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Imagining Imagination

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IMAGINING IMAGINATION

John M. Johnson, Francisco Alatorre, David Berg,
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ABSTRACT

Purpose – With an acknowledgement to Benedict Anderson’s seminal writings on “imagined communities,” this paper examines several meanings and uses of the concept of imagination: theoretical, methodological, and substantive.

Methodology/approach – Application of these meanings are illustrated from eight qualitative researches, combining direct observations, interviews, participant observation, and document analysis.

Findings – Data are drawn from diverse settings, such as undocumented migrant communities, terrorism, Native American communities, collaborative divorce, nationalism, mass killers, players of video games, and genocide, to illustrate the potential uses and meanings of imagination.

Originality – These diverse researches illustrate the potential empirical and research contributions of these ideas.

Keywords: Imagination; qualitative methods; imagined communities; everyday life

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Imagination refers to an internal mental state of the actor, a projection to the future of a desired or expected state. Charles Horton Cooley, one of the important progenitors of symbolic interaction, noted the importance of imagination over 100 years ago. Cooley asserted that “society must be studied in the imagination,” and further “there is no separation between real and imaginary persons.” He wrote:

... the imagination which people have of one another are the *solid facts* of society, and ... to observe and interpret these must be a chief aim of sociology. I do not mean merely that society must be studied by the imagination – that is true of all investigations in their higher reaches – but that the object of study is primarily an imaginative idea or group of ideas in the mind, that we have to imagine imagination. (Cooley, 1902, p. 87, emphasis in the original)

In 1959, C. Wright Mills published his classic *The Sociological Imagination*, which included his critique of two dominant trends in sociology, Grand Theory and Abstracted Empiricism, and he proposed using “sociological imagination” as a useful methodological stance to avoid the problems of these. He said that sociologists and other social scientists should use their imaginations to tie together or link together “private troubles of personal milieux” (an individual’s specific troubles or life situation) with “the larger public issues,” for example, Mary Smith’s AFDC situation with the larger issue of poverty. For Mills, two aspects of imagination are implicated: first, a moral or value imperative to seek an empathic understanding of the lives of those we study, and second, a methodological imperative to link these to larger social or political issues. Mills has little to say about how either of these is accomplished (also see Denzin, 2010).

In 1983, cultural anthropologists Benedict Anderson published *Imagined Communities*, considered a seminal work in the field of nationalism. Anderson was taken up with the question of when, where, and how nationalism spread, and he concludes that 18th and 19th century nationalism is significantly related to the growth of industrialization, and especially two of its by-products, books and newspapers. Print media had a strong impact on early nation building, and nationalism as a social construction became created in people’s imaginations by and through media. A nation is an imagined community, says Anderson; “It is an imagined community because, regardless of the actual inequality or exploitation that may prevail in the early nation-building, the nation is always conceived as a deep horizontal comradeship” (1983, p. 17). Members of nations do not know each other personally, but through mass media, they imagine their fellowship with commonly situated others as a community of

shared common culture (or what is presumed to be shared). Imagined communities gloss over ethnicity, gender, race, religion, and preferences, it is a “horizontal fraternity.” Even though originally written in 1983, this work artfully anticipates many of the phenomena of cyberspace and other SIS communities.

In 1990, Paul Atkinson published *The Ethnographic Imagination*, but in this work, the author claims a modest and limited focus, to examine ethnographic reports as texts, to uncover the rhetorical and narrative methods used by ethnographic authors, and to create the verisimilitude or vraisemblance of the written report. His focus is less about the “tricks-of-the-trade” for doing ethnographies or participant observation researches, or how to gain an empathic understanding of other’s lives, and more about the rhetorical or writing strategies of their authors. He asserts that there are imagined elements in the textual constructions of reality produced by social science authors.

In this brief introduction, we have uncovered four distinct meanings to the idea of imagination. First, imagination may refer to the imagination of the actor or actors, the internal mental states which project an existing or future state of affairs. This meaning seems closest to the intention of Benedict Anderson’s well-known work on nationalism. Related terms include intention, goal, purpose, project, fantasy, or dream, but each of these is distinct from imagination, and in the following pages, some of these distinctions will be addressed. Second, imagination may refer to the methodological stance of the observer or scientist who seeks to empathically grasp and understand what the actor or actors mean or imagine. The purpose of using this strategy is to make sociological or ethnographic reports true, or more consistent with the social meanings of the social worlds we study and comprehend. Many of the books on ethnography appear motivated by this intention for the observer or analyst. Third, imagination may refer to the analytical strategy or goal of the observer to link more concrete levels of meaning to large levels of meaning in the society or culture. This meaning seems closest to the intention of C. Wright Mills’ classic book. And fourth, imagination may refer to the rhetorical strategies or devices used in texts to communicate or claim the reports as real, true, or believable. This meaning seems closest to that intended by Paul Atkinson. A fifth meaning might propose strategies for moving from texts to performances, but we do not here address such performance ethnographies.

In the following sections, the authors describe how they encountered and developed these ideas about imagination in actual researches. We will show how social actors used their imaginations, and how we used our

imaginations to grasp the meanings of their beliefs and actions. Our goals are to develop imagination methodologically, and to critically assess its applicability and limitations.

THE IMAGINED COMMUNITY OF UNDOCUMENTED IMMIGRANTS IN THE UNITED STATES (FRANCISCO ALATORRE)

How do Mexican immigrants who come to the United States without legal status imagine their reality and success in a challenging and often hostile environment? This question animates my dissertation research on undocumented immigrants, and I have learned their “imagined community” often proves inaccurate. Revisions and changes in one’s imagined plans are needed as the external situation changes. For these resilient immigrants, this is an ongoing process of interpretation and adaptation.

From many interviews with undocumented immigrant families in the society of St. Vincent de Paul Esperanza/Hope program in Phoenix, Arizona, there were strong examples of the concept of the imagined community, and how it both threatens and maintains resiliency. The immigrants’ removal from their community in Mexico to the imagined immigrant community in the United States poses serious threats to the individual’s well-being. Undocumented immigrants become resilient by seeking out other undocumented immigrants, trading tips on jobs, sending alerts on dangers, spreading news from Spanish or English mass media, taking care of each other’s children, speaking Spanish, cooking and eating familiar foods, and listening to music from home. In such ways, the imagined immigrant community becomes less abstract and more real.

One strong example is a family where various members had come to the United States at earlier times, then returned to Mexico, thus providing important information about what to expect and how to be successful. The husband and wife planned their border crossing for two years, and saved enough money for one year of U.S. survival. They decided to locate in Phoenix, rather than in Los Angeles, because of lower living costs and the presence of friends. They created a 10-year plan, to save as much money as possible, so that when they returned to Mexico, the husband could open a mechanic shop, and the wife a beauty salon. Also, their son would be young enough to spend his teenage years in Mexico. Their initial imagined community proved fairly accurate for some time, and they even earned enough money to pay for day care for their son. Then the visa and

immigration laws changed in Arizona, and they were led to revise their plans and objectives in response to the external environment, now more hostile for getting work, having health insurance, and social acceptance in the community.

In another case, the imagined community for a Mexican couple vanished as soon as they entered the United States. They first arrived in Nogales, Sonora, and then hired a coyote who charged them \$750 per person to take them across the border to Tucson, Arizona. The coyote told them to bring enough food and water for a two-day journey, but in reality it was a six-day trip with many life-threatening dangers, involving the loss of one life in the crossing party. They eventually arrived in Phoenix, where they had two children, and prospered for a while. Then the husband was unfaithful, and they separated. He told her to return to Mexico, but she remained with the help of some other immigrants. She found her entrepreneurial spirit, and began a business creating and selling paintings and hand-crafted religious items such as rosaries. She sells some of her products to a retailer, and others at a weekly swap meet. She barter for some of her needs, including prescription medicines from the black market. She lives with her two children in an office building, where she pays \$350 per month, without any bath or shower.

Most undocumented immigrants imagine a successful immigrant community where many are able to work and save money for their eventual return to Mexico, but reality seldom matches their vision. They collaborate with many others in the same situation, to change and alter their views with the changing external circumstances, including social service providers such as those at St. Vincent de Paul, who assist their resiliency by expectations and hopes based on the realities of their lives and changing social-political situation. This concept of imagined community provides ways of how social service providers perceive resources of resiliency and threats to resiliency.

THE IMAGINED COMMUNITY OF TERRORISM (DAVID BERG)

In the imagined community of terrorism, actions that are considered terrorism shift over time and space depending upon the actors involved and their competing interests in controlling a narrative with broader public. Hoffman (2006, p. 1) laments that the word has become grossly overused, and that the media are partly to blame for this; “Most people have a vague idea or impression of what terrorism is but lack a more precise and truly

explanatory definition of the word.” Terrorism shares a diffuse and ambiguous moral boundary like pornography or obscenity. There is a broad consensus that these things are “bad” in some way, but no one can describe with much precision what conduct or meanings falls into these categories. Fights against terrorism, thus, devolve into morality plays driven by high-profile media events, similar to earlier moral panics or campaigns.

Sociologists have long theorized an important relationship between group solidarity and punishment for deviant behavior. Terrorism is often classified as a form of violent political deviance used by nonstate actors. [Lauderdale and Amster \(2007\)](#) specifically argue that conceptions of deviance are malleable, often changed to favor interests with power. An alleged terrorist attack, then, can be used to reinforce social values or appropriate behavior and unite people in their common interests.

The widespread reactions to terrorist attacks in the United States can be seen as the latest permutation where a perceived threat from external forces creates solidarity as insiders (American communities) express their collective disapproval at the “other” (terrorist communities), and begin formulating collective action in response to an attack. The fear of a mass casualty attack from an unknown assailant is quite powerful and has an infectious property. Like other cases of collective fear, and attack produces strong emotions about the external threat ([Altheide, 2002, 2006, 2009](#)). The perception of an external threat from a shadowy unknown enemy often leads to overly reactive and repressive measures. As [Erikson \(2005, p. 22\)](#) has written:

People who fear witches soon find themselves surrounded by them; people who become jealous of private property soon encounter eager thieves. And it is not always easy to know whether fear creates the deviance or deviance creates the fear, the affinity of the two has been a continuing source of wonder in human affairs.

Erikson’s statement concerning Puritanical 17th Century New England applies well to the reactions about Japanese Americans after Pearl Harbor, the “Red Scare” of the communist spies during the 1950s, and the reactions of the 9/11 Islamist attacks against the World Trade Center.

Fear helps to establish “moral boundaries,” find scapegoats, bring likeminded people together, and produce repressive rituals. Opposition to proposed mosques in the United States and Switzerland and pastor Terry Jones’ plan to burn the Quran on the 9th anniversary of 9/11 are recent examples where imagined communities of patriots mobilize to counter the threats of the imagined community of terrorists. My dissertation research ([Berg, 2010](#)) mapped these shifting meanings of the terrorism phenomenon. I found important regional, educational, and age-related differences in

the imagined terrorist communities, but mass media sources permeated all of these.

DAKOTA SIOUX PRISON LETTERS 1862–1867 (ROY JANISCH)

My Sisseton-Wahpeton Sioux Nation is primarily located in eastern South Dakota, and their Tribal Council provided to me for analysis over 400 pages of letters written to and from tribal members during the mass imprisonment of 1862–1867. The early Sisseton-Wahpeton bands began to settle in eastern South Dakota and the southern part of Minnesota after 1700, living a free nomadic existence of moving with the game for hunting and trapping in the summers, and then encampments to survive and prosper during the often severe winters of the northern plains. Some of the Sioux bands began making the transition to farming by the 1820s and 1830s, but few among the Sisseton-Wahpeton bands joined this transition. Minnesota achieved statehood in 1858, and became the location of the infamous Sioux uprising of August, 1862. The causes of this uprising are complicated and disputed, but it began on August 17, 1862, and went on for 38 days during August and September, with many battles between Sioux warriors and U.S. soldiers and U.S. citizens in Redwood Ferry, Birch Coulee, Fort Ridgley, Lake Shetek, New Ulm, West Lake settlements, Fort Abercrombie, and Wood Lake. When General Henry H. Sibley finally arrived with his troops to this area, over 1200 Indians were taken into custody and held at Camp Release (now Montevideo), and eventually about 2000 were imprisoned at the several forts or camps in this area. The U.S. government invalidated all treaties and took the lands of the Sioux after the uprising. General Sibley's military commissions eventually subjected 302 Indians to courts martial, but many of the sentences were remitted by President Lincoln, except for the 39 notoriously executed at Mankato on December 26, 1862.

The letters analyzed in my research were written to and from individuals imprisoned between 1862 and 1867, and were mostly translated or transcribed by Rev. Stephen R. Riggs or Rev. John P. Williamson, two Presbyterian ministers. Rev. Riggs had arrived at Fort Snelling in 1837, founded a village of about 400, and translated the first Sioux dictionary, many Christian hymns, and parts of the Bible. He thus became one of the principal translators of and for the Sisseton-Wahpeton bands. During the winter of 1862–1863, Rev. Riggs worked with the prisoners at Fort Snelling, whereas Dr. Williamson worked at the Mankato prison. The early letters

from 1862 contain themes of Native American baptisms, and giving thanks to The Great Spirit. One proclaimed, "The (Dakota) people now have some part of eternal life and that is good. Give thanks to The Great Spirit and all of my Dakota friends that I am together with, and are well." Such statements show the beginnings of a new imagined community which combined elements of traditional beliefs and the new Christian beliefs. On occasion, this was expressed with ambivalence; "And how you guided me in the straight and narrow and ... to the Great Spirit, I am now skilled in the Lord's Prayer, but then they did this to me" (put in prison).

The Dakota Sioux of 1862 had to imagine what it was to be in prison, but also had to imagine what it meant to write a letter, and what it meant to have one of the white authorities read it at the other end. The traditional Dakota Sioux culture was an oral culture. It was not dependent on books, documents, letters, dossiers, or other material artifacts. In such a culture, speaking the truth was a pragmatic, moral, social, and community imperative. Dakota culture did not distinguish between the public sphere and the private sphere, not the sacred and the secular; these are foreign distinctions of other cultures. The moral standing of the individual was found in family and community relationships, and an individual's daily speech affirmed and continually established these relations. A modern person must imagine what it was like to live in these circumstances. There existed a moral imperative to speak the truth among in-group members. An individual's standing and reputation in the community was dependent on speaking the truth.

Writing letters was not an established custom, and this practice occurred because of the imprisonment of family and community members. One might imagine how strange this practice must have seemed to those called upon to practice it, and wonder what they thought it meant to "send a letter" to a family member where there existed no common or known institutional meaning for this. Also, at one end, it was translated into the indigenous language by a Presbyterian minister, and at the other end of the line as well. As one reads these hundreds of letters sent to and from such places as Camp McClellan, Davenport, Iowa, Fort Thompson, Fort Wadsworth, D.T. (Dakota Territory), James River, Redwood Falls Camp, Indian Camp Sheridan (Iowa), Camp Kearney (Nebraska), Red Eagle Trails Camp, Fort Rice Missions, and many others, one is first impressed by the mundane nature of the letters. Family members used these letters to: (1) report on how family members were doing, (2) make a request, (3) present assurances and reassurances, (4) report local events, (5) reaffirm common beliefs, and (6) reaffirm relationships. A strong impression is conveyed by the salutations

of the letters. Almost all of the letters begin with one or more of the following: My Relative, His Country, I shake your hand, It is so, or May it be so. Here are some actual examples:

“My relative His country again I write you this letter.” (066)

“My relative well I wish you that eight of us men want letters, it is so.” (018)

“My relative on letter give you I want, it is so.” (024)

“I will now write you this letter, it is so.” (099)

“His country, my relative, one letter I make for you, it is so.” (011)

“My relative, just now, once again, I write you a letter, it is so.” (063)

“My relative one, His Country, very recent letter I made for you, it is so.” (055)

The ritual phrases “my relative,” “I shake your hand,” and “It is so” represent ways to transpose the normative frame of face-to-face conversation into letter format; the writer is saying that, in effect, if he were present in a face-to-face interaction, he could affirm the truth of the spoken word with a physical presence and hand shake. The letter writer had to imagine this new situation of the prison communication, and now today we have to use our imaginations to grasp what this must have meant for them. Since these imprisoned communications involved asymmetrical differences of power, it seems prudent to imagine great caution and concern on their part.

IMAGINATION IN THE COLLABORATIVE LAW MOVEMENT (ELIZABETH MCLIN)

Imagination can create a community of committed individuals working to improve a specific area of the social world. The collaborative law movement began when one man imagined divorce as nonadversarial and then committed to make it so. His ability to transmit that imagined ideal to others resulted in a growing number of professionals choosing to practice collaboratively. Within a collaborative practice, family law lawyers use imagination to enlist and retain clients, and clients then use their imaginations to complete the process and later to assess their individual divorce experience. As a result, clients and professionals may transform their views about the nature of divorce and conflict.

In the movie, *The War of the Roses* (Devito, 1996), Danny Devito plays a divorce lawyer who represents one party in an over-the-top contentious divorce. The movie revolves around Devito's character recounting the

details of this brutal divorce to a prospective client. Eventually, the viewer learns that Devito's narration is an attempt to persuade his client to reconsider divorce as an option because the consequences are so horrible. The film, though fictional, reflects an extremely bad divorce, an image that matches divorces one may have heard about in the news or sometimes in one's own family. In criminal cases, special attention is always paid to "estranged" partners of victims of crime because former spouses and partners are often the perpetrators. Hence, imagining divorce as a war-like dispute between former partners is not a stretch for most people. Collaborative family lawyers can use this predisposition within individuals to help clients imagine the potential for worst-case-scenarios in their own divorces.

Drawing on images of negative divorces, clients can be motivated to choose a different process for their own divorce; a process that promises to help them avoid the harmful aspects of divorce, such as financial ruin, damage to their children's well-being, and a court-driven adversarial process. Court is imagined as a major threat to a positive divorce and represents the opposite of a collaborative divorce. For former clients of collaborative divorce, court represented losing control of one's destiny; having what one says used against you; a cessation in honest and forthright communication; putting the hope for a civil relationship with their former spouse aside; and/or the risk of the unknown that comes with relinquishing control of decisions to a third party, such as a judicial official (McLin, 2010). To balance the negative possibilities, collaborative family lawyers may also draw upon positive experiences of past collaborative clients to help prospective clients imagine a better outcome for themselves, one that is made possible if they pursue a collaborative divorce. Imagination provides a definition for both what is to be avoided and what is hoped to be achieved. In this undertaking, clients and lawyers "team up" to work toward success. In doing so, shared negative and positive images of the possibilities help create and reinforce a sense of community for them within the endeavor. Membership in this community further helps participants imagine themselves as people who can do things the right way, even when it is difficult. Both clients and their lawyers demonstrate their commitment to this greater good (e.g., getting a healthy divorce or helping others get a healthy divorce) through the action of completing the process.

Imagination helps clients choose the process to begin with, and without imagination, clients might not opt to stay in the process. In research with clients who have successfully completed a collaborative divorce (McLin, 2010), many clients found the hands-on and face-to-face process

challenging. During difficult periods, these clients persevered, even when they did not wish to, because they could reimagine a much worse outcome if they did not. Essentially, they remained to avoid that which they imagined.

Following their divorces, clients were happy with the process, even when their relationship with their exes remained strained. Clients imagined how much worse things might have been for them, for their children, and for their former partner, had they not opted to use collaborative divorce. The imagined worst-case-scenario remained after the process was completed and served as a yardstick that both lawyers and clients used to measure how much worse it might have been. In this way, imagination becomes a tool for measuring success.

Collaborative law practice relies on imagination to help achieve its objectives. Collaborative lawyers use imagination in order to recruit clients by helping them imagine how bad divorces could be, and how much better they might be. These images also help retain clients within the process because leaving the process poses the threat of a worse outcome. Furthermore, imagination helps clients and collaborative lawyers determine success by offering a comparison that makes the end result, whatever it is, more appealing. Without the imagined negative divorce and its capacity to harm, clients might be unwilling to pursue a collaborative divorce, and divorcing families might be less able to navigate through divorce unscathed.

THE IMAGINED REVENGE FANTASIES OF MASS KILLERS (JENNIFER MURRAY)

Mass and serial killers are found in many cultures, but there are many more in the United States, with the greater availability of guns being an especially important factor for mass killers, defined in the academic literature as the killing of four or more victims by a lone assailant (perhaps with a confederate), usually in one location, over a brief period of time. The popular mass media image of a mass killer as an “impulsive lunatic” who “snaps” or “goes off” is mistaken. Mass killers are invariably sane in the legal sense, and their crimes usually involve deliberate and ruthless calculation and planning, even over a long period of time. Today we average one mass killing every 10 days.

My doctoral dissertation research investigated how mass and serial killers – through their imagination – plan, justify, rehearse, and perfected their killings, along with the imagined public response. The context of this inquiry focuses on intersecting circumstances (psychological, social,

emotional, physical, and situational) which lead offenders to be consumed by obsessive fantasies that propel the individual to commit acts of brutal violence. The killer's preparation is typically a long-term and calculated fantasy process, which commonly reveals a vast collection of documentary, photographic, and electronic evidence afterward. My research utilized *ethnographic content analysis* as developed by David Altheide (1996), and this revealed four major fantasy scripts: (1) revenge fantasy; (2) sexual, sadistic, and misogynistic fantasy; (3) suicidal-homicidal fantasy; and (4) validation through infamy and media attention fantasy. These fantasies and scripts become progressively intertwined over time, and play the critical role in the motivations and actions of mass and serial killers.

The early childhood losses or destabilizing events will dictate the targeted victims for the prospective mass killer. These losses are complex and diverse, but commonly produce in the individual an angry rumination and a self-absorbed sense of suffering, blamefulness directed at others, sense of psychological inadequacy, self-doubt, and perhaps hopelessness. The killer begins to fantasize about actual or proxy victims who are held responsible for the killer's failures and disappointments, either directly or indirectly. Over time, these fantasies of wrath and retribution take on an obsessive quality and become an alternative reality. It is through a lengthy indulgence in this perverse imaginary world that the killer finds justification and motivation for his feelings and, ultimately, his behavior. The source of loss is felt to be an assault on the killer's concept of self. Whatever is central to that false sense of self dictates who will bear the brunt of the killer's anger. For example, a killer whose identity is tied to his job or to his material wealth, and who loses that anchor, may target victims in the workplace. This was true for Joseph Westbecker who killed 16 at his Kentucky workplace in 1986, after receiving a poor performance evaluation. Financial set backs or ruin were involved in the mass killings of Alan Barton in Atlanta, John List in New Jersey, and James O. Huberty who shot 46 at a MacDonald's restaurant in San Ysidro, California, in 1984. Retribution for bullying, or reclaiming a sense of pride and masculinity due to bullying, is often involved in the motivations of the shooters at schools, such as those of Eric Harris and Dylan Kliebold at Columbine, Colorado; Charles Whitman at the University of Texas; or Seung Hui Cho at Virginia Tech. The mass killer's imagined revenge fantasy often includes vivid portrayals of how their friends, family, or outsiders will view and feel about their infamous crimes.

The role of sadistic sexual fantasy and pathological misogyny is another important consideration in identifying the role and purpose of the fantasy formation process, especially in understanding cycles of escalation for mass

and serial killers. It is important to scrutinize the origins of sexual sadism or other psychosexual issues, because the dysfunction is present in many homicides, although there are significant differences between serial and mass killers. Sexual sadism is a common motivation for many notorious serial killers, such as Ted Bundy, who killed at least 33 women in six states; Gary Ridgeway, who killed 59 in the State of Washington; or Jeffrey Dahmer, who killed 17 young men in Ohio and Wisconsin. But this is rare for mass killers, with the notable exception of “hybrid” mass killer Richard Speck, who killed eight nurses in Chicago. Torture and humiliation of the victim is a source of sexual arousal and gratification for killers such as these. Deeply misogynistic feelings of anger and hatred toward women, including indignation of repeated rejections, are very evident in the writings and communications of George Hennard and George Sodini. Hennard left many writings describing all women as “vipers” before shooting 45 in a Luby’s Restaurant in Killeen, Texas. And Sodini left many communications blaming women for his repeated rejection and loneliness, before shooting 13 in a L.A. Fitness pilates class in Pennsylvania. For killers such as these, their imagined revenge fantasies are cathartic, temporarily taking the perpetrator away from his suffering, and allowing an externalization of others for one’s personal failures. Vivid rumination is instrumental in advancing their imagined fantasies. Mass killers never see themselves at fault. They blame others for their own real or imagined losses.

When a killer’s fantasy involves self-aggrandizement or attention-seeking themes, a primary motivator is pleasure derived from an imagined infamy. The killer constructs a fantasy image, in some cases akin to what Lonnie Athens calls a “phantom community” (an imagined community as opposed to an actual community from the individual’s life), and he then may envision himself as a folk-hero or anti-hero in order to get back at society deserving of his wrath. The killer delights in thinking about public shock, horror, and negative judgment for him and his crimes, although in some cases he may intellectually acknowledge that he should feel guilt or remorse, such as in the case of the Columbine school shooters. This fantasy script typically involves an obsession with the media’s portrayal of events and whether the murders will be reported accurately in the media. There is an “imagined community” in these scripts, but it is different than the ones noted by Alatorre or Melnikov in the other essays presented here, and different than the animating concept in Benedict Anderson’s seminal book.

One might be tempted to think that “fantasies” and “imagination” are located somewhere in the inner reaches of the mind, and hence unavailable and unobservable to others. But in many cases of the vast document

collections left behind by many of the mass and serial killers, it is very clear in many cases that their imagined fantasies were very long term in origin and development, and during these many years, others often learned about these images and fantasies. There are important intervention and policy implications of this; it means that early detection of these imagined fantasies is often possible, and when it is then early intervention is possible too, perhaps thus saving many innocent lives.

THE IMAGINED COMMUNITIES OF UKRAINIANS (ANDREY MELNIKOV)

Ukraine is a very interesting example of post-Soviet constructions of imagined communities, and demonstrates all of the ambiguities and complexities of *submerged national identity* (see [Tiryakian, 2007](#)) in a context of deep crisis and social anomie throughout all spheres of society (politics, economy, and culture). Nations do not arise at one specific moment in history. They have multiple beginnings in special-temporal and phenomenological dimensions. This is why there are multiple definitions of the current situation in Ukraine, and these shifting definitions are related to politics, ideology, and ongoing interpretations of Ukrainian history, past and present.

Constructions of the Ukrainian imagined community during the last 10 years have been deeply influenced by the acute political conflicts. After the triumph of the “Orange Revolution” of 2004, President Viktor Yushenko and his followers developed an image of the Ukrainian nation which was more salient for Ukrainian-speaking inhabitants of the central and western parts of the country. This image was based on pro-Western orientations and polar rethinking of Ukrainian history where Russia became a more negative symbol (which also occurred in Latvia, Lithuania, and Estonia as well). A much more positive definition of Russia emerged from the “white-blue” party opponents of Yushenko’s “orange” party. These opponents eventually won the elections in 2010, and were led by the new President Viktor Yanukovich. Their political ideas are more pro-Russian, and their interpretation of the Ukrainian nation places less emphasis on common ethnicity, and greater emphasis on Ukraine as a civil and political community with strong ties to Russia. This definition was more salient in the southern and eastern parts of Ukraine, inhabited by an overwhelming majority of Russian-speaking people and by interethnic Russian-Ukrainian or ethnic Russian families.

The conflicts in the political arena involved different meanings and imaginations of the collective history, about what is to be remembered about the past, and what is to be forgotten. These conflicts involved disputes about whether Ukraine should join NATO, whether the Russian language should have official status, what to do about the Russian naval base in Ukrainian Crimea, and so on. Conflicts arose about the post-Soviet reinterpretations of important Ukrainian historical events, such as a famine of 1932–1933, the Revolution of 1917, World War II, national heroes, monuments, holidays, and so on. Thus, the response to the question “What does it mean to be Ukrainian?” was much different for those in the East versus those in the West. They imagined national communities with different histories, languages, geographical claims, and loyalties. Moreover, new questions about identity have arisen; What kind of Ukrainian am I? Who am I if I was born in USSR to an interethnic Russian-Ukrainian family, have Ukrainian citizenship, and speak both Russian and Ukrainian? Difficulties in answering these questions produced *split-identities* or *diffuse identities* of many of the Ukrainians who lived in the south and east. A *diffuse identity* means that an individual is unable to define his or her national identity, as opposed to a *blended identity* where the individual readily creates a pastiche out of the different threads. Psychologically, this kind of identity can lead to inward disquiet and dissatisfaction. It may break integrity of inner personal structures, and may produce depressive consequences. In addition, *diffuse national identity* amplifies against a background of transition of Ukrainian society from Soviet to Western type, and of a wider identity crisis in a context of globalization processes, with its new technologies of television, Internet, and mobile phones. Globalization enhances the rise of what Lou Zurcher (1977) called “the mutable self,” which reflects shifts in self-definitions from stasis (self-as-object) to dynamic (self-as-process) orientations.

Despite the deep divisions within the Ukrainian imagined communities, there are bases for its continued integration and development, and consequently a gradual change from diffuse to an integrated all-Ukrainian national identity. Ukrainians from East and West do not wish territorial division of the country. Interethnic (Russian-Ukrainian) and ethnic Russian families in Ukraine have assimilated enough to reject emigration to Russia, and thus to imagine themselves as a legitimate part of the Ukrainian community. Since many Ukrainian citizens have a diffuse national identity, there are foundations for building an integrated or blended identity. Within Ukraine today, it is easy to see the dialectic process of existential and national identifications at work, in the mass media and in everyday

interactions. Subjective definitions and material culture combine via mass media to produce a dynamic and evolutionary process. Today it is clear that the majority of Ukrainians imagine themselves not primarily as an ethnic or language group, but as citizens of a newly emergent Ukrainian state, with its emergent (and contested) national-civil and national-state identities (see Golovakha & Drobizheva, 2007). This leads many to expect that the future will bring a decrease in diffuse identities and an increase in blended identities. Today Ukrainians are aware that the young people born after the 1991 independence readily accept their Ukrainian passports, and symbolically leave behind their parents' Soviet identities.

IMAGINATION IN ROLE PLAYING VIDEO GAMES (TIMOTHY ROWLANDS)

Role playing games (RPGs) are games of imagination, extending and systematizing the make believe that so preoccupies us as children. Presenting nested, fledgling realities of our everyday ones, RPGs always mine the working worlds of their creation. Whether the purely imagined spaces arising from the shared words of players in a pen-and-paper, dice-based game like *Dungeons & Dragons*, the reimagined, transformed space of a conventional hotel or municipal park used for Live Action Role Playing (LARPing), or the persistent, digital theme park of the virtual world in a massively multiplayer online role playing game (MMORPG) like *World of Warcraft*, game worlds are simulations. They present imagined pasts, presents, and futures, which are cosmological, mythic, or simply existential in character in that they ask us to explore our place in the world. More specifically, arising at a moment in history characterized by postindustrial capitalism's globalizing tendencies, these game worlds largely ask players to imagine life as a global citizen. What's more, since the context presented in the game is truncated, disguised, abstracted, and imagined, a magic circle where words and actions are one and the same, in exploring the life of a global citizen, the key decisions to be made by players are profoundly ethical in character.

What about the imagined worlds of RPGs suggests they are simulations of global citizenship? Certainly, RPGs draw on a wide variety of mechanics and metaphors (rules and game play). They can be played with dice and character sheets, costumes and props, or a computer of some combination of them. Some RPGs adopt the now clichéd trappings of high-fantasy sword and sorcery. Others ask players to imagine there is more going on than

might otherwise be apparent, exposing an occult realm of gothic punk horror or Lovecraftian conspiracy looming beneath the surface of the familiar (post-)modern world. However, regardless of form or content, they are overwhelmingly united by their requirement that players imagine other worlds than those immediately at hand. To do so, in search of epic spectacle, RPGs often require players to take on precisely those roles – explorers, adventurers, mercenaries, super heroes, secret agents, and so on – which foster a sense of agency on the global stage. In creating the context for these actors, these game worlds often mimic familiar elements of their parent realities; these worlds are social and economic.

Drawing on [Anderson's \(1983\)](#) concept, it is insufficient to say RPGs ask players to imagine communities. They also ask players to imagine imagined communities. As Anderson argues, imagining community is the work of nation building. It is about connecting disparate individuals to a common cause (typically the formation and/or martial, economic or political defense of the nation-state) based on a sense of shared history, tradition, language, values, and perhaps geography. Because, in RPGs, all this happens in the magic circle of the game's pretense, a bounded space which encourages the active creation of belief in alternative actualities, players are not asked to join the communities they imagine. While playing, RPGs may be temporarily *in* the imagined community, but they are never *of* that community. Imagining imagined communities, then, is one step removed from nation building, operating at a meta-level to it. It does not simply entail thinking about commonality and the nation. Rather, it entails thinking about the very prospect of organizing people based on imagined commonalities or nations. In order to role play an elf, I not only need to know something about the imagined community of the elven folk I plan to join, I also need to know something about how an elf might relate to a human, dwarf, troll, or orc in this world. This, in turn, requires that I know something about how these others might react to an elf. If I want to role play in this sense, I cannot simply imagine a community. I have to also imagine other communities in relation to my own.

As with any storytelling medium, conflict motivates the actions of players in these game worlds. Conflict, in turn, forces players to make ethical choices. Here, the differences between imagining community and imagining imagined communities become clearest. In nation building, imagining community, we typically rely on “us” versus “them” distinctions which serve to demonize and devalue anyone outside the group. Ethical choices made in this mode privilege the local and familiar. However, in imagining imagined communities, we instead enter into an (imagined) dialogue with

the Other. That is, RPGs in this vein model inclusive, cosmopolitan worldviews rather than insular nationalist ones. Ethical choices made in this mode must respond responsibly to the Other as a being inherently worthy of respect, one whose very vulnerability and suffering calls forth our own compassion, goodness, and charity. RPGs, in their many forms and formats, are culturally reflexive tools which allow us to playfully experiment with imagining communities and their ethical implications without the burdens of risks of attempting to do so in real life.

In the latest popular iteration of RPGs, MMORPGs like *World of Warcraft*, these tools have become artificially proscribed. In coming to these video game worlds, gamers brought with them an instrumental orientation based on beating the game. As such, gamers quickly dropped the pretenses of imagining imagined communities, a process-oriented approach, and instead imagined their community more immediately around a functional division of labor they call *The Holy Trinity*, a goal-oriented approach (Rowlands, 2011). In these worlds, gamers see themselves as damage dealers (“DPS”), damage mitigators (“tanks”) or damage recovery (“healers”). Capitalizing on the successes of early MMORPGs like *EverQuest* and learning from their failures, *World of Warcraft* further refined this notion of community. When *World of Warcraft* players meet in real life for the first time, the most common question “Horde or Alliance?” In other words, “Which imagined community do you belong to within this pocket reality?” players in MMORPGs don’t seem to want to explore the identity of being part of the imagined elven or dwarf antion, *World of Warcraft* lets players sort themselves into the Holy Trinity but then splits them into two superficially different but functionally similar teams, the Anglophone Alliance and the indigenous, anthropomorphic Horde. Here, the more complex and potentially culturally productive play of imagining imagined communities is deferred to the more immediate task of directly imagining yourself as part of the gamer community. In the interest of producing a type of consumer oriented toward a particular type of gaming product, MMORPGs, the reflexivity was lost and with it some of our ability to use these as spaces for the expression of our sociological imagination.

IMAGINING THE HUTU GENOCIDE IN 1994 RWANDA (KYRSTEN SINEMA)

Between April 7, 1994, and the end of June, 1994, about 100 days, the Rwandan government orchestrated and carried out the swiftest, deadliest

genocide in world history, murdering over 800,000 Tutsis and moderate Hutus in the small central African country. Armed largely with Chinese-made machetes and significantly financed by the French government, the Rwandan Presidential Army, Rwandan military, the *Interahamwe*, local government officials, Catholic leaders, and even ordinary Rwandan Hutus brutally and systematically killed nearly 20% of the country's population, including the majority of all Tutsis living in Rwanda. The genocide was waged with virtually no international intervention. The United Nations had as largely symbolic presence in the country during the crisis. Propaganda had a major effect on the country in the years leading up to and during the genocide.

The native peoples of Rwanda are today called Twa, a pygmy cave-dwelling people who make up less than 1% of Rwanda's current population. Hutus and Tutsis immigrated to the country later, but no documented proof of when they arrived or where they came from exists. The people of Rwanda lived together for generations as one people, choosing *Mwamis*, of chiefs, from among the local communities. Because the people of Rwanda intermarried for so many generations, experts today agree that the Hutus and Tutsis cannot be considered separate ethnic groups. Prior to colonization, the people of Rwanda did not have an ethnic identity system; people were differentiated on the basis of their occupation, pastoralists and cultivators. Tutsis were more likely to be herders, and so a system of stratification by the respective modes of production was established in 1860 when a Tutsi became King of Rwanda. It was easier for Tutsis to accumulate wealth through the ownership and transfer of animals. Hutus were more likely to be farmers, and thus has less access to accumulation of product for sale, which led to less ability to accumulate wealth over time. While there was some stratification among Rwandans, the distinctions were not those of ethnic identity, but rather of occupation, wealth, and status in society.

In 1885, Germany claimed imperial domination of Rwanda, but they were not actively engaged, and their colonization had little practical impact on the lives of Rwandans. After World War I, however, the League of Nations "bequeathed" Rwanda to Belgium, who took to colonization with energy. In 1933–1934, the Belgian occupiers introduced "ethnic identity cards," dividing the Rwandan people into three distinct ethnic groups, the Bahutu (Hutu), Batutsi (Tutsi), and the Batwa (Twa). According to this Belgian classification system, Hutus make up 84% of the population, Tutsis 15%, and the Twa only 1%. During Belgian rule, Tutsis were the privileged race, and supported by the Belgians as the dominant, elite ethnic group. That Catholic Church, who ruled Rwanda hand in hand with the Belgian

occupiers, subscribed to Tutsi superiority as well, and used religion as a tool to cement Tutsi hegemony in the land.

Independence movements swept Africa in the 1960s, and the national elections held in 1960 in Rwanda resulted in a landslide for Hutu candidates. Belgium shortly thereafter turned Rwanda over to the Hutu, cementing the upheaval of decades of social stratification and hierarchy. Under the newly elected President Gregoire Kayibanda, a series of exclusions and recriminations soon began, and by the end of 1963 between 10,000 and 20,000 Tutsis were killed in reprisal attacks. Over the next three decades, the Hutu ruled Rwanda, and the Tutsi were subjected to multiple waves of violence, murder, and ethnic cleansing. In the years leading up to the 1994 genocide, outbreaks of violence toward Tutsis by Hutus intensified. Between 1990 and 1994, there were four organized massacres throughout Rwanda, targeting thousands of Tutsis. The international community did not respond to any of the massacres.

Between 1990 and early 1994, there were a series of attacks and counterattacks between the Hutus in and out of the government, and the Rwandan Patriotic Front, the Tutsi rebels. The genocide began in earnest after the plane carrying Rwandan President Habyarimana was shot down on April 6, 1994, but this triggering event had been preceded by pervasive propaganda in radio and print media. The Hutu extremists published a newspaper *Kangura* between 1990 and 1994, with many vicious, racist cartoons and articles against the Tutsis, and Radio Television Libre des Milles Collines (RTLM) funded by President Habyarimana and his allies continuously broadcast racist messages, and openly advocated genocide, with complete instructions of whom should be killed, where, and when, within Kigali and surrounding areas. An early issue of *Kangura* published the infamous “Bahutu Manifesto,” a credo written by the pan-Hutu president Kayibanda, which sought to teach Rwandan Hutus that the Tutsi were an elite controlling force that must be overthrown. *Kangura* demonized the Tutsi, and thus promulgated an imagined dichotomy of racial difference which was a caricature of reality. Perhaps the most famous publication of *Kangura* contained the “Hutu Ten Commandments,” which sought to teach Hutus to disassociate themselves from Tutsis in social, commercial, and political life. It vilified Tutsi women as a poison of Rwandan Hutu. The ten commandments made assertions such as “All Hutus must know that all Tutsis are dishonest in business,” “All Hutus must know that all Tutsi women are working for the Tutsi ethnic cause,” “A Hutu majority must prevail throughout the educational system,” “Any Hutu is a traitor who forms a business alliance with a Tutsi, who borrows money from or loans

money to any Tutsi, or grants favors in business dealings with Tutsi,” and so on. The Hutu Ten Commandments served as an important tool in the dehumanization of the Tutsi, as they legitimized brutish behavior against, and later massacres against Tutsi. These publications and pronouncements asserted an absolute ethnic difference between Hutus and Tutsis, when none had existed before the colonial era, and promised or imagined a better future if Rwanda could be “cleansed” of this ethnic poison. *Kangura* popularized a number of euphemisms to refer to the Tutsi and killing them. The purpose of the propaganda was clear, to reignite the pan-Hutu ideology in Rwanda and prepare for the elimination of the Tutsi people of the country. These imagined racial differences promoted a “horizontal community,” to use the phrase of Benedict Anderson, wherein the definitions of “Hutu” and “Tutsi” were assumed to be absolute and definitive, wiping away any other distinctions of race, family, clan, gender, class, wealth, education, status, or mixed ancestry. The mass media propaganda imagined and “sold” these images and ideology to their audiences, and promised a brighter future which would restore a past historical glory of the Hutu, much as Slobodan Milosevic “sold” the ethnic cleansing in Bosnia on the promise of restoring past historical glory of the Serbs.

CONCLUDING IMAGININGS (SCOTT RENSHAW)

Benedict Anderson (2006, p. 25) says that we imagine how the characters in a novel are embedded in society, groups, families, and communities; characters are integrated through the written descriptions, and we imagine their consciousness and social interactions. Each character is a generalized other who makes and/or takes the imagined role of the other. This is close to Emile Durkhiem’s “collective representations,” or Charles Horton Cooley’s “looking glass self,” an explicit imagining of the other.

Cooley (1902, p. 25) writes, “so in imagination we perceive in another’s mind some thought of our appearance, manners, aims, deeds, character, friends, and so on, and we are variously affected by it.” Each author of this paper employs imagination as an analytic strategy to link concrete levels of meaning to broader levels of meaning embedded in society or culture. The authors demonstrate how the actors and researchers imagination of the other is pertinent in their research and the production of meaning.

Berg and Sinema describe the importance of mass media imagery in the formation of contemporary imaginings. Berg concludes that imaginings of terrorist organizations shift in association with region, education, and age;

media imagery of terrorist communities shape and “frame” our imaginings. Mass media broadcast deviant images of terrorism, and thus set up a dichotomy. We imagine the deviant, which in turn reaffirms and implicates our imaginings of social interactional normalcy. Similarly, Sinema describes how Belgian authorities in Rwanda issued identity cards creating categorizations for Bahutu, Batutsi, and Batwa, but it was not until the 1990s when a Bahutu media-driven propaganda campaign created imagined communities of difference among the groups, affirming the importance of imagining a deviant other. Propaganda-assisted imaginings of the other set the stage for the 1994 Rwanda genocide.

Alatorre’s research on undocumented Mexican immigration and McLin’s description of collaborative divorce exemplify the imaginings of the looking-glass-self. Alatorre found that undocumented Mexican immigrants imagine a successful Diaspora where people are able to work, save money, and eventually return to Mexico. Before migrating, individuals must imagine how their manners, aims, deeds, character, and everyday social interaction will fit in, appear before, and judged by others. Their self-feelings of acceptance (pride) and/or rejection (mortification) will in part guide their migration and conduct. But these initial ideas might be changed over and over again, as the immigrants find new and changing conditions in the United States, such as the changing political climate in Arizona. This observation is an important modification to Anderson’s ideas. Similarly, McLin shows that collaborative divorce clients’ imaginings of a bad divorce generate important images for them to participate in the process.

Melnikov discusses how the images of Russian, Ukrainian, and Russian-Ukrainian are integral to identity formation in this relatively new (1993) country. Ukrainians use their expanded looking-glass-self as they imagine other Ukrainians, and they must know which Ukrainian/Russian identity is present in any given situation, or social interaction may be threatened. Rowlands discusses how the functional role differentiation in video games such as *EverQuest* or *World of Warcraft* provides a beginning script for actors to anticipate and thus coordinate actions with others.

Janisch strengthens Anderson’s contributions to Cooley when he discusses how through Sioux letter writing, specifically the written and ritual phrases “I shake your hand” and “It is so,” transposes the writer and reader to an imagining of each other in actual face-to-face social interaction. For both writer and reader to offer and accept the imagined handshake, they must imagine themselves as favorably judged “Sioux.” These imaginations reaffirm and create Sioux community, Sioux pride, and interaction.

Murray implies a looking-glass-self as she distinguishes between Athens' "phantom community," of fictionally imagined peoples, and Anderson's "imagined communities" derived from actual people associated with one's life. Murray notes that the killer's imaginings, before the killing, can lead to acts and killings that may generate a real feeling of self-pride associated with the response from the actual community, a pride derived from the imagined community's negative judgment of his or her actions.

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