness through “socially shared narrations or fantasies.”<sup>130</sup> Sharing fantasies enables participants to construct a convergent ideology based on a store of common communicative symbols. Symbolic convergence occurs when an individual dramatizes or shares a narrative in such a way as to arouse responses in the other members of a group. As a result of this dramatizing, “others in the group may respond to the message by growing excited and expanding or adding to it. The tempo of the conversation quickens, others join in and a chain reaction takes place.”<sup>131</sup> The chaining out of this dramatizing message generates the basic unit of symbolic convergence, a fantasy.

Bormann defines a fantasy as “the imaginative and creative interpretation of events that fulfills a psychological or rhetorical need.”<sup>132</sup> A fantasy allows humans “to present or show to the group mind, to make visible (understandable) a common experience and shape it into social knowledge.”<sup>133</sup> Notably, fantasies “are always slanted, ordered and interpreted;” in other words, they help group members account for experiences and events as they choose, allowing them to construct their own reality.<sup>134</sup> Symbolic convergence helps cultures to organize, negotiate and perpetuate their worldview through “the creation, raising and sustaining of a group

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<sup>130</sup> Bormann, Ernest G. “Symbolic Convergence Theory: A Communication Formulation.” *Journal of Communication* 35 (1985): 128.

<sup>131</sup> Bormann, E.G., Knutson, R.L., & Musolf, K. “Why do people share fantasies?” *Communication Studies* 48 (1997): 255.

<sup>132</sup> Bormann, Ernest G. “The Symbolic Convergence Theory of Communication: Applications and Implications for Teachers and Consultants.” *Journal of Applied Communication Research* 10 (1982a): 52.

<sup>133</sup> Bormann, 1982a, 52.

<sup>134</sup> Bormann, 1985, 134.

consciousness.”<sup>135</sup> Likewise, epideictic “connects people to a greater consciousness” and “creates in the members of the audience a recognition of their oneness, a sense of communality.”<sup>136</sup> Thus, to the extent that it draws upon the shared identity of a particular group with the purpose of uniting them in a particular moment, epideictic discourse may create symbolic convergence.

Since a given group can share multiple fantasy themes, these “various shared scripts” will coalesce to establish a rhetorical vision, “which provides a broader view of a culture’s social reality.”<sup>137</sup> Those who participate in a rhetorical vision comprise a rhetorical community. Bormann observes, “Individuals in rhetorical transactions create subjective worlds of common expectations and meanings.”<sup>138</sup> He contends that, “the result of such symbolic sharing is a social reality common to the participants” – in other words, a rhetorical vision.<sup>139</sup> Rhetorical visions “serve to sustain the members’ sense of community... and provide them with a social reality.”<sup>140</sup> Group members “come to share a common view of an aspect of their common experience.”<sup>141</sup> Thus, a rhetorical vision is a collaborative construction of reality, a communal attempt to make sense of the circumstances that surround us. This shared reality is what unites a rhetorical community both within a particular moment (when faced with specific circumstances) and across time (in such as a way as to transcend the particular circumstances).

This socially shared understanding of reality is fundamental to epideictic discourse. Sullivan defines epideictic as “the experience of members of an audience who find that the speaker is saying exactly what needs to be said, who find that *they are being caught up in a*

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<sup>135</sup> Bormann et al., 1997, 254.

<sup>136</sup> Carter, 1991, 226, 227.

<sup>137</sup> Bormann, 1982a, 53.

<sup>138</sup> Bormann, Ernest G. “Fantasy and Rhetorical Vision: The Rhetorical Criticism of Social Reality.” *Quarterly Journal of Speech* 58 (1972): 400.

<sup>139</sup> Bormann, 1982a, 51.

<sup>140</sup> Bormann, 1972, 398.

<sup>141</sup> Bormann, E. G. “Fantasy and Rhetorical Vision: Ten Years Later.” *Quarterly Journal of Speech* 68 (1982b): 304.

*celebration of their vision of reality.*”<sup>142</sup> Similarly, Sheard maintains, “The epideictic mode of discourse *continually fosters rhetorical communities.*”<sup>143</sup> As previously discussed, epideictic discourse *relies on* the common ground of speaker and audience, the existence of shared values and beliefs. Accordingly, epideictic discourse *presumes* the presence of a shared reality (i.e. rhetorical vision). It assumes that fantasies have, can, and will chain out within and amongst the group it addresses. Thus, epideictic discourse (in this case, music) helps to create and sustain a rhetorical community (namely, the country music audience) through the ritual celebration and propagation of a common worldview and shared values.

Epideictic rhetors can only persuade their audience “insofar as their language identifies the ways of the rhetor with the ways of the audience.”<sup>144</sup> In other words, a speaker has to convince an audience that they have a common interest, they share a common point of view, in order to persuade them. Thus, the epideictic rhetor (in this case, the artist) must appeal to the collective identity of the group (a rhetorical community to which the artist also belongs) in order to create shared social reality (rhetorical vision). Through these *identification* appeals, the rhetor establishes that he/she and the audience have common ground, what Burke calls *consubstantiality*. Since I contend that Burke’s notions of *identification* and *consubstantiality* are germane to the creation and maintenance of rhetorical visions via epideictic rhetoric, I will now discuss how these aspects of dramatism can inform my research.

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<sup>142</sup> Sullivan, 1993a, 128, emphasis added.

<sup>143</sup> Sheard, 790, emphasis added.

<sup>144</sup> Bostdorff, Denise M. *The Presidency and the Rhetoric of Foreign Crisis*. Columbia, SC: University of South Carolina Press, 1994, 21-22.

## Dramatism

Burke contends, “You persuade a man only insofar as you can talk his language by speech, gesture, tonality, order, image, attitude, idea, *identifying* your ways with his.”<sup>145</sup> For Burke, *identification* is fundamental to persuasion because division is elemental to the human condition. Burke explains, “If men were not apart from one another, there would be no need for the rhetorician to proclaim their unity.”<sup>146</sup> Appealing to some common identity then, enables us to overcome that natural division. Identification reveals the ways in which we are alike, enabling us to connect with one another, what Burke would call the sharing of “substance.”<sup>147</sup> The extent to which we are able to identify with one another is the extent to which we establish this “consubstantiality” or communion of our substances.<sup>148</sup>

In order for a rhetorical vision to catch on and chain out amongst the audience, the epideictic rhetor and audience must meet “in a common mental or spiritual space” – in other words, must establish consubstantiality.<sup>149</sup> In fact, Sullivan asserts that consubstantiality is “where the continuing ideology of an orthodoxy [rhetorical community] is given birth in a new generation and rebirth in those who already dwell within the tradition.”<sup>150</sup> Thus, consubstantiality is what enables a rhetorical vision to chain out and what helps sustain a rhetorical community. What Kenneth Burke calls consubstantiality, Bormann calls symbolic convergence; yet, regardless of the term, this communion is the foundation on which rhetorical communities are built. Identification is an essential task for an epideictic rhetor because it enables the epideictic

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<sup>145</sup> Burke, Kenneth. *A Rhetoric of Motives*. New York: Prentice-Hall, Inc., 1950, 55.

<sup>146</sup> Burke, 1950, 22.

<sup>147</sup> Burke, 1950, 21.

<sup>148</sup> Burke, 1950, 21.

<sup>149</sup> Sullivan, 1993a, 127.

<sup>150</sup> Sullivan, 1993a, 128.



rhetor to construct and maintain a rhetorical community, and therefore, promulgate a rhetorical vision.

Burke identified three types of identification appeals: explicit, antithetical and implicit. *Explicit identification* is easily recognized, because the discourse contains overt and unmistakable references to a shared identity. Burke explains that this type of identification is used “merely as a way to establish rapport with an audience by the stressing of sympathies held in common,” as in the case of a “baby-kissing politician.”<sup>151</sup> *Antithetical identification* is characterized by the evocation of a shared enemy against which the audience and speaker can unite. Calling this type of identification “the most urgent form of congregation by segregation,” Burke cites “temporary alliances in wartime” as a prime example of this strategy.<sup>152</sup> He notes that this strategy of identification can create the following scenario: “If you raise an objection against *our* side and it’s like a criticism leveled against us by the other side, you can be accused of being on *their* side.”<sup>153</sup> Thus, this strategy sets up an unmistakable “us versus them” situation in which audience members must choose sides. Finally, *implicit identification* contains subtle references to unity, commonly denoted by the speaker’s employment of the word “we.” For example, a president might declare that “we” are at war, when clearly a soldier’s involvement in the war is quite different than an ordinary civilian’s involvement. This last type of identification is the most powerful, because it is often not recognized for what it is or what it does.<sup>154</sup>

We have already seen that epideictic is only effective insofar as the audience “think[s] of the rhetor as one of their own,” which explains why the songs of country music usually include

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<sup>151</sup> Burke, Kenneth. “The Rhetorical Situation.” *Communication: Ethical and Moral Issues*. Ed. L. Thayer. New York: Gordon and Breach Science, 1973, 268.

<sup>152</sup> Burke, 1973, 268.

<sup>153</sup> Burke, 1973, 268.

<sup>154</sup> Bostdorff, 1994; Cheney, George. “The Rhetoric of Identification and the Study of Organizational Communication.” *Quarterly Journal of Speech* 69 (1983): 143-158.

“an attempt at identification.”<sup>155</sup> An epideictic rhetor “tries to establish a sense of communion centered around particular values recognized by the audience.”<sup>156</sup> Accordingly, country artists as epideictic rhetors must “proclaim their unity” with and amongst their listeners; they must demonstrate to their audience that they do indeed share some common ground.<sup>157</sup> They can then use this solidarity (consubstantiality) to maintain the audience as a rhetorical community and ensure that a given rhetorical vision will chain out.

In my examination of *Courtesy of the Red, White and Blue* and *American Soldier*, I analyze how Toby Keith builds and sustains a rhetorical community through attempts to establish consubstantiality. I examine how Keith cultivates a persona both within the songs themselves, as well as in the media coverage surrounding them, in order to identify with the country music audience. In order to deconstruct the rhetorical vision offered by Keith, I utilized Burkean pentads, discussed below.

### ***Pentadic Analysis***

Burke observes, “Men seek for vocabularies that will be faithful *reflections* of reality. To this end, they must develop vocabularies that are *selections* of reality. And any selection of reality must, in certain circumstances, function as a *deflection* of reality.”<sup>158</sup> In other words, we develop language to help us organize and interpret the world around us (reflection), but this process is only accomplished through selection and exclusion, i.e. choosing what to emphasize and, consequently, what to minimize or even exclude altogether. This process will in turn limit what aspects of reality can be understood or even considered (deflection); the language system we create and subscribe to dictates what reality we experience, reducing the possibilities for

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<sup>155</sup> Sullivan, 1993a, 126; Buckley, 294.

<sup>156</sup> Perelman and Olbrechts-Tyteca, 51.

<sup>157</sup> Burke, 1950, 22.

<sup>158</sup> Burke, Kenneth. *A Grammar of Motives*. Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1969, 59.

alternative conceptions. This is precisely why Burke asserts that we can examine what individuals say in order to uncover how they understands the world around them.

Language, then, is the means through which humans interpret and respond to what occurs around them. Thus, when we describe a situation, we attribute motive simply by choosing our words. For Burke, motive (our explanation of an occurrence) can be discovered using the language of the world of drama – act, agent, agency, scene and purpose – which comprise the *pentad*. The *act* refers to what took place; the *scene* is the situation in which the act took place (the physical environment and/or the circumstances surrounding it, including timing); the *agent* is the person or entity that performed the act; the means used to accomplish the act is *agency*; and the *purpose* refers to why the act occurred. It is worth noting that *purpose* and *motive* are not the same. *Purpose* is what the rhetor identifies or implies was the reason for the act *within* the discourse, while *motive* is what generates the discourse – i.e. what motivates the rhetor - as determined by the critic. The two do not necessarily correspond.<sup>159</sup>

Just as the world of drama has a limited number of possible plots which can occur, so too are there “a limited number of situations that occur to man.”<sup>160</sup> In response to these recurring situations, we establish strategies to help us articulate what is happening. Thus, by simply using language, we reveal what strategy we are employing to understand the situation at hand. Foss explains, “We use rhetoric to constitute and present a particular view of our situation, just as the presentation of a play creates a certain world or situation inhabited by characters who engage in actions in a setting.”<sup>161</sup> Notably, “how we describe a situation indicates how we are perceiving it

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<sup>159</sup> Burke, 1969; Foss, Sonja K. “Pentadic Criticism.” *Rhetorical Criticism: Exploration and Practice*. Prospect Heights, IL: Waveland Press, Inc., 1989, 335-343.; Ling, David A. “A Pentadic Analysis of Senator Edward Kennedy’s Address to the People of Massachusetts July 25, 1969.” *Rhetorical Criticism: Exploration and Practice*. Ed. S.J. Foss. Prospect Heights, IL: Waveland Press, Inc., 1989, 344-351.

<sup>160</sup> Ling, 344.

<sup>161</sup> Foss, 336.

and the choices we see available to us.”<sup>162</sup> Hence, when we use language, we construct and reveal our reality.

Likewise, epideictic discourse is “informed by the present... and often serves to bolster faith or pride in the ideals of the ‘present system,’” which helps the audience locate itself as a community in the present circumstances.<sup>163</sup> Thus, epideictic discourse can “bring order and meaning to an otherwise chaotic and meaningless series of events.”<sup>164</sup> As I have already argued, an epideictic rhetor relies on the existence of a common reality with his/her audience. Accordingly, the reality described by the epideictic rhetor should reveal the reality (rhetorical vision) shared by his/her audience (rhetorical community). In order to deconstruct the reality presented by the rhetor, Burke offers pentadic ratios, to which I now turn.

### ***Pentadic Ratios***

Once the five elements of the pentad have been identified, the relationship among the terms (i.e. how each affects the others) must be considered by pairing off two elements at a time in a *ratio*. There are twenty possible ratios, each encompassing two terms, with the dominant term first. Hence, a *scene-act* ratio differs from an *act-scene* ratio, with *scene* influencing *act* in the former, *act* influencing *scene* in the latter. Not all ratios will necessarily produce significant relationships. Once the significant ratios have been extracted, one pentadic term should emerge that “has the most impact on the other terms or that determines the nature of all or most of the other terms in the pentad.”<sup>165</sup> This term is what a critic uses to explain how rhetors perceive and interpret the situations they face.

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<sup>162</sup> Foss, 336.

<sup>163</sup> Beale, 223.

<sup>164</sup> Carter, M., 223

<sup>165</sup> Foss, 341.

Brummett notes that, according to Burke, we have “a disposition to define most things in life with one term or ratio,” and we “repeatedly explain experience to ourselves and others with one term or ratio.”<sup>166</sup> In other words, we are likely to continually define and respond to situations by assigning precedence to the same term or ratio. The persistent ascendancy of each term corresponds to a distinct philosophical tradition or school, which can in turn expose the motive for the rhetoric. Each philosophy subscribes to its own “vocabulary” which awards “this one term full expression with the other terms being comparatively slighted or being placed in the perspective of the featured term.”<sup>167</sup> When *act* is dominant, the corresponding philosophy is *realism*, in which the agents are defined by what they do. On the other hand, a prevailing *agent* signifies *idealism*, in which the nature of the agent determines the nature of the act as well as the other components of the situation. The primacy of *scene* indicates *materialism*, in which action is reduced to motion, and the scene assumes responsibility for what took place. Featuring *agency* denotes *pragmatism*, a doctrine in which the act is justified or explained by the means used to accomplish it. Lastly, when *purpose* dominates, *mysticism* emerges, a philosophy in which agents are compelled to act by some higher purpose.<sup>168</sup>

Brummett demonstrates how the pentad can help uncover what ideological assumptions are driving the rhetoric of each side of a controversy in his examination of the rhetoric of both pro and anti gay rights activists. Each side’s position is a derivative of the larger ideology to which the group subscribes, and the pentad helped him analyze how rhetors on both sides describe the situation. According to Brummett, “in a public controversy, people will try to define the problem and change audience perceptions of the world by placing responsibility for the way

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<sup>166</sup> Brummett, Barry. “A Pentadic Analysis of Ideologies in Two Gay Rights Controversies.” *Rhetorical Criticism: Exploration and Practice*. Ed. S.J. Foss. Prospect Heights, IL: Waveland Press, Inc., 1989, 353.

<sup>167</sup> Burke, 1969, 127.

<sup>168</sup> Burke, 1969.

things are with one or more of those five terms.”<sup>169</sup> In other words, by assigning dominance to one term (or a ratio between terms) over the others, a rhetor promotes a particular evaluation of the situation. Both pro and anti gay rights factions emphasize the act-agent ratio, but gay rights advocates feature agent over act (idealism), while opponents feature act over agent (realism). Thus, for advocates, “acts are derivative from agents, people do what they do because of the kinds of people they find themselves to be.”<sup>170</sup> Opponents, on the other hand, maintain that, “agents are derivative... a person is what he or she is through his/her actions or the actions of others.”<sup>171</sup> Thus, Brummett’s pentadic analysis demonstrates that a rhetor’s tendency to persistently interpret situations according to the same dominant term (or ratio of terms) is the product of a larger set of ideological assumptions.

We have already seen that “the essence of a country song is the story,” and as such, the stories told within a country song are “a manner of viewing or reflecting life,” a means through which the country artist can and often does shape the shared reality of the country music audience.<sup>172</sup> Thus, country music helps the country audience to understand and evaluate a particular situation in light of an already established set of values and experiences (those ideological assumptions Burke identified). This process of shaping communal identity is ongoing, allowing country artists to make sense of momentary circumstances by interweaving them into the larger fabric of their community. Hence, when a country artist presents a rhetorical vision in an attempt to assign meaning to a specific situation, that artist will invariably reveal what ideological assumptions are driving the discourse by assigning dominance to one pentadic term or ratio.

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<sup>169</sup> Brummett, 353.

<sup>170</sup> Brummett, 354.

<sup>171</sup> Brummett, 354.

<sup>172</sup> Lewis, 1976, 38.

My motivation for using pentadic analyses in my investigation of *Courtesy* and *American Soldier* is two-fold: firstly, as I have already discussed, the pentads serve as a means to illuminate Keith's perception and interpretation of a post-September 11 reality. This interpretation of the events of September 11 and the subsequent wars in Iraq and Afghanistan forms the foundation of the rhetorical vision Keith constructs and promotes within the songs. Secondly, the pentadic ratios enable me to discuss some of the ideological assumptions underlying Keith's discourse. Such assumptions tell us as much about the worldview of the intended audience for these songs (rhetorical community) as they do about Keith's worldview.

### **Rhetorical Context**

A pentadic analysis is generally applied *internally* - that is, the pentadic elements are applied to content *within* the discourse itself – how the rhetor characterizes the act, agent, scene, agency and purpose. Nevertheless, the pentad can also be expanded to investigate the *external* context of the text – that is, “how that artifact itself functions as part of a situation that suggests particular ways of looking at and responding to it.”<sup>173</sup> To understand fully understand the impact of *Courtesy* and *American Soldier*, I explore the rhetorical context in which these two songs were conceived and consumed using Benoit's conception of the “genesis of rhetorical action.”<sup>174</sup>

In seeking to explain the origins of rhetorical action, Benoit refutes both Bitzer and Vatz, who have each offered well-known (and antithetical) conceptions of the “process of rhetorical invention.”<sup>175</sup> Bitzer's now infamous situational perspective suggests, “rhetorical discourse is

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<sup>173</sup> Foss, 339.

<sup>174</sup> Benoit, William L. “The Genesis of Rhetorical Action.” *Southern Journal of Communication* 59.4 (1994): 342-355.

<sup>175</sup> Bitzer, Lloyd F. “The Rhetorical Situation.” *Philosophy and Rhetoric* 1 (1968): 1-14.; Vatz, R.E. “The Myth of the Rhetorical Situation.” *Philosophy and Rhetoric* 6 (1973): 154-161; Benoit, 342.

called into existence by situation.”<sup>176</sup> Thus, for Bitzer, the situation precludes the discourse and demands a particular rhetorical response. By contrast, Vatz argues, “I would not say ‘rhetoric is situational,’ but situations are rhetorical... not ‘the situation controls the rhetorical response’... but, the rhetoric controls the situational response.”<sup>177</sup> For Vatz, the rhetor creates the situation, assigning meaning to events through the use of discourse. Benoit calls Bitzer’s perspective “a thinly-disguised stimulus-response account of the genesis of rhetorical action,” that “discounts the influence of the rhetor’s purpose and nature.”<sup>178</sup> He also rejects Vatz’s perspective because it fails to “adequately acknowledge the importance of the situation, the rhetor’s purpose or agencies available to the rhetor.”<sup>179</sup> In Burkean terms, Bitzer places too much emphasis on *scene*, whereas Vatz lends too much weight to *agent*.

Benoit utilizes Burke’s pentadic ratios to present his own “alternative conception of the genesis of rhetorical action.”<sup>180</sup> He uses the pentad and its derivative ratios to “locate the elements present within the rhetorical situation and map out their interrelationships.”<sup>181</sup> Featuring *act* as the secondary term of each ratio, he is able to explore how the rhetorical act is “influenced (or explained or justified) by” each of the other terms, creating four ratios: *purpose-act*, *scene-act*, *agent-act* and *agency-act*.<sup>182</sup> Thus, the discourse becomes the *act*, and the critic considers how *agent* (the nature of the rhetor him/herself), *agency* (the means used by the rhetor), *scene* (the particular circumstances) and *purpose* (the rhetor’s objective) contributed to the production of the discourse. Benoit reasons that this conception of the “genesis of rhetorical action” is

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<sup>176</sup> Bitzer, 9.

<sup>177</sup> Vatz, 159.

<sup>178</sup> Benoit, 347-8.

<sup>179</sup> Benoit, 348.

<sup>180</sup> Benoit, 348.

<sup>181</sup> Benoit, 349.

<sup>182</sup> Benoit, 349.



superior to those perspectives offered by Bitzer and Vatz because it subsumes both (*scene-act* and *agent-act*, respectively), and allows the critic to consider all aspects of the situation.

I have adopted Benoit's perspective on the origin of rhetorical action in my exploration of the context in which *Courtesy* and *American Soldier* were written and consumed. Accordingly, I investigate each song as a rhetorical *act*, considering its production and consumption as a consequence of (1) the nature of the *agent*, Keith (or more accurately, Keith's public persona), (2) the *agency* or means used by Keith to convey them (i.e. country music), (3) the *scene* or circumstances in which they were written and consumed, and (4) Keith's *purpose* (implied or explicit) in writing and recording them. By considering all the elements of the rhetorical context, I gain a fuller understanding of how each contributed to the creation and consumption of these pieces of discourse.

### **Methods of Analysis**

In order to understand the rhetorical impact of the songs *Courtesy of the Red, White and Blue (The Angry American)* and *American Soldier*, I employ a three-pronged organic method comprised of (1) a contemporary understanding of epideictic discourse, (2) aspects of symbolic convergence and (3) aspects of Dramatism. Since I have already determined that instrumentation is subordinate in country music, I have confined my analysis to lyrical content.

First, I examine the song lyrics as examples of epideictic rhetoric, defined as the ritualistic reinforcement of values to maintain community. I identify the values championed by Keith and discuss how country music relies on a common system of values to appeal to its audience, particularly in times of war.

Secondly, I discuss how the country music audience constitutes a rhetorical community and how Keith identifies with the country music audience by cultivating a particular persona both within the song lyrics and in the media coverage surrounding the songs.

Thirdly, I analyze how these songs, a part of a rhetorical vision, provide the audience with a shared social reality for understanding the post-September 11 world. I explore Keith's rhetorical vision of a post-September 11 reality through a pentadic analysis of the song lyrics. I use media coverage and the *Billboard* charts to determine how well this vision "chained out" amongst the country music audience.

Finally, using Benoit's perspective on the genesis of rhetorical action, I utilize media coverage to explore the rhetorical context in which these songs were written and consumed.

The remainder of this paper is comprised of three chapters. Chapter Three is the analysis of *Courtesy of the Red, White and Blue*; it includes an examination of the rhetorical vision advanced by Keith within the song's lyrics, an exploration of the impact the song had on the intended audience (rhetorical community) and an investigation of the rhetorical context in which the song was produced and consumed. Chapter Four is the analysis of *American Soldier*; it also includes an examination of the rhetorical vision presented by Keith within the song's lyrics, an exploration of the impact the song had on the intended audience (rhetorical community) and an investigation of the rhetorical context in which the song was produced and consumed. The paper concludes with Chapter Five, comprising both a review and discussion of the findings of this study.

CHAPTER 3. ANALYSIS OF *COURTESY OF THE RED, WHITE AND BLUE*  
(*THE ANGRY AMERICAN*)

A few days after September 11, 2001, Toby Keith penned *Courtesy of the Red, White and Blue*, partly in tribute to his recently deceased father, a Korean War veteran. He began playing the song at military gigs in early 2002 with no intention of recording and officially releasing it as a single. Encouragement from several high-ranking military officers, including no less than the Marine Commandant himself, prompted Keith to reconsider, and he eventually recorded the song on the album *Unleashed*.<sup>183</sup> The single quickly climbed the *Billboard* country charts, and with the fuel of controversy behind it, *Courtesy* hit number 1 in July 2002, a month prior to the album's release. It even enjoyed a second round of success in May 2003, thanks to yet another round of controversy.

In light of the enormous rhetorical impact of *Courtesy*, this chapter first examines the song's lyrics as instances of epideictic rhetoric in order to illuminate the **rhetorical vision** tendered by Keith. Value appeals are identified and discussed in light of the eight values identified by Buckley as defining the country music genre (discussed in the preceding chapter). In addition, this chapter explores both media coverage and the *Billboard* charts to assess how well this vision chained out amongst its intended audience (**rhetorical community**). Finally, this chapter investigates the **rhetorical context** in which this song was written and consumed using Benoit's perspective on the "genesis of rhetorical action."

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<sup>183</sup> "Courtesy of the Red, White and Blue." *CBS News*. 31 Dec. 2003. <<http://www.cbsnews.com/stories/2003/10/28/60II/printable580469.shtml>>

## Rhetorical Vision

Not surprisingly, the dominant theme in *Courtesy* is patriotism, which Buckley simply defines as “love of country.”<sup>184</sup> In the first stanza, Keith identifies what it means to be an American, and his primary qualification is patriotism. His brand of patriotism, however, is unequivocally defined as much more than a broad “love of country.” He sings, “American girls and American guys/ We’ll always stand up and salute, we’ll always recognize/When we see Old Glory fly, there’s a lot of men dead/ So we can sleep in peace at night when we lay down our head.”<sup>185</sup> From the outset, Keith establishes a dichotomy between who is and who is not an American, claiming that Americans are intrinsically patriotic and possess an inherent respect for the flag. According to Keith, reverence for the flag is analogous with reverence for our troops, both past and present. When Americans see the flag, they acknowledge it as a symbol of those who gave their lives in service to this country to ensure the safety of all Americans.

Keith elaborates this connection between the military and the flag in the second stanza: “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.” While this stanza certainly introduces another theme of Buckley’s, home and family, Keith’s primary focus is still patriotism. He offers this brief glimpse of his father to illustrate where his own patriotism originated, and to furnish listeners with an example of a true patriot. His father lost his eye in the service of his country and yet still flew a flag at their home, demonstrating that his country was worth the sacrifice. Keith connects two key country music values, that of patriotism and family, in describing how his father taught his children what it means to be patriotic. Moreover, Keith implies that, by flying that flag, his

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<sup>184</sup> Buckley, 296.

<sup>185</sup> Song lyrics obtained from Keith’s official website: <<http://tobykeith.musiccitynetworks.com>>.

father *ensured* that their family would “grow up and live happy in the land of the free.” The flag is a symbol of the freedom they enjoy, a freedom secured by men like Keith’s father, who served in the military.

At the center of the two aforementioned controversies Keith weathered with the release of this song are the following lyrics: “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.” Further cultivating the dichotomy he creates in the opening stanza, Keith bluntly reiterates what it means to be an American. When provoked, the United States will respond with immediate and aggressive military action because “it’s the American way.” For Keith, warfare is fundamentally American, which suggests that those who oppose military force are un-American. Furthermore, such measures are not only reasonable, but completely necessary in order that “justice... be served.” With justice on their side, Americans can and should support retaliatory military action. Once again, Keith has linked patriotism with deference for our military.

Keith reinforces his patriotic theme by infusing his lyrics with iconic American symbols. He refers to the flag as “Old Glory” and to the United States as “the land of the free” and “the Red, White and Blue.” He compares the impending retribution against the September 11 perpetrators to the “4<sup>th</sup> of July,” presumably comparing a future air strike to a shower of fireworks.<sup>186</sup> In the chorus, Keith depicts American icons goaded into action by their fury. “Uncle Sam,” for example, writes the enemy’s name “at the top of his list,” presumably to make vengeance a chief priority. The “Statue of Liberty” is “shakin’ her fist,” while “Mother Freedom start(s) ringin’ her bell.” Even the “eagle” is inspired to take action, although it is only

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<sup>186</sup> Please note that this song was written *before* the U.S. took any military action in Afghanistan. This point will be expanded later in this paper.

indistinctly described as in flight. Nevertheless, by evoking these traditional American icons aroused in anger, Keith appeals to the fundamental patriotic urge in his audience: the love of country. These symbols represent America, and if they are enraged, then Americans should be too. Once again, the line is clearly drawn between who is an American and who is not.

Patriotism is unquestionably the prevailing theme of this song, but it is not the only value to which Keith appeals. As we have already seen, home and family are linked to this theme in Keith's transient portrait of his veteran father. Keith also touches on Buckley's value of individual worth in his brief description of his father's disposition. Buckley writes that individuals depicted in country music often "live lives of quiet dignity," as they "come to terms with, but do not always conquer" hardship.<sup>187</sup> In the case of Keith's father, he refuses to allow the loss of his eye to diminish his love of the United States, or his determination to raise his children as patriots. Buckley explains that in country music, "the quality of a man's life is not measured by his conventional accomplishments but by the content of his character."<sup>188</sup> Keith's father is admirable, not because he is rich or powerful, but rather because he served in the military and raised a family. This song tells us nothing else about what he did with his life – presumably because these are the most significant things he could do. Individual worth, then, is linked to the values of both patriotism and family.

Keith also includes hints of rugged individualism in his portrait of his father, as well as his depiction of the United States and her angry American symbols. Keith's persistent veneration of the military throughout the song is, in essence, admiration for this well-known American virtue. Soldiers epitomize rugged individualism. The military harnesses the vitality of the raucous individual and directs it towards a specific purpose. Additionally, Keith portrays the

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<sup>187</sup> Buckley, 295.

<sup>188</sup> Buckley, 295

United States and her icons as rowdy and tenacious, as if they are embroiled in a bar room brawl. America acquires a “black eye” and responds by “put[ting] a boot” in the enemy’s “ass.” Even the Statue of Liberty abandons lady-like behavior in favor of “shakin’ her fist.” In addition to rowdiness and resilience, Buckley describes rugged individualism in terms of “self-reliance” and “personal independence,” both of which are captured in Keith’s sketch of his dad.<sup>189</sup> Rather than lament his debilitating injury, he raises and supports a family and proudly, almost defiantly, flies a flag outside their home. Rugged individualism, like individual worth, becomes linked with the values of patriotism and family.

In addition to appealing to such values, Keith offers a rhetorical vision driven by mysticism, assigning *purpose* dominance throughout the song. At first glance, the image described in the opening stanza of *Courtesy* is deceptively simple: Americans, whom Keith refers to throughout as “we,” will “always” salute the flag (*act*) – anytime, anywhere (*scene*) – in order to honor our troops (*purpose*). Yet, we have already seen that, for Keith, saluting the flag is not an *act* in and of itself, but rather the means (*agency*) through which Americans (*agents*) display their patriotism. For Keith, this *act* of patriotism occurs for the *purpose* of paying homage to those in uniform; Americans are compelled to display their patriotism (via saluting the flag) because of a need to revere our military. In Burkean terms, purpose drives action (*purpose-act*).

The portrait presented in the second stanza is equally and seemingly straightforward: Keith’s father, an army veteran (*agent*), flew a flag in the family’s yard “til the day that he died” (*scene*). Once again, the flag becomes the means (*agency*) through which patriotism is demonstrated (*act*). This expression of patriotism results from this man’s desire to provide security, happiness and above all, freedom, for his family (*purpose*). As previously discussed,

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<sup>189</sup> Buckley, 295.

Keith suggests that, through this display of patriotism, his father ensured that his family would “grow up and live happy in the land of the free.” Thus, purpose compels Keith’s father to act. As with the first stanza, act is derivative of purpose (*purpose-act*).

In the third stanza, Keith contrasts these purpose-driven acts of patriotism with a brief description of the senseless actions of the enemy on September 11 (*scene*). Unlike the Americans, the enemy (*agent*) acts without discernible purpose, and is consequently defined solely by what they do (*act*) and how they do it (*agency*). According to Burke, when *act* is dominant, the corresponding philosophy is *realism*, “the doctrine that universal principles are more real than objects as sensed.”<sup>190</sup> Realists subscribe to the notion of universals and a single reality for all; they believe that absolute ideals of right and wrong, fact and fiction, exist for all humans. In addition, Burke defines realism by quoting Aristotle: “things are more or less real according as they are more or less in action.”<sup>191</sup> Thus, humans and things are defined by what they do. Accordingly, the “sucker punch” delivered from “somewhere in the back” suggests a cowardly and dishonorable adversary perpetrating an arbitrary attack, which Keith juxtaposes with the preceding depictions of purposive (and by implication, principled) Americans.

Keith cultivates a rhetorical vision of September 11 as well as its probable aftermath in the third stanza. He sings, “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 4<sup>th</sup> of July.” Notably, Keith refers to an American military retaliation that *had not yet occurred* at the time the song was written *as if it had already taken place* (“we lit up your world”). In the chorus, by contrast, he refers to the forthcoming military action as an assured future (“it’s gonna be hell”), not a prior event. While the precise

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<sup>190</sup> Foss, 341.

<sup>191</sup> Burke, 1969, 227.



reason for this disparity is uncertain, it is likely that Keith saw military action as an inescapable (and perhaps even preferable) consequence of the attacks. By assuming military action was inevitable and championing it as a just response *before* it even took place, he designates the September 11 attacks as an act of war.

Predictably, Keith assigns America the role of victim, declaring that the United States has “fallen under attack.” Yet, he does not dwell on America as the injured party, preferring instead to scorn the ignoble attackers as skulking around “somewhere in the back,” and their actions as a “mighty sucker punch.” He emphasizes the cowardice of both the assault and the assailant by calling the attack a “sucker punch” and suggesting that it came from “the back,” the way a recreant would attack. To further disparage the nature of the enemy, Keith declares that the United States would react promptly, “soon as we could see clearly through our big black eye.” He acknowledges that America suffered an injury, but to refer to it as “black eye” suggests that its effect is limited and fleeting. A black eye is a superficial injury, it does not inflict penetrating or debilitating damage, and it will heal quickly. Significantly, a black eye does not prevent America from reacting while she heals, and Keith is confident that she will respond with a vengeance.

According to Keith, America has plenty of power at her disposal to retaliate. He refers to “[lighting] up [the enemy’s] world like the 4<sup>th</sup> of July,” indicating that America would do much more than land a lucky punch. Furthermore, he lends honor to such retaliatory military action by comparing it to the very day that celebrates our identity as a nation, July 4. When the United States strikes, the damage will be extensive and profound; in fact, the attack will “feel like the whole wide world is raining down on you.” Rather than inflicting a temporary wound, America will shatter the enemy’s very way of life. Keith reiterates the power of the United States by

labeling her “the big dog” whose “cage” has been “rattle[d]” by a craven and insubstantial adversary. Once again the enemy’s actions are derogated as feeble and transient, a mere “rattle” of the “cage” of the mighty United States. Confident as to what the attackers can expect in return, Keith unequivocally declares, “you’ll be sorry that you messed with the U.S. of A.” And unlike the treacherous “sucker punch” of the enemy that came from behind, Keith says that there will be no mistake as to who was perpetrating the attack this time. It will be boldly and undeniably “brought to you courtesy of the Red, White and Blue.”

Keith continually refers to the United States in the collective first person, “we,” implicitly conferring upon both himself and the listener a shared identity as Americans. He also promotes a common identity by offering the audience a common (if vague) enemy towards which they can direct their anger and against which they can unite. By referring to the enemy as “you” and the United States as “we,” Keith fosters an unmistakable “us versus them” scenario, prompting listeners to take sides. After September 11, there is no middle ground; you are either with us or against us.

Central to Keith’s rhetorical vision of a post-September 11 reality is America Incarnate, a collective and cohesive entity to which Keith and the audience belong. Throughout the song, Keith personifies the United States, effectively furnishing America with a physical body capable of action and emotion. As a being, America “lay(s) down her head,” sustains a “big black eye,” and even “put(s) a boot” in the “ass” of her foe. In fact, when Keith depicts America’s incensed icons in the chorus, he implies that America herself experiences rage. This depiction of America Incarnate operates as *agent* in both the chorus and bridge of the song.

In the chorus, icons such as “Uncle Sam,” the “Statue of Liberty,” the “eagle,” and “Mother Freedom” represent America Incarnate (*agent*) as well as the means (*agency*) through

which she will exact revenge for September 11 (*scene*). The individual actions taken by each icon (i.e. “Uncle Sam put your name at the top of list/And the Statue of Liberty started shakin’ her fist”) are subsumed by the overall *act* of retaliation on the September 11 perpetrators. Keith refers to America Incarnate (*agent*) in the song’s bridge as the “big dog” and the “U.S. of A.” Here, America’s counterattack (*act*) is conducted by means of a “boot in [the enemy’s] ass” (*agency*). While the explicit *scene* is a battle in the near future, Keith implies that America Incarnate will retaliate any time she is attacked: “This big dog will fight when you rattle his cage.”

Here, as in the third stanza, Keith stresses a ratio between *act* and *agent*, but reverses the direction of influence: *act* is now derivative of *agent* (*agent-act*). According to Burke, a prevailing *agent* signifies *idealism*, “the system that views the mind or spirit as each person experiences it as fundamentally real.”<sup>192</sup> For the idealist, reality is relative and is created entirely by humans themselves. The nature of the agent will then determine the nature of the act as well as the other components of the situation. For Keith, the enemy is defined by *what they do* (i.e. perpetrate a cowardly attack), while America Incarnate acts because of *who she is*, her very nature. By defining America Incarnate in this way, Keith effectively releases her from any responsibility resulting from her actions: she has no choice but to counterattack. Thus, he skillfully sidesteps acknowledging the validity of a counterattack by simply not posing the question. America is compelled to retaliate whenever provoked – yet, she is not motivated by revenge alone.

Taken together, the chorus and the bridge provide America Incarnate with an overriding *purpose* for both her actions and her character, one that surpasses mere retribution. America Incarnate does not act without cause, and Keith provides her with perhaps the noblest cause of

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<sup>192</sup> Foss, 342.

them all: justice. By claiming that, “justice will be served,” Keith is able to elevate America’s actions from reckless reaction to avenging crusade. He even manages to ennoble putting “a boot in [the] ass” by claiming, “it’s the American way.” As with the first and second stanzas, *act* is derivative of *purpose* (*purpose-act*). Thus, America Incarnate does what she does because of who she is, and she does what she does for a purpose; therefore, *purpose* drives both *agent* and *act* (*purpose-agent- act*).

According to Burke, when *purpose* dominates, an ideology of *mysticism* emerges, a philosophy in which “the element of unity is emphasized to the point that individuality disappears.”<sup>193</sup> Burke explains, “the unity of the individual with some cosmic or universal purpose is the mark of mysticism.”<sup>194</sup> Thus, Keith suggests that the U.S. is united by a solidarity of purpose that transcends the needs and objectives of individual Americans. Burke notes that mystical philosophies often resurface “in times of great skepticism or confusion about the nature of human purpose,” when humans can overcome their doubts by “submerging [themselves] in some vision of a universal or absolute or transcendent purpose.”<sup>195</sup> The attacks of September 11 and the onset of war, which instigated a need for people to cope with the devastation and their fear of the future, certainly qualifies as such a time. By promoting a rhetorical vision based on mysticism, Keith attempts to mollify into the concerns of the country music audience, assuring them that justice will ultimately prevail.

### ***Summary***

In *Courtesy of the Red, White and Blue*, Keith promotes a rhetorical vision of America Incarnate, a resilient and unified nation, collectively angered and roused to action by the

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<sup>193</sup> Foss, 342.

<sup>194</sup> Burke, 1969, 288.

<sup>195</sup> Burke, 1969, 288.

cowardly and dishonorable attacks of September 11, 2001. Rather than dwell on America's momentary injury, Keith decries the treachery of our enemy and assures listeners that the U.S. will ultimately prevail. This vision propagates a shared American identity by reinforcing the traditional values of the audience and offers a common enemy against which Americans can unite. Keith unequivocally defines September 11 as an act of war, furnishing the U.S. with just cause for military retaliation while exempting her from questions of the validity of her actions. Most importantly, this vision provides America Incarnate (and by extension, all Americans) with an overriding and transcendent purpose: to serve the interests of liberty and justice.

### **Rhetorical Community**

The key to symbolic convergence is audience participation; in other words, there must be evidence that the rhetorical vision has caught on and chained out. In the case of *Courtesy of the Red, White and Blue*, the proliferation of Keith's vision received a considerable boost from public controversy. *Courtesy* began its climb up the *Billboard* country charts at number 41 in late May of 2002, three months before the release of the album *Unleashed*.<sup>196</sup> Less than a month later, on June 13, Keith announced that he had been cut from ABC's upcoming Fourth of July celebration because Canadian-born news anchor Peter Jennings objected to the song's lyrics.<sup>197</sup> In an interview with CNN's Larry King, Keith insisted that he had no intention of making Jennings' objections public until ABC released a statement claiming Keith had never been booked for the event. "They tried to make us out to look like we were just trying to create press

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<sup>196</sup> "Hot Country Singles." *Billboard* 25 May 2002: 35.

<sup>197</sup> Mansfield, 13 June 2002, 1D.

for the thing [song],” explained Keith.<sup>198</sup> Keith countered ABC’s claim by publicly faulting Jennings for his ejection from the 3-hour special.<sup>199</sup>

In blaming Jennings, Keith “had the perfect country music enemy: a brainy media guy who also happens to be Canadian.”<sup>200</sup> Country music audiences quickly sided with Keith, sending the news anchor hundreds of pairs of boots, “bearing messages about sunless places in which to stick them.”<sup>201</sup> The *Washington Post* observed, “*Courtesy* didn’t just sell well, it produced the sort of controversy the performers dream about.”<sup>202</sup> In fact, Keith himself “readily acknowledges that he got a far bigger bump getting dropped from the holiday show than he would have gotten playing it.”<sup>203</sup> And he certainly did. The ensuing media frenzy drove *Courtesy* into *Billboard*’s top 10 in just two weeks, and it took the number 1 spot on July 20, 2002 – a mere two months after its debut on the charts, and still a month shy of the album release.<sup>204</sup>

With so much momentum behind it, the album *Unleashed* predictably debuted at number 1 on the *Billboard* country album charts in August of 2002, and sold a million copies in just sixteen days.<sup>205</sup> Remarkably, the album grabbed the top spot once again *nearly a year later* in May 2003, as Keith publicly battled yet another foe, this time Dixie Chicks’ front-woman Natalie Maines. On the eve of the U.S. invasion of Iraq, Texas-native Maines incited a “media firestorm” in March 2003 when she told a London audience, “Just so you know, we’re ashamed the President of the United States is from Texas.”<sup>206</sup> The world of country music responded with

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<sup>198</sup> *Larry King Live*

<sup>199</sup> De Moraes, C07.

<sup>200</sup> Segal, David. “Toby Keith, by Jingo: the country singer takes on America’s enemies –and his own – with a vengeance.” *The Washington Post*, 25 July 2002: C01.

<sup>201</sup> Willman, 38.

<sup>202</sup> Segal, C01.

<sup>203</sup> Segal, C01.

<sup>204</sup> “Hot Country Singles.” *Billboard* 29 June 2002: 42; “Hot Country Singles.” *Billboard* 20 July 2002: 29.

<sup>205</sup> “Top Country Albums.” *Billboard* 10 Aug. 2002: 31; *RIAA*

<sup>206</sup> Rudder, Randy. “In Whose Name? Country Artists Speak Out on Gulf War II.” *Country Music Goes to War*. Eds. C.K. Wolfe and J.E. Akenson. Lexington: The University Press of Kentucky, 2005. 208-226.

a vengeance; Chicks' songs were promptly pulled from country radio playlists nationwide, while outraged fans destroyed their CD's in protest. An unapologetic Maines faced opposition from several country artists, but the animosity between Keith and Maines quickly spilled over into an all-out feud that played out as Operation Iraqi Freedom continued.<sup>207</sup> In fact, as the country stars squared off in the media, President Bush declared the end of major combat operations on the first of May.<sup>208</sup>

On May 21, 2003, the hostility between Keith and Maines came to a head during the Academy of Country Music Awards, when Maines performed in shirt emblazoned with the letters F.U.T.K., which most viewers interpreted as "an expletive aimed at Keith."<sup>209</sup> Yet, Keith had the last laugh; not only did he take home the award for "Entertainer of the Year" that same night, but his album, *Unleashed*, experienced a resurgence of popularity almost a full year after its initial release. It claimed the number 1 spot on the *Billboard* charts the following week on May 31, and was certified triple platinum the week after that.<sup>210</sup> In short, the controversies over *Courtesy* helped make it Keith's most well-known song and secured Keith's status as the voice of patriotism in country music after September 11.

Undoubtedly, the country music audience embraced the rhetorical vision offered by Toby Keith's *Courtesy of the Red, White and Blue*. The song and album's initial success, as well as their resurging popularity the following year are a clear indication that the vision had indeed chained out. Keith's controversial public image, cultivated by extensive media coverage, served only to bolster the raw and rowdy persona he established within the song itself. *Washington Post* writer David Segal observed, "the atmosphere of vengeance around Keith is one reason he seems

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<sup>207</sup> Fox, 2005.

<sup>208</sup> "Timeline: Iraq." *BBC News*. 2006. <[http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/world/middle\\_east/737483.stm](http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/world/middle_east/737483.stm)>

<sup>209</sup> Stark, UPFRONT.

<sup>210</sup> Stark; "Top Country Albums." *Billboard* 31 May 2003: 57; *RIAA*

perfectly in sync with the mood of the country, which has had vengeance on its mind lately.”<sup>211</sup> Keith himself agreed, declaring, “It’s the way people feel.”<sup>212</sup> He related a story of a reporter who criticized him for being “out of touch for writing this song.” In response, he reasoned, “when you write a song and it goes number 1 in seven weeks, I think you hit reality square on the head.”<sup>213</sup>

### ***Summary***

And to what reality is Keith referring? Keith’s controversial song advances a categorical definition of patriotism based on reverence for the American military, and champions the values of family, individual worth and rugged individualism. In addition, it promotes a portrait of America Incarnate, a nation both powerful and resilient, and a shared identity that Keith and listeners alike can claim. Country artists like the Dixie Chicks who have expressed opposition to the ongoing conflicts in Afghanistan and Iraq have quite simply not seen success. The Chicks quickly fell out of favor with the country music genre after their now infamous remarks about President Bush and the invasion of Iraq. Willie Nelson and Merle Haggard released songs considered “antiwar, or at least questioning [the war]” that received little or no airplay on country radio.<sup>214</sup> Hence, “the few country songs that have expressed reservations about Iraq have failed to click.”<sup>215</sup> John Hart, president of a marketing research company based in Nashville, explains “country music does enough research that they understand listeners are supportive of the military... and just don’t want to get involved with those songs.”<sup>216</sup>

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<sup>211</sup> Segal, C01.

<sup>212</sup> Baca, F07.

<sup>213</sup> Segal, C01.

<sup>214</sup> Gerome, John. “Country radio shuns anti-Iraq-war songs.” *Ottawa Citizen* 15 June 2004: D5.

<sup>215</sup> Gerome, D5.

<sup>216</sup> Gerome, D5.



Like country artists of generations past, Keith understands that, in times of war, the country audience wants to hear songs that promote its own point of view. “It goes back to what country music is all about – it appeals more to people who back the military.”<sup>217</sup> Country music gives voice to a segment of the population not represented in other musical genres. “The Toby Keith record set the bar... people are angry and these guys are responding to it.”<sup>218</sup> The overwhelming success of *Courtesy of the Red, White and Blue* demonstrates that Keith effectively tapped into what the country music audience feels and values.

### **Rhetorical Context**

Music as a rhetorical act is “imbedded in and inseparable from the web of contextual references that inform its production and consumption.”<sup>219</sup> Accordingly, consideration of any song as rhetoric must account for context, “because much of music’s rhetorical impact originates in sources located *outside* the delineated text, and the response to music is heavily influenced and framed by these contextual elements.”<sup>220</sup> Benoit’s notion of the “genesis of rhetorical action” offers substantial insight into the rhetorical context in which *Courtesy of the Red, White and Blue* was both produced and consumed. Featuring the discourse itself as an *act*, Benoit uses the remaining members of the pentad (*agent, agency, scene* and *purpose*) to identify the elements present within the situation in which the discourse originated. Thus, in my investigation of the rhetorical context of *Courtesy*, I explore how the song (as a rhetorical *act*) was influenced by each of the other components of the situation.

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<sup>217</sup> Ferman, Dave. “Country music waves the flag: Its like no other genre for rallying fans during wartime.” *Fort Worth Star-Telegram* 19 April 2003: 19.

<sup>218</sup> Ferman, 19.

<sup>219</sup> Matula, 219.

<sup>220</sup> Matula, 218, emphasis added.

### *Agent-Act*

Keith himself - or more precisely, Keith's public persona as cultivated in both his music and the publicity surrounding him - serves as the *agent* in this rhetorical context. We have already seen in the preceding chapter that the country music audience will interpret and accept the message of a song (*act*) based on what they know about the artist (*agent*) who produced it. In fact, Irvine and Kirkpatrick argue that the artist's image is "the prime determinant of the rhetorical capacity of the musical message."<sup>221</sup> Accordingly, in order to deliver a successful rhetorical message, a country music artist must first establish him/herself as an appropriate representative of the country audience, qualified to speak both for and to the rhetorical community. Because there is a specific correlation between the influence of a song and its artist, a significant *agent-act* relationship should emerge for any song with rhetorical impact. In both the lyrics of *Courtesy* and the resulting media coverage, Keith successfully identifies with his audience, cultivating a public image that is consistent with and palatable to the country music community.

The rhetorical vision Keith presents in *Courtesy* resonates with the country audience because Keith resonates with the country audience. He uses the inclusive "we" throughout the song and provides listeners with a common enemy against which they can unite, constituting and preserving the rhetorical community by rehearsing their beliefs and values. His lyrics aptly capture the sentiments of this rhetorical community following September 11, articulating for them what they lack the means to publicly express for themselves. Keith achieves consubstantiality with his audience by presenting himself as both a member and representative of the community, the embodiment of their communal identity. He takes a fierce pride in his membership in this group and invites the audience to do the same, to celebrate themselves, their

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<sup>221</sup> Irvine and Kirkpatrick, 274.

perspective and their very way of life. Essentially, he legitimizes their point of view, assuring them that they are right to feel as they do. Thus, Keith is able to present himself as more than qualified to speak to and for this rhetorical community.

Both within the lyrics and in the media coverage surrounding his feuds, he is rowdy and raw, unequivocal and wholly unapologetic. He is fully aware that “playing the role of country’s resident rouge... is great show business.”<sup>222</sup> His highly publicized feuds with both Jennings and Maines served only to bolster his image as “the poet laureate of righteous indignation.”<sup>223</sup> He told Rolling Stone, “It’s like sticking your head in the sand if you criticize my song. They said, ‘You should have more tact.’ There’s nothing tactful about war. There’s nothing tactful about flying a plane into a building.”<sup>224</sup> In striking back against those who denounce *Courtesy*, Keith sets up a clear dichotomy between those who “get” the significance of September 11 and those who do not. Accordingly, he implies that those who condemn the song are somehow disparaging the country audience at large, indicating that, “people who don’t get this song don’t get us.” Keith becomes a “righteous hero,” standing up for the beliefs and values of his listeners and refusing to compromise their identity to appease group outsiders.<sup>225</sup> Clearly, Keith’s public persona (*agent*) played a vital role in the creation and consumption of this rhetorical act.

### ***Purpose-Act***

Keith both wrote and released *Courtesy* for a few interrelated reasons. In several newspaper and magazine articles, Keith explains that he originally penned the song as a tribute to

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<sup>222</sup> Tyrangiel, 75.

<sup>223</sup> Tyrangiel, 75.

<sup>224</sup> Binelli, 44.

<sup>225</sup> Sanneh, Kelefa. “After love and frivolity, a penance of war songs.” *New York Times* 26 July 2005: E1.

his father, imagining how his veteran father would have felt about September 11.<sup>226</sup> He also claims that he wanted to have a song to play on imminent U.S.O. tours and boost the morale of the troops.<sup>227</sup> After receiving encouragement from high-ranking military officials, Keith decided to record the single on his upcoming album. In Keith's words, the Marine Corp Commandant told him, "You have to release it. You can serve your country in other ways besides suiting up in combat."<sup>228</sup> Thus, it became his duty as an artist to release it. He told CNN's Wolf Blitzer, "This is my way of serving my country."<sup>229</sup> Thus, he is compelled to act by this transcendent *purpose*, much like the soldiers he so enthusiastically reveres.

While Keith admits that he anticipated this song would stir up controversy, he insists that he ultimately released the tune because it was a message that the American public wanted and needed to hear.<sup>230</sup> He told Larry King, "I knew it wasn't written for everybody, but I knew that there was a certain amount of people it was written for."<sup>231</sup> Again, Keith implies that he recorded this song out of a sense of obligation, a need to give voice to this segment of the population, to articulate their emotions and to celebrate their values. The creation and dissemination of this song as a rhetorical act are clearly a consequence of the *purposes* that drove Keith.

### ***Agency-Act***

Song, specifically the genre of country music, is the means (*agency*) through which Keith conducts this rhetorical act. As discussed in the preceding chapter, the rhetorical potential of music is often overlooked because the format of a song is not rhetoric's "normal discursive

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<sup>226</sup> See: "Singer says ABC's Jennings gave him the boot." *CNN.com*. 13 June 2002. <<http://archives.cnn.com/2002/SHOWBIZ/Music/06/13/tobykeith.abc>>; Binelli; Mansfield, 13 June 2002; Baca

<sup>227</sup> See: "Courtesy of...Blue"; "Singer says...boot"; Binelli; Tyrangiel

<sup>228</sup> "Courtesy of...Blue"

<sup>229</sup> "Singer says...boot"

<sup>230</sup> See: Binelli; "Singer says...boot"; "Courtesy of...Blue"; Mansfield, 13 June 2002.

<sup>231</sup> *Larry King Live*

state.”<sup>232</sup> Because audience members are not expecting to be persuaded, they become “ready recipients of the rhetorical statement without being aware of its complete implications.”<sup>233</sup> Thus, because many consumers of *Courtesy* are not approaching the song as a piece of rhetoric, they are less likely to be critical consumers, neglecting to scrutinize the message for its persuasive capabilities. Any message conveyed via a musical channel has the potential to be especially influential on the unwary listener, and *Courtesy* is no exception.

In addition, the fact that Keith delivered the message of *Courtesy* by way of country music (as opposed to any other genre of music) is particularly noteworthy. We have already seen in the preceding chapter that, “country music is a derivative of the people to whom it belongs.”<sup>234</sup> Country music is meant to be a reflection of its audience, their attitudes and values, their way of life. “The desire to hear songs about themselves is a key to understanding the country audience.”<sup>235</sup> Consequently, Keith’s *agency* of choice unmistakably indicates that he had a specific audience in mind for the receipt of this message (*act*), i.e. the country music audience.

### ***Scene-Act***

The *scene* in which *Courtesy of the Red, White and Blue* was produced and consumed is multifaceted. The most immediate and apparent set of circumstances that gave birth to this song is the terrorist attacks of September 11. Various journalists report that Keith wrote the song in less than an hour just days after September 11, 2001, *before* the United States took any military action in Afghanistan or Iraq.<sup>236</sup> Yet, when the single hit the airwaves and began its climb up the Billboard charts in late May of 2002, the United States and her allies had already toppled the

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<sup>232</sup> Irvine and Kirkpatrick, 273.

<sup>233</sup> Irvine and Kirkpatrick, 273.

<sup>234</sup> Gritzner, 860.

<sup>235</sup> Rogers, 227.

<sup>236</sup> “Singer says...boot”; “Courtesy of...Blue”; Segal; Tyrangiel; Binelli; Baca

Taliban-run Afghan government, while the hunt for al-Qaeda operatives, especially Osama bin Laden, continued.<sup>237</sup> Thus, the *scene* in which the song was written (namely, the immediate aftermath of September 11) differs from the *scene* in which it was consumed (namely, as U.S. military operations continued in Afghanistan and expanded into Iraq).

When writing this song, Keith discussed military action that had not yet taken place as if it had already occurred. In so doing, Keith advances an argument for such action, taking what Aristotle designated as a “deliberative” stance. In contrast to epideictic discourse, which seeks to establish “what is,” deliberative discourse attempts to establish “what will or should be.”<sup>238</sup> A deliberative rhetor argues in favor of a particular policy or course of action. Epideictic is often characterized as “preparatory to” deliberative discourse, meaning that a rhetor often proposes a policy or course of action only after common values have been reinforced.<sup>239</sup> Yet, Keith begins as a deliberative rhetor, arguing for military action before it takes place, and comes to be understood as an epideictic rhetor, supporting military action as it occurs.

The retribution Keith describes in the lyrics had *not* yet been realized at the time he wrote the song, although his prophetic description came to be understood (retroactively) as an endorsement of the subsequent military action in Afghanistan and later, Iraq.<sup>240</sup> The *Washington Post* characterized *Courtesy* as “a swaggering celebration of the U.S. bombing of the Taliban in Afghanistan.”<sup>241</sup> CBS news called *Courtesy* “a battle cry [of the] U.S. armed services in Iraq,” relaying how bombs and tanks in Iraq were branded with the song’s lyrics. Clearly, the production of *Courtesy* as a rhetorical act is intimately tied to the specific situation (*scene*)

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<sup>237</sup> “Timeline: Afghanistan.” *BBC News*. 2006. <[http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/world/south\\_asia/1162108.stm](http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/world/south_asia/1162108.stm)>

<sup>238</sup> Sullivan, 1991, 230-231.

<sup>239</sup> Oravec, 167.

<sup>240</sup> Willman; Segal; “Courtesy of... Blue”

<sup>241</sup> Segal, C01

created by September 11. Likewise, the *scene* in which this song was consumed had an enormous impact on the rhetorical success of its message.

Yet, in addition to this more immediate setting of September 11 and its resultant military campaigns, *Courtesy* as a rhetorical act occurred within a larger rhetorical situation, that of the tradition of country music in times of war. In recording and releasing *Courtesy*, Keith followed in the footsteps of past country artists who have written patriotic songs as the United States went to war.<sup>242</sup> Music historian Ronnie Pugh explains that, as a war gets underway, country songs “tend to be on the jingoistic side – the enemy is dreadful, America is great – but... you almost have to exaggerate, you have to build it up or you wouldn’t get the support of the population that you need to fight a war, to win a war...”<sup>243</sup> For example, early World War II-era hits like Denver Darling’s *We’re Gonna have to Slap the Dirty Little Jap* and *Cowards over Pearl Harbor* express hostility and promise retribution to those who bombed Pearl Harbor. *Courtesy* expresses a similar sentiment towards the perpetrators of September 11, demonstrating that Keith’s rhetorical act originates not merely in the immediate circumstances, but also within a larger rhetorical tradition of war-era country music. Since the Civil War, when the United States is at war, country artists write and release patriotic songs. The impact of *scene* on this rhetorical act is unmistakably significant.

### ***Summary***

In order to fully determine the rhetorical impact of *Courtesy of the Red, White and Blue*, the song must be considered as a rhetorical *act* produced and consumed within a particular context. That context comprises all the elements of the situation in which the discourse was both

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<sup>242</sup> *CMT Greatest Patriotic Songs*; Wolfe, C.K. and J.E. Akenson. *Country Music Goes to War*. Lexington: The University Press Of Kentucky, 2005.

<sup>243</sup> *CMT Greatest Patriotic Songs*

conceived and received, including *agent*, *purpose*, *agency*, and *scene*. Keith's public image (*agent*) played a crucial role in both the creation and consumption of this rhetorical act, as he successfully presented himself as a representative of the country music audience, the personification of their collective identity, qualified to speak to and for this rhetorical community. Keith identified a handful of *purposes* that compelled him to write and release the song, not the least of which was a sense to duty to encourage the troops and give voice to the sentiments of the country audience. By utilizing the channel (*agency*) of country music to convey his message, Keith indicates that this song was specifically intended for the country audience, since country music is meant to be a reflection of its listeners. Finally, this song is not only a product of the circumstances surrounding September 11, but also derivative of the tradition of country music in times of war, demonstrating that the creation and receipt of this song as a rhetorical act is indeed impacted by *scene*.

With my analysis of *Courtesy of the Red, White and Blue* complete, I now turn my attention to *American Soldier* in the upcoming chapter.



## CHAPTER 4. ANALYSIS OF *AMERICAN SOLDIER*.

Keith followed the sweeping success of *Courtesy of the Red, White and Blue* with *American Soldier*, which he included on his next album, *Shock 'N Y'All*, in late November 2003. Lacking the spark of controversy but undoubtedly benefiting from the momentum of the preceding album, *American Soldier* held the top spot on the *Billboard* country chart for four weeks in early 2004 and was named *Billboard's* number 6 country single of the year. The album *Shock 'N Y'All* sold an incredible three million copies in less than two months and was named *Billboard's* number 1 country album of 2004.

In light of the enormous rhetorical impact of *American Soldier*, this chapter first examines the song's lyrics as instances of epideictic rhetoric in order to illuminate the **rhetorical vision** presented by Keith. In addition, this chapter explores both media coverage and the *Billboard* charts to assess how well this vision chained out amongst its intended audience (**rhetorical community**). Finally, this chapter investigates the **rhetorical context** in which this song was written and consumed using Benoit's perspective on the "genesis of rhetorical action."

### **Rhetorical Vision**

*American Soldier* is a contemplative tune, muted and virtually uncontroversial, but every bit as determinedly patriotic as its infamous predecessor. This gentle ballad enabled Keith to further cultivate themes championed in *Courtesy* - namely patriotism, family, rugged individualism and individual worth - while introducing a more pronounced espousal of the value of work. Here, Keith takes a soldier's perspective, presenting him from the outset as a family man: "I'm just tryin' to be a father, raise a daughter and a son/ Be a lover to their mother,

everthin' to everyone."<sup>244</sup> He is quick to link family to work, claiming that, "providing for our future's my responsibility," and in so doing, portrays the soldier as an everyman who shoulders the same burdens as any other father. Like any working man, he is simply doing his best to raise a family and pay his bills.

In fact, Keith does not explicitly reveal that the narrator is a soldier until the chorus. He sings, "Up and at 'em bright and early, I'm all business in my suit/ Yeah I'm dressed up for success, from my head down to my boots." The somewhat ambiguous reference to a "suit" suggests the narrator is off to work, but this could just as easily refer to a business suit as a mechanic's uniform. Yet, when Keith indicates that he is wearing "boots," the fleeting impression of any kind of worker is promptly replaced with the image of a blue-collar worker. This likeness is bolstered as Keith explains, "I just work straight through the holidays and sometimes all night long." Clearly, our narrator does not hold a regular nine-to-five job. Keith does include two phrases that hint at the narrator's true profession, first asserting, "Yeah, I'm real good under pressure, *being all that I can be.*"<sup>245</sup> He later adds, "I'm *true down to the core.*"<sup>246</sup> These allusions to Army and Marine slogans, respectively, suggest that the narrator has all the qualities required to be a soldier without explicitly stating that he is.

In addition to the values of both work and family, Keith revives the theme of individual worth or character, first offered in *Courtesy*, in his depiction of this soldier. The narrator's work ethic is unquestionably admirable; he works nights and holidays without complaint, and is fully aware that he "can't call in sick on Mondays." He insists, "I will always do my duty," indicating that he puts his responsibilities before personal need or concern. He characterizes himself as "solid," "steady" and "true," even commenting that he is "real good under pressure," revealing

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<sup>244</sup> Song lyrics obtained from Keith's official website: <<http://tobykeith.musiccitynetworks.com>>.

<sup>245</sup> Emphasis added

<sup>246</sup> Emphasis added

that his uncompromising reliability is a point of pride. Yet, he is without arrogance, insisting, “I don’t do it for the money... I don’t do it for the glory.” Keith implies that this man would do whatever job was asked of him with the same unshakable commitment and determination.

At the same time, the soldier recognizes both the gravity and uniqueness of his profession and “stand[s] ready” for whatever challenges lay ahead, including his own endangerment. He vows, “I will always do my duty, no matter what the price/ I’ve counted up the cost, I know the sacrifice.” He unflinchingly accepts his profession’s demands for self-sacrifice, courageously choosing honor over his own will or security. While he admits, “I don’t want to die for you,” he insists, “if dyin’s asked of me/ I’ll bear that cross with honor, ‘cause freedom don’t come free.” He faces the possibility of death with courage and conviction, valuing freedom above his own life. This brief reference to the Christian ethic of “bearing a cross” lends further weight to the depth of the soldier’s sacrifice: like Christ, he shoulders the responsibility for many, disregarding the worth of his own life in order to provide deliverance for others. This soldier is a man of impeccable character, steadfast and unpretentious, who puts the lives of others ahead of his own.

Keith also celebrates rugged individualism in his portrait of this soldier. In *Courtesy*, Keith depicts a tough and defiant America incarnate pushing through the pain of injury, refusing to bow to adversity and brawling with the enemy. He contrasts that raw vitality with this soldier’s simple and straightforward resolve, which is more analogous to the strength Keith credits to his father in the earlier tune. In addition to strength of body, this soldier displays strength of mind, stable and selfless in the face of danger: “I’m real good under pressure.” Rather than “put[ting] a boot in the ass,” this soldier demonstrates his strength by “stand[ing] ready, when the wolf prowls at the door.” His power is in his dependability, his acceptance of responsibility without complaint. His is the quiet strength of determination, the courage of

conviction that, “I will always do what’s right,” whether that means providing for his family or defending his country.

Unlike *Courtesy*, this song consistently features a single *agent*, namely the narrator, allowing Keith to present a more intimate and increasingly complex rhetorical vision. He offers an *agent-act* perspective throughout the song, rendering *act(s)* as derivative of the nature of the *agent*. Like the America incarnate of *Courtesy*, the narrator’s actions are the consequence of who (and what) he is, who (and what) he finds himself to be. The actions of this single agent result from his binary nature: from his character as an individual (who he is) and his role as a soldier (what he is). This duality is skillfully interwoven throughout the song, making it impossible to discern where the obligations of the individual man end and the duties of the soldier begin. Each role feeds into the other: the admirable character of the man is what compels him to be a soldier and vice versa. By accepting both the role of “family man” and the role of “soldier,” our narrator’s actions are no longer his own; compelled to play these roles, he must then graciously undertake the inherent responsibilities of each.

If the narrator’s actions are merely the consequence of who and what he is (*agent-act*), then what compels him to accept both roles with their corresponding obligations? Similar to the America incarnate of *Courtesy*, our narrator is compelled to be who he is (*agent*), and therefore act as he does (*act*), by an overarching *purpose*; thus, here, as with much of *Courtesy*, *purpose* drives both *agent* and *act* (*purpose-agent-act*). Keith opens the song with the simple image of a man, in this case, the narrator or “I” (*agent*), dutifully heading off to work (*act*) on any given day (*scene*). Yet, Keith is careful to note that this man works neither for money or glory, but rather for the simple honor of providing for his family (*purpose*).

When Keith later reveals that the narrator is a soldier, this seemingly straightforward *purpose* takes on an aggregate quality: this man is providing for the future of all Americans, because we are, by extension, all part of his family. The narrator pledges, “I’m out here on the front lines, sleep in peace tonight,” suggesting that Americans have security because he and other soldiers are willing to provide it by endangering themselves. More than his own peril, he is concerned “when liberty’s in jeopardy.” He reminds us that “freedom don’t come free,” indicating that he recognizes the cost of the American way of life and he is willing to pay it, “no matter what the price.” Thus, Keith provides this soldier with a *purpose* that transcends his particular circumstances: to secure liberty for all Americans. He “provid[es] for our future” by preserving our freedom.

Yet, Keith offers an apparent contradiction of motivation that threatens to mute this transcendent *purpose*. On the one hand, the narrator describes his occupation as “just” another job, simply a means to put food on the table for his family: “I’m just tryin’ to be a father, raise a daughter and a son/ Be a lover to their mother, everythin’ to everyone.” In fact, when he explains he works neither for “money” nor “glory,” he says, “I just do it anyway.” He qualifies his profession with the word “just,” suggesting that there is nothing special about what he is doing or why he does it. The narrator is “just” another working man with the same pressures and problems as anyone else; he is no different than any other husband and father.

However, he follows that description with a pledge that elevates his profession well beyond the ranks of an average job with everyday demands: “I will always do my duty no matter what the price/ I’ve counted up the cost, I know the sacrifice/ ...if dyin’s asked of me/ I’ll bear that cross with honor...” Many working men earn a paycheck without putting their life on line, so clearly a soldier is motivated by more than the need to make a living. Can this man serve both

*purposes* simultaneously, the ordinary ambition to provide for a family and the extraordinary pursuit of liberty? Keith reconciles these seemingly divergent purposes by implying that they are intertwined, two sides of the same coin, much like the double nature of the *agent* himself. In protecting and providing for his family, the soldier safeguards a nation; in defending the nation, he protects and provides for his family. Rather than place the purposes at odds, Keith renders them inseparable, enabling the soldier to serve both simultaneously.

What ultimately binds the dualistic nature of the agent, thereby integrating his competing purposes, is patriotism. In *Courtesy*, Keith defines patriotism in terms of reverence for the American military; *American Soldier* extends this definition by further detailing what it means to be a soldier and why soldiers are worthy of our gratitude. The narrator is both everyman and soldier, a typical American and a hero, worthy of admiration, yet still one of us. By giving us this sort of hero, Keith places patriotism firmly within our reach, making it available to all who will join this soldier, either literally or symbolically. While the soldier is the ultimate patriot, laying down his life for his country, Keith implies that we too can be patriots by simply giving this man our respect. Keith champions the values of work, family, rugged individualism and individual worth by presenting them as admirable qualities of an average soldier and, by implication, desirable characteristics of the average American.

Like *Courtesy of the Red, White and Blue* before it, *American Soldier* is foremost an anthem of patriotism, unapologetically celebrating the American way of life and those who secure it for us. Underlying both songs is Keith's presumption that patriotism is an inherent American virtue. Though less severe in *American Soldier*, Keith draws the same distinction as he does in *Courtesy*, suggesting those lacking his brand of patriotism are simply un-American. In the chorus, the narrator says, "I'm an American soldier, an American/ Beside my brothers and

my sisters, I will proudly take a stand.” He is an American twice, a soldier once. He qualifies the honor of being a soldier with the distinction of being an American. It is not simply an honor to serve; it is an honor to serve America. To serve the United States is to serve liberty, and Keith makes it quite clear that there is no price too high for freedom. Additionally, Keith offers a distinctly democratic picture of men and women standing side by side to defend the nation. He implies that those who are not soldiers can “take a stand” by symbolically supporting those who do so literally. This sort of solidarity epitomizes Keith’s brand of patriotism, a non-elitist sentiment common to all Americans and secured by military sacrifice.

It is noteworthy that *American Soldier* makes no specific reference to any particular war or conflict (*scene*), unlike *Courtesy*, which deals explicitly with September 11 and its aftermath. The soldier narrating this song could be any American soldier at any time in American history, giving the song a timeless and transcendent appeal that *Courtesy* cannot claim. Yet, because it was released during the post-September 11 wars in Afghanistan and Iraq, Keith implies that soldiers serving in these conflicts are no different and no less honorable than their historical counterparts. Hence, he indicates that Americans should revere their soldiers, regardless of the specific circumstances under which they serve. Anything less would be unpatriotic and wholly un-American.

Conversely, by not discussing any specific conflict, Keith avoids making an endorsement of the very war that prompted the song in the first place – i.e. the war in Iraq. In so doing, he draws a distinction between the war and those who are fighting it. Focusing on the soldier instead of the war renders this song somewhat apolitical and virtually context-free: it can be embraced by those who support this particular war and by those who do not, it does not force the audience to choose. Keith also establishes a disconnect between the war and the soldiers who fight

it by making *act* derivative of *purpose*. In positioning action as a consequence of a *purpose* that transcends the soldier himself, Keith effectively relieves the soldiers of the responsibility for the war they fight. Like the America incarnate of *Courtesy*, this soldier has no choice but to fight: he is compelled to fight (*act*) by the very *purpose* that compels him to serve. By distinguishing between the war and the soldier, Keith lifts the burden of justification for the war from the shoulders of the soldiers.

Unlike *Courtesy*, which provided audiences with a vaguely defined but still context-bound enemy, *American Soldier*'s foe is less precise. The enemy in *Courtesy* is unequivocally understood to be the perpetrators of the September 11 attacks, but *American Soldier* makes no such claim. Keith briefly refers to the "wolf growl[ing] at the door," but makes no other explicit references to an enemy within this song. The narrator does assure us, "When liberty's in jeopardy, I will always do what's right," implying that any threat to liberty is an adversary. Because the soldier is not bound by a specific conflict, neither is the enemy he faces. Hence, Keith circumvents the question of whether or not Iraq is an enemy by pitting this soldier against no enemy in particular.

On the other hand, by separating this soldier from a specific adversary, Keith once again emphasizes continuity between those fighting in the current conflict and any who have come before him. This soldier could be facing any enemy of liberty. A soldier fighting in a popular war is no different from a soldier fighting in an unpopular war. Keith indicates that, regardless of the enemy they fight, all soldiers fight for freedom, and are therefore worthy of our respect. By isolating this soldier from any particular conflict and any particular enemy, Keith effectively releases this song from the very context in which it was produced. Keith neither endorses nor criticizes the war in Iraq; instead, he draws our attention from the conflict itself to those who



fight it. He implies that ultimately, the conflict itself is not what matters; what matters are those individuals who sacrifice themselves in the name of freedom.

### ***Summary***

In *American Soldier*, Keith advances a rhetorical vision dominated by a single soldier, who is both everyman and hero, accepting the extraordinary responsibilities of his profession without complaint. His steadfastness is the mark of quiet strength, courage in the face of danger and conviction of the honor of self-sacrifice in the name of liberty. Keith furnishes this soldier with a dualistic purpose that transcends his particular circumstances, that of safeguarding both his family and his nation to ensure a future of freedom. This vision provides listeners with both a portrait of patriotism to emulate and a reminder of why soldiers are worthy of our gratitude. By depicting this soldier as “one of us,” Keith enables listeners to be patriotic simply by offering this man our appreciation and respect. Lastly, Keith divorces this soldier from any particular enemy and context, effectively relieving the soldier of the responsibility of the war he fights, and relieving himself from the need to comment on the legitimacy of the war in Iraq.

### **Rhetorical Community**

As discussed in the previous chapter, the crux of symbolic convergence is confirmation that a rhetorical vision has caught on and chained out amongst audience members. We have already seen that the vision offered by Keith in *Courtesy of the Red, White and Blue* did indeed chain out, spurred on by controversy and extensive media coverage. The commercial success of both the album *Unleashed* and the single *Courtesy* are a testament to the proliferation of the rhetorical vision cultivated by Keith in his first patriotic tune. *American Soldier* and its album *Shock ‘N Y’All* were also enjoyed enormous commercial success.

*Shock 'N Y'All* debuted on the *Billboard* country album charts at number 1 in November of 2003, and was certified multi-platinum within three weeks.<sup>247</sup> Moreover, it only took one more month for the album to sell an additional million copies.<sup>248</sup> *Shock 'N Y'All* held the number 1 spot on the *Billboard* country charts for thirteen weeks, and remained in the top 10 until October of 2004, almost a full year after its release.<sup>249</sup> In fact, *Shock 'N Y'All* sold a remarkable quarter of a million *more* albums in its first week than *Unleashed*.<sup>250</sup> *Billboard* named *Shock 'N Y'All* the number 1 country album of 2004 and the number 7 most successful album of *all* musical genres that year.<sup>251</sup>

On November 22, 2003, the day *Shock 'N Y'All* was released, *American Soldier* debuted on the *Billboard* country singles chart at number 53.<sup>252</sup> It broke into the top 10 by mid-January after just nine weeks on the chart – a particularly notable feat, considering it was not the first single to be released from the album.<sup>253</sup> *American Soldier* took the top spot on the chart in late February 2004, and spent four weeks at number 1.<sup>254</sup> It claimed a place in the top ten for four months and spent almost six months on the chart altogether before it fell out of the top ten.<sup>255</sup> *Billboard* ranked *American Soldier* as the number 6 country single of 2004 and even awarded it a place (number 90) on the chart for top singles of 2004 overall (of *all* musical genres).<sup>256</sup> In addition, Keith was named *Billboard's* number 1 country artist of 2004 and its number 3 musical artist overall.<sup>257</sup>

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<sup>247</sup> “Top Country Albums.” *Billboard* 22 Nov. 2003: 38; *RIAA*

<sup>248</sup> *RIAA*

<sup>249</sup> “No Shock...Recaps,” 14; “Top Country Albums.” *Billboard* 9 Oct. 2004: 32.

<sup>250</sup> “Billboard Bulletin.” *Billboard* 13 Nov. 2003: 1.

<sup>251</sup> “Top Country Albums.” *Billboard* 25 Dec. 2004: 30; “Year in Music and Touring.” *Billboard* 25 Dec. 2004: 19.

<sup>252</sup> “Hot Country Singles.” *Billboard* 22 Nov. 2003: 40.

<sup>253</sup> “Hot Country Singles.” *Billboard* 17 Jan. 2003: 29.

<sup>254</sup> “No Shock... Recaps;” “Hot Country Singles.” *Billboard* 21 Feb. 2004: 36.

<sup>255</sup> “Hot Country Singles.” *Billboard* 1 May 2004: 40.

<sup>256</sup> “Hot Country Singles.” *Billboard* 25 Dec. 2004: 30; “Hot Singles.” *Billboard* 25 Dec. 2004: 23.

<sup>257</sup> “Top Country Artists.” *Billboard* 25 Dec. 2004: 28; “Year in...Touring.”

The commercial popularity of *American Soldier* confirms that this was song was not only embraced by the country audience, but also found its way into the ears and hands of Americans outside the country music community. The reason for this is simple: the song has wider appeal because it does not take a position on the war in Iraq. *American Soldier* has all of the patriotic sentiment and none of the controversy of *Courtesy*, and, consequently, it was able to transcend the country genre in a way that *Courtesy* could not. Additionally, the military comprises men and women from all walks of life, not only those who constitute the country music audience.<sup>258</sup> And, as we shall see, while the song has a specific meaning to those who serve or whose loved ones serve, anyone who supports our troops can (and often did) enjoy this song.

As we have already seen in the preceding chapter, *Courtesy of the Red, White and Blue* ignited controversy and, as a result, received an enormous amount of media attention. Keith himself occupied a substantial proportion of the media's interest, becoming as central to the story as the song itself. By contrast, the media coverage of *American Soldier* takes on an entirely new tone and perspective. With little or no controversy surrounding it, this song made headlines in 2004 because of its impact on individual lives, particularly those connected to the military. Thus, tales of Keith brawling with Jennings and the Dixie Chicks over controversial lyrical content were replaced with stories of the song's meaning to the troops, and most notably, heart-wrenching accounts of *American Soldier* being played at the funerals of fallen soldiers. "The ballad has become the unofficial anthem for those called to duty in Iraq and Afghanistan, as well as their families left at home."<sup>259</sup>

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<sup>258</sup> Kane, Tim. "Who bears the burden? Demographic characteristics of U.S. military recruits before and after 9/11." *The Heritage Foundation* 7 Nov. 2005. <<http://www.heritage.org/Research/NationalSecurity/cda05-08.cfm>> ; "Executive Summary." *Department of Defense (DoD)* 2002. <<http://www.dod.mil/prhome/proprep2002/summary/summary.htm>>

<sup>259</sup> Boone, Jerry F. "Song lyrics give picture of silent hero." *The Oregonian* 11 Aug. 2004: B01.

Twenty year-old Army Spc. Allen “A.J.” Vandayburg was buried in Mansfield, Ohio, after “his Bradley Fighting Vehicle was struck by a rocket-propelled grenade in Barez, Iraq” on April 9, 2004.<sup>260</sup> The newspaper notes, “country music filled the funeral home as Toby Keith’s *American Soldier*, a favorite of Vandayburg’s, was played in his memory.”<sup>261</sup> Army Sgt. Christopher Ramirez, age 34, of Edinburg, Texas served in the military for 14 years before being killed in an explosion in Al-Anbar Province, Iraq during his third tour there in April 2004.<sup>262</sup> A veteran of both Desert Storm and Kosovo, Ramirez loved country music, and his niece told the press “*American Soldier*. He loved that song.”<sup>263</sup> At the August 11, 2004 memorial service for Spc. Kenny Leisten, “the words to *American Soldier* spilled over the mourners Monday as country vocalist Toby Keith’s song tried to explain what it means to be in uniform today.”<sup>264</sup> The 20 year-old native of Cornelius, Oregon was killed an explosion in Iraq in late July, and the reporter chronicling his funeral interspersed the story with the lyrics of the song that both opened the service and acted as its central theme.<sup>265</sup> Stories such as these were found in newspapers around the country, from early 2004, when the song first became popular, and continuing even into March of 2006.<sup>266</sup>

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<sup>260</sup> Ludlow, Randy. “A family’s pain: Mansfield salutes fallen soldier.” *Columbus Dispatch* 18 April 2004: 01B.

<sup>261</sup> Ludlow, 01B

<sup>262</sup> Bogan, Jesse. “Edinburg buries veteran of Iraq.” *San Antonio Express-News* 23 April 2004: 9B.

<sup>263</sup> Bogan, 9B.

<sup>264</sup> Boone, B01.

<sup>265</sup> Boone, B01.

<sup>266</sup> Further examples include: Park, Sarah. “W.Va. Soldier who cheated death once is laid to rest.” *The Washington Post* 17 Aug. 2004: B05. (Sgt. Bobby Beasley, 36, of Inwood, West Virginia was killed in an explosion in Ghazikel, Afghanistan and was laid to rest as *American Soldier* played.) Kruse, Michael. “Organizing a tribute for an American soldier.” *Hernando Times* 30 July 2005: 1. (Staff Sgt. Michael Schafer, 25, of Spring Hill, Florida was killed while fighting in Afghanistan, and his widow requested that his favorite song, *American Soldier*, be played at his funeral.) Scott, Michael. “Allen knew something worth dying for’: Willowick soldier celebrated, mourned.” *Plain Dealer (Cleveland)* 4 Dec. 2004: B5. (Army Spc. Allen Knop, 22, of Willowick, Ohio was killed during his second tour in Iraq, and his memorial service included “the Toby Keith song, *American Soldier* as accompaniment to a video presentation of family photos.”) Sultan, Aisha. “Lemay Soldier receives an emotional farewell.” *St. Louis Dispatch* 26 Mar. 2006: C1. (Army Sgt. Amanda Pinson, 21, of Lemay, Missouri was killed by a mortar shell near Tikrit, Iraq, and her funeral services included the song, *American Soldier*.)

The soldiers themselves sought to express what this song meant to them and their fallen comrades. Army Spc. David Mahlenbrock, a 20-year-old native of Maple Shade, New Jersey specifically requested that *American Soldier* be played at his funeral. His wishes were filled in December of 2004 when he was buried at Arlington Cemetery after being killed in Kirkuk, Iraq.<sup>267</sup> While stationed north of Baghdad on Kirkuk Air Base, Army Pfc. Freddy Torrey wrote his mother a letter that she then shared with the *Tampa Tribune*. Using the words of Keith's song to express his sentiment, he writes, "I am a soldier. But above all, I am an American who will fight for my country and forever make a stand. From the song: 'When liberty's in jeopardy, I will always do what's right.'"<sup>268</sup> He adds, "The only thing I ask is, when you hear the songs *Proud to be an American* or *American Soldier*, just take off your hats and remember those who have fallen."<sup>269</sup> These media accounts reveal the powerful impact Keith's rhetorical vision in *American Soldier* had on soldiers and their families.

### ***Summary***

*American Soldier* enabled Keith to further cultivate and promote the definition of patriotism he first offered in *Courtesy*, while continuing to rehearse values such as work, family, rugged individualism and individual worth. Through his portrait of a soldier, Keith was able to both honor those individuals that comprise our military and encourage the rest of us to do the same. He makes no reference to any specific war or enemy, suggesting that all soldiers, past and present, are equally worthy of our gratitude, while adroitly avoiding comment on the conflict in Iraq. Consequently, Keith renders the song virtually apolitical, focusing attention not on the war itself, but rather on those who fight it. In so doing, Keith continues a tradition in country music,

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<sup>267</sup> Smith, Leef. "Fallen Soldier leaves behind newborn girl." *The Washington Post* 16 Dec. 2004: B02.

<sup>268</sup> Torrey, Freddy. "Soldier hopes we remember." *Tampa Tribune* 23 April 2004: PASCO, 2.

<sup>269</sup> Torrey, 2.

since “typically, the attitude of the hillbilly and his music toward war is a personal one, more concerned with effects than its causes.”<sup>270</sup> Country songs may originate with a particular conflict, but “...the emotions they express apply to all wars everywhere.”<sup>271</sup> The commercial success of *American Soldier*, coupled with the impact the song had on the troops, demonstrates that, as with *Courtesy*, Keith was able to tap into the emotions and values of his audience.

### **Rhetorical Context**

As discussed in the previous chapter, music as a rhetorical *act* must be considered as a component of a larger context that shapes both its creation and consumption. According to Benoit, that context comprises of the other four members of the pentad (*agent, agency, scene* and *purpose*) and accounts for how each of these elements impacts the production and reception of the song. Therefore, as with my investigation of *Courtesy of the Red, White and Blue* in the preceding chapter, I explore the rhetorical context of *American Soldier* to determine how the song (as a rhetorical *act*) was influenced by each of the other components of the situation.

#### ***Agent-Act***

As with *Courtesy*, Keith’s public image (*agent*) cultivated both within the song and in the resultant media coverage, played a vital role in the consumption of *American Soldier* (*act*). “Keith’s patriotism is as much a part of his image as his three-day stubble.”<sup>272</sup> Indeed, Keith solidifies his persona as the most patriotic of patriots, the closest thing to being a soldier without actually wearing the uniform. Keith elects to tell this soldier’s story in the first person, and in so doing appropriates the role of soldier for himself. This enables him to provide a more intimate glimpse into the lives of our soldiers, and allows us to identify more closely with their

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<sup>270</sup> Horstman, Dorothy. *Sing Your Heart Out, Country Boy*. Nashville: Country Music Foundation, Inc., 1986, 255.

<sup>271</sup> Horstman, 257.

<sup>272</sup> Yarborough, Chuck. “Swaggering country star is total package.” *Plain Dealer (Cleveland)* 18 Sept. 2004: E6.

circumstances. However, this also positions Keith as the mouthpiece of the troops, suggesting that he is in some way qualified to speak for them, to share their story.

Keith's proximity to the troops seems to legitimize his position as their unofficial spokesperson. He has played over sixty U.S.O. dates since September 11, 2001, and enjoys mingling with the soldiers before and after the show.<sup>273</sup> Keith explains, "I convoy with them. When we go to Baghdad, we don't just land in the green zone and sing....There ain't no use in me going over there and just standing in Baghdad and telling the soldiers to come to me. I go to them."<sup>274</sup> He adds, "I don't want to just play to the behind-the-scenes guys. I want to look in the eyes and shake the hands of the guys going on patrol every night."<sup>275</sup>

Keith told Larry King, "I'm proud of the military bond I've enjoyed over the last few years."<sup>276</sup> In fact, he admits, "I never feel more important than when I'm standing in front of 700 or 800 soldiers and they've got the 40 or 50 pounds of gear on and they've been on a 12 mile hump and they come in and all they want to do is come over and get their digital camera out and take a picture of me."<sup>277</sup> His unmistakable respect for the troops, coupled with his willingness to mingle with them on their turf, has won him considerable support amongst the American military. "The troops couldn't ask for a bigger supporter, one who puts his body where his big old mouth is."<sup>278</sup> Keith can act as a spokesperson for the individual soldier because he does more than pay homage to them in song – he does his best to share and understand their experience.

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<sup>273</sup> Masley, Ed. "Troop Support: Toby Keith might not be for the war, but he's behind our soldiers." *Pittsburgh Post-Gazette* 30 June 2005: W-16; Reed, Bob. "The Good Soldier: Toby Keith glad to be on the front lines entertaining our troops." *Chicago Sun-Times* 17 June 2005: 16.

<sup>274</sup> Masley, W-16.

<sup>275</sup> Masley, W-16.

<sup>276</sup> *Larry King Live*

<sup>277</sup> Masley, W-16.

<sup>278</sup> Masley, W-16.

### ***Purpose-Act***

Keith is unequivocal as to why he wrote and released *American Soldier*, carefully drawing a distinction between supporting the troops and endorsing the war they fight. Keith explains to Larry King that he wrote the song “for all the times that I get to meet the troops on these USO tours... this is my support for the American fighting men and women.”<sup>279</sup> When King asked him whether he supported the decision to take military action in Iraq, Keith replied, “I’ve never had an opinion on it. I don’t think that I’m supposed to have an opinion... I’m an American and I have to support our troops. At some point the anti-war stuff in America gets to looking to our troops like anti-American stuff.” And what should you do if you “honestly oppose” the war? Keith says he is “all for” expressing opposition *prior* to the war effort, but he maintains, “once the war starts, I think everybody needs to support – somebody’s got a mother, daughter, brother, sister, son, whatever over there laying it on the line for us.” He adds that the troops “don’t want to be over there any worse than the anti-war people. They want to be home with their kids, but they’re not. They’re over there fighting and I think they need all the support they can get, more so about whether we should be at war or not.”

In seeking to establish that *American Soldier* is indeed apolitical, Keith contrasts the song with *Courtesy*, remarking, “After 9/11... I wrote an angry song that was political... But *American Soldier* was just a tribute to the veterans who served our country.”<sup>280</sup> Thus, while he acknowledges that he had political objectives in writing and releasing *Courtesy*, he insists that is simply not the case with *American Soldier*. “I’m not for every war and I’m not against every war,” Keith explains, “and obviously, I don’t consider myself smart enough to say whether we should be [in Iraq] or not... This is just my way of letting everybody know exactly what a soldier

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<sup>279</sup> *Larry King Live*

<sup>280</sup> Masley, W16.



is: just another American that gets up and goes to work.”<sup>281</sup> He sought to draw attention to the plight of those in uniform, to put a face on them and their way of life. He told Larry King, “I always feel for the troops and their families when they’re going in.” Clearly, Keith wrote and released *American Soldier* (*act*) to pay tribute to the American military (*purpose*), not to endorse or condemn the war in Iraq.

### ***Agency-Act***

As with *Courtesy*, the genre of country music serves as the means (*agency*) through which *American Soldier* (as a rhetorical *act*) was created and consumed. We have already learned that musical consumers often do not approach songs as instances of rhetoric, and are therefore more susceptible to a song’s persuasive potential. Additionally, as with *Courtesy*, Keith’s selection of country music as the means to accomplish this rhetorical act undoubtedly suggests that he had a particular audience in mind, namely the country audience, for the receipt of this musical message.

A song as rhetorical act is essentially “a response by the artist to particular feelings, needs and desires of the group to which he is appealing.”<sup>282</sup> Country music in particular is meant to both reflect and celebrate the viewpoints of its audience. *American Soldier* as a country song is Keith’s attempt to reach a specific audience, namely those with some link to the military. While those connected to the military are not necessarily limited to the country audience, the majority do fit the profile of the average country music listener: middle class, non-urban, white and Southern. The Department of Defense reports that more than 40% of non-prior service recruits in the U.S. Military Services are from the South.<sup>283</sup> The Heritage Foundation confirms the so-called

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<sup>281</sup> Whitmore, Margo. “Shock ‘N Y’all may shock some.” *Billboard* 25 Oct. 2003: 43.

<sup>282</sup> Irvine and Kirkpatrick, 276.

<sup>283</sup> “Executive Summary.”

“Southern military tradition” both before and after September 11, 2001, demonstrating that the South is in fact “overrepresented among military recruits.”<sup>284</sup> In addition, white Americans are “proportionally represented” in military enlistment, implying that the majority of recruits are indeed Caucasian. Suburban and rural areas are “overrepresented,” while “the middle class consistently provides disproportionately high numbers of soldiers.”<sup>285</sup> Although this song certainly appeals to those outside the traditional country audience, Keith’s choice of *agency* clearly implies that this message (*act*) was intended for the country audience, those most likely to be connected to the military. Accordingly, media coverage demonstrates that this song was indeed embraced by the members of the military and their families.

### ***Scene-Act***

The *scene* in which *American Soldier* (*act*) was created and consumed comprises both a contemporaneous and a more transcendent setting, much like *Courtesy*. The most immediate set of circumstances that gave birth to this song is Operation Iraqi Freedom. The single debuted on the *Billboard* charts near the end of 2003, the year in which the U.S. launched her invasion of Iraq.<sup>286</sup> By the time the album containing this song was released, President Bush had already declared the end of major combat operations in Iraq, and American troops sought to seize and maintain control over the country. *American Soldier* continued a steady climb up the *Billboard* charts as 2003 gave way to 2004, as the U.S. continued to struggle to establish order and help set up a democratic Iraqi government. Thus, while the war in Afghanistan served as the backdrop for the consumption of *Courtesy*, audiences consumed *American Soldier* as military operations proceeded in Iraq.

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<sup>284</sup> Kane.

<sup>285</sup> Kane.

<sup>286</sup> “Hot Country Singles.” *Billboard* 22 Nov. 2003: 40; “Timeline: Iraq”

After President Bush proclaimed, “Mission Accomplished” on May 1, 2003, country music shifted its focus from the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq themselves to the continuing sacrifice of the individual soldiers. John Michael Montgomery’s *Letters from Home* sought to capture the feelings of a soldier through the narration of letters he received from loved ones back home. In Trace Adkins’ *Arlington*, a “tribute to soldiers who paid the ultimate price,” a soldier who has been killed tells of his own journey to being buried at Arlington National Cemetery.<sup>287</sup> While tunes such as these flooded the airwaves, civilians and soldiers alike embraced *American Soldier*, which “took the face of the unknown soldier and really presented it to the people at home and said ‘let’s not forget this man is still on the front lines.’”<sup>288</sup> One veteran explains that this song, “made us feel like in the contributions that we make to our country, we are making contributions to our families also.” Moreover, “not only are we trying... to protect our families, we’re trying to protect everybody else’s.”<sup>289</sup> Clearly, the immediate *scene* played a primary role in the reception of this song as a rhetorical *act*.

Similar to *Courtesy*, *American Soldier* (*act*) also occurred within a larger rhetorical context, that of the tradition of country music in times of war. By recording and releasing *American Soldier*, Keith continues the custom of past country artists who have written patriotic songs when the U.S. is at war.<sup>290</sup> This tune, however, belongs to a different category of wartime songs than *Courtesy*, those that focus on the soldier rather than the enemy and the war. Music historian Charles Wolfe explains that, traditionally, the “self-confidence and simplistic optimism of the early songs [gives] way to more somber and self-reflective works.”<sup>291</sup> As a war progresses,

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<sup>287</sup> *CMT Greatest Patriotic Songs*

<sup>288</sup> *CMT Greatest Patriotic Songs*

<sup>289</sup> *CMT Greatest Patriotic Songs*

<sup>290</sup> *CMT Greatest Patriotic Songs*; Wolfe and Akenson

<sup>291</sup> Wolfe, Charles. “‘Bloody War:’ War Songs in Early Country Music.” *Country Music Goes to War*. Eds. C.K. Wolfe and J.E. Akenson. Lexington: The University Press of Kentucky, 2005, 31.

country music shifts to “reflect its death and despair,” to express a soldier’s “longing, generally for a loved one” in the face of long deployments. Jimmie Rodgers, the father of country music, wrote *Soldier’s Sweetheart* during World War I to memorialize a friend who had died during the conflict.<sup>292</sup> In Ernest Tubb’s *Soldier’s Last Letter*, which spent an extraordinary 29 weeks at number 1 on the Billboard charts, a World War II soldier leaves a letter to his mother unfinished, dying before he has the chance to complete it.<sup>293</sup> The Louvin Brothers’ *From Mother’s Arms to Korea* and Ernest Tubb’s *Heartsick Soldier on Heartbreak Ridge* captured the anguish of Korean War soldiers fighting an unpopular and misunderstood war.<sup>294</sup> Glen Campbell’s *Galveston* expressed a similar sentiment during the Vietnam War.<sup>295</sup> Since *American Soldier (act)* also aims to express the predicament of an individual soldier, it not only originates in the immediate circumstances of Operation Iraqi Freedom, but it also falls into this larger rhetorical context of wartime country music. Undoubtedly, *scene* had a significant impact on both the production and consumption of this rhetorical act.

### ***Summary***

To determine the rhetorical impact of *American Soldier*, the song must be considered as a rhetorical *act* created and consumed within a particular context. This context comprises all the components of the situation that gave rise to the discourse, namely *agent*, *purpose*, *agency*, and *scene*. In the media coverage surrounding the song, Keith cultivated a public persona (*agent*) that positioned him as a representative of the troops, qualified to speak both to and for them via this song (*act*), while his proximity to the soldiers helped legitimize this status as their unofficial spokesperson. Keith wrote and released the song (*act*) in order to express gratitude and support

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<sup>292</sup> *CMT Greatest Patriotic Songs*

<sup>293</sup> *CMT Greatest Patriotic Songs*, Wolfe.

<sup>294</sup> *CMT Greatest Patriotic Songs*

<sup>295</sup> *CMT Greatest Patriotic Songs*

for the American military (*purpose*), not to comment on the war in Iraq, a distinction that enables him to separate the soldier from the war. In electing to convey his message through the channel (*agency*) of country music, Keith indicates that this song (*act*) was primarily intended for the country audience, particularly those with a connection to the military. Lastly, this song is not only a product of the immediate circumstances of Operation Iraq Freedom, but it also emanates from a larger context of war-time country music, indicating that *scene* had a significant impact on the creation and consumption of this rhetorical *act*.

With my analyses of both *Courtesy of the Red, White and Blue* and *American Soldier* complete, the next and last chapter will include a review and discussion of the findings reported in Chapters Three and Four.

## CHAPTER 5. DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION.

### **In Review.**

To explore and evaluate the rhetorical impact of *Courtesy of the Red, White and Blue* (*The Angry American*) and *American Soldier*, I have conducted an organic analysis of both songs as rhetorical acts produced and consumed within a particular rhetorical context. Because country music is fundamentally a discourse that celebrates the attitudes, values and experiences of its audience, I have first analyzed these two songs as instances of epideictic rhetoric. I have adopted a contemporary conception of epideictic, which focuses on the ritualistic reinforcement of values in order to constitute and maintain a rhetorical community. As an epideictic rhetor, Keith rehearses the traditional values of the country music audience, uniting them in celebration of the communal identity that forms the foundation of their social reality. That shared identity enables Keith to cultivate and advance a rhetorical vision of a post-September 11 reality, to attribute meaning to the events of September 11 and the ensuing conflicts in Afghanistan and Iraq in accordance with the beliefs and values of the country music audience.

Kenneth Burke asserts that language is the means through which we interpret and respond to what occurs around us, and thus, when we describe a situation, we both construct and reveal our understanding of reality. Accordingly, Burke offers pentadic analysis as a means to understand how rhetors interpret the situations around them. I have conducted a pentadic analysis of each song's rhetorical vision in order to illuminate how Keith makes sense of a post-September 11 reality. In addition, I discovered that Keith continually assigns dominance to *purpose* above the other pentadic members, suggesting that the rhetorical visions he fosters are based on an ideology of mysticism. Both media coverage and the *Billboard* charts confirm that each vision successfully chained out amongst the rhetorical community, that is, the country

music audience. Lastly, to explore the rhetorical context in which each song was conceived and consumed, I investigated each song as a rhetorical *act*, identifying how each song was impacted by the other components of the situation, namely *agent*, *purpose*, *agency* and *scene*.

## **Discussion.**

September 11 and the subsequent military action in Afghanistan and Iraq gave rise to a rhetorical exigence inherent to times of war – namely, the need for someone to assign meaning to these events and give voice to the emotions and experiences of average Americans, a need best met through epideictic discourse. Epideictic is “informed by the present... and often serves to bolster faith or pride in the ideals of the ‘present system,’” helping the audience locate itself as a community in the present circumstances.<sup>296</sup> Thus, epideictic discourse can “bring order and meaning to an otherwise chaotic and meaningless series of events.”<sup>297</sup> In both *Courtesy of the Red, White and Blue* and *American Soldier*, Keith successfully fulfilled the epideictic needs of the country music audience by reinforcing their identity as a rhetorical community and interpreting the events of September 11 in accordance with their shared social reality. Keith celebrates the values of the country music audience, championing themes such as family, work, rugged individualism and individual worth, while advancing an unequivocal definition of patriotism based on deference for the American military. In offering a rhetorical vision driven by mysticism in each song, Keith implies that the United States is compelled to act, united by a solidarity of purpose that transcends the needs and objectives of individual Americans.

In the case of epideictic discourse, “the audience must think of the rhetor as one of their own,” which explains why country music lyrics (as instances of epideictic discourse) “are often

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<sup>296</sup> Beale, 223.

<sup>297</sup> Carter, M., 223.

an attempt at identification.”<sup>298</sup> In order to advance a rhetorical vision, Keith needed to identify with listeners, to demonstrate what he had in common with them, what Burke would call the sharing of “substance.” Consequently, Keith positions himself as a suitable representative of the rhetorical community, qualified to speak both to and for them, by promoting a shared identity within each song. His rehearsal of traditional communal values in both songs is an example of *explicit* identification, featuring shared viewpoints as a means of establishing rapport between himself and the audience. He also engages in *implicit* identification, invoking the subtle and collective “we” in *Courtesy* in order to provide listeners with a sense of unity. Also evident in *Courtesy* are *antithetical* identification appeals, which evoke a shared enemy against which speaker and audience members can unite. Keith sets up an unmistakable dichotomy in *Courtesy*, pitting “us” against “them,” and compelling listeners to take sides. Keith also used the media to publicly position himself as a spokesperson of the country music audience, bolstering the identification appeals he offers within the lyrics.

Authentic epideictic rhetoric “strengthens social or institutional cohesion by generating a kind of communal knowledge, a set of palatable cultural truths.”<sup>299</sup> Thus, in addition to building and preserving rhetorical communities, epideictic rhetoric fosters the advancement of rhetorical visions, which are simply collaborative constructions of reality. *Courtesy* and *American Soldier* as epideictic discourse provide the country audience with just such “communal knowledge,” that is, rhetorical visions that enabled them to make sense of September 11 and the subsequent military action taken by the United States. Media attention and the *Billboard* charts confirm that Keith is an effective epideictic rhetor, successfully promoting a rhetorical vision with each song. Alternate visions offered by other country artists like the Dixie Chicks did not catch on and chain

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<sup>298</sup> Sullivan, 1993a, 126; Buckley, 294.

<sup>299</sup> Sheard, 775.



out. The commercial success of both singles indicates that Keith was able to provide audiences with “communal knowledge” that satisfied their epideictic needs.

Since “much of music’s rhetorical impact originates in sources located *outside* the delineated text,” and “the response to music is heavily influenced... by these contextual elements,” a song as a rhetorical *act* must be considered as a consequence of the various components of the rhetorical context in which it originated.<sup>300</sup> The success of a musical message (*act*) depends largely on the extent to which the artist (*agent*) establishes him/herself as a suitable representative of the rhetorical community. In both *Courtesy* and *American Soldier*, Keith’s public persona (*agent*), cultivated in both his music and the media, positioned him as a spokesperson for the country audience, qualified to speak both to and for this rhetorical community. In *Courtesy*, Keith speaks for all “true” patriots, that is, those who inherently revere the American military and serve the purposes of freedom and justice. He bolsters this image amidst his highly publicized feuds by implying that those who criticize the song are somehow criticizing its audience at large. By contrast, Keith appropriates the role of a soldier in *American Soldier*, and legitimizes his ability to speak both to and for the soldiers by demonstrating his proximity to the troops in the media. Each persona played a significant role in how each song was consumed by the audience.

Keith’s *purpose* in writing each song (*act*) differs; while both attempt to pay tribute to the troops, he maintains that *Courtesy* is political, while *American Soldier* is not. In *Courtesy*, Keith depicts military action that had not yet taken place as if it had already occurred, lending the song a deliberative quality in its composition that becomes muted in its consumption. Thus, while he may have begun as a deliberative rhetor, arguing that military action ought to take place, he is understood as an epideictic rhetor, championing military action as it happens. Either way,

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<sup>300</sup> Matula, 220.

*Courtesy* takes a definitively pro-war and pro-military stance, while *American Soldier* is best characterized as pro-soldier. It is worth noting that in expressing his motivation in writing these two songs, Keith assigns dominance to *purpose*, claiming that he wrote them out a sense of duty, which suggests a continued commitment to mysticism. Like those *within* his songs, Keith himself is compelled to act by purposes that transcend his individual objectives.

Keith makes use of the channel of country music (*agency*) to convey his message (*act*), implying that each song was intended for the country music audience. Audiences tend to approach all types of epideictic discourse “with the expectations that [the rhetor] will say what they want to hear,” and country music is no different.<sup>301</sup> Country music, perhaps more than any other musical genre, is a reflection of its audience. Edwin Black contends that we can “extract” from any discourse “the audience it implies,” meaning that these songs reveal an implied audience, an anticipated reception of each song’s message.<sup>302</sup> *Courtesy* and *American Soldier* are country songs, intended to reflect and celebrate a particular rhetorical community. Notably, media coverage and the *Billboard* charts reveal *American Soldier* took on a broader audience, appealing to those connected to the military beyond the traditional country audience.

Both songs (*acts*) are not only a consequence of the immediate circumstances surrounding September 11 and its subsequent military conflicts, but are also derivative of a larger context of wartime country music (*scene*). Epideictic discourse, according to Sullivan, functions as ritual as it seeks to preserve the shared identity of a rhetorical community. In writing and releasing *Courtesy of the Red, White and Blue* and *American Soldier*, Keith enacts a tradition that has been established in the world of country music since the Civil War, the customary maintenance, celebration and perpetuation of cultural values in times of war. Such ritualistic

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<sup>301</sup> Sullivan, 1993a, 124

<sup>302</sup> Black, 112.

epideictic discourse places the current circumstances in a larger context in order to provide the audience with a sense of order and meaning in a time of uncertainty. Audiences can find comfort in hearing messages not unlike those of previous times of war and perhaps be assured that this too will pass.

As epideictic discourse, country music has a ritualistic quality, continually rehearsing shared values in an attempt to preserve and perpetuate the shared identity of the country audience as a rhetorical community. As a result, country artists as epideictic rhetors can draw upon this communal identity in order to promote an interpretation of any given situation, that is, a rhetorical vision. Thus, the shared identity cultivated by epideictic unites the country audience as a rhetorical community in a particular moment (in the face of a specific situation, such as post-September 11) as well as through time (in such a way as to transcend the specific circumstances). This process of shaping communal identity is ongoing, allowing country artists to make sense of specific circumstances by interweaving them into the larger fabric of their rhetorical community. Accordingly, country music as epideictic functions both within time (in a particular moment) and across time (transcending any particular moment). The fusion of epideictic, symbolic convergence and Benoit's genesis of rhetorical action accounts for the rhetorical impact of these songs by facilitating the consideration of those elements located both *within* the discourse and *without*, thereby exploring each song as both a particular rhetorical act and as part of a transcendent genre.

### **Conclusion.**

Undoubtedly, this study is incomplete in that it only considers two instances of wartime country music. In light of this limitation, further study should certainly cast a wider net, examining a larger sample of songs from various war eras in order to look for continuity in both

their conception and consumption. Nonetheless, this study does suggest that wartime country music can aptly be characterized as epideictic discourse, a finding that provides a theoretical and methodological basis for future analysis of this as well as other categories of music. This study also confirms much of the prior research that conceptualizes music as rhetoric, accounting for the impact of previous-identified variables such as intended audience, artist persona and context. In a larger sense, this study helps further substantiate the claim that music is indeed a rich resource for rhetorical study in that musical consumers are often unaware of music's rhetorical potential.

I began this paper with a quote from *Entertainment Weekly*, in which Toby Keith remarks, "I dig being the flag-waving redneck."<sup>303</sup> Like it or not, that is exactly what he is perceived to be. Toby Keith's name has become synonymous with patriotism in country music today, due in large part to two wildly popular tunes: *Courtesy of the Red, White and Blue (The Angry American)* and *American Soldier*. Through these songs, Keith attempted to make sense of September 11 and the subsequent military action by offering the country music audience palatable rhetorical visions infused with a celebration of their beliefs, values and experiences. *Courtesy* and *American Soldier* enjoyed enormous commercial success, verifying that reality, courtesy of Toby Keith, is exactly what the country music audience wants to hear.

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<sup>303</sup> Willman, 38.

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VITA

The second of three children born to Jesse and Lorraine Fleeman, the author grew up in Chesterfield County, Virginia. As an undergraduate at the University of Virginia, she pursued a double major in History and Anthropology, with a particular focus on the ancient world. She completed two senior thesis projects for each respective major, and conducted an independent study in medieval English history. After completing her Bachelor of Arts, Arin served as a World History teacher for Chesterfield County Public Schools. She continued her education while working as a teacher, completing graduate level education courses and teaching training workshops.

Arin began her graduate studies in the Department of Communication at Virginia Tech in 2004. Her course work included foundational classes in Communication Theory and Methods, as well as Rhetorical Theory and Criticism. She devised two independent studies, one in Classical Myth, the other in Mythic and Burkean Criticism, in order to further explore a growing interest in rhetorical criticism. As a graduate teaching assistant, she has assisted in a variety of undergraduate courses, including *Public Speaking*, *Interpersonal Communication*, *Introduction to Communication Studies* and *Persuasion*.

Upon receipt of her Master of Arts, Arin will join the doctoral program in Rhetoric and Public Affairs in the Department of Communication at Texas A&M University. There, she plans to expand this thesis project by exploring the rhetorical impact of country music in times of war from a historical perspective. Of particular interest are projects that investigate how cultural values are maintained, celebrated and propagated through rhetoric, particularly popular discourse, such as song, movies and television. After completing her Ph.D., Arin intends to work as academic professional in a university setting.