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***“A Land of Make Believe that Don’t Believe in Me”: Dissent by Incongruity in
Green Day’s “Jesus of Suburbia”***

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ABSTRACT

Following the September 11 terrorist attacks there were increased demands in America for patriotism. This attitude of hyper-patriotism, in accordance with the Bush Administration’s appropriation of the American civil religion, precluded many discursive possibilities for dissent. Yet there were some who still utilized the available outlets of public discourse to dissent from Bush Administration policies. Green Day’s 2004 song, “Jesus of Suburbia,” is just such an exemplary dissent discourse. What follows is divided into four sections. First, I analyze the ideological circumstances which preceded the release of “Jesus of Suburbia.” Second, I reflect on the respective conceptual insights of Ivie’s humanizing dissent and Burke’s perspective by incongruity; ultimately, I suggest their programs be joined into an individual construct: dissent by incongruity. Third, I examine how “Jesus of Suburbia” employed dissent by incongruity to critique imperialistic policies. Finally, I argue Green Day’s use of dissent by incongruity reorients the direction of dissent discourse.

Few events in American history have shaped politics as profoundly as the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001. In addition to redefining America’s political role in the world, most noticeably its foreign policy approach, 9/11 also distorted the tenor of U.S. political dialogue. According to Parameswaran (2006), the 9/11 terrorist attacks marked an opportunity “for tabloid and mainstream news media to engage with broader issues of U.S. foreign policy, national identity, religious freedom, free speech, and patriotism” (p. 42). In reality, though, that opportunity was squelched by intense public demands for patriotism. Even artistic outlets such as music were affected, falling victim to stringent standards of censorship. Taken collectively, the Bush Administration’s domestic legislation, foreign policy approach, and zealous nationalist rhetoric, galvanized a restrictive ideological apparatus. The Administration’s post-9/11 security policy of preventive war, which would come to be known as the “Bush Doctrine” (Dunmire, 2009, p. 195), strongly emulated a phenomenon which Bellah (1967) identified as the American civil religion.

The years following 9/11 were plagued by considerable partisan bickering and tenuous communication. Central to this contentious climate was the U.S. response to the 9/11 terrorist attacks: full-scale military involvement in both Iraq and Afghanistan. In the wake of such polarizing politics, Ivie (2007) proposed a peaceful approach to war resistance, a practice he

termed “humanizing dissent” (p. 219). An egalitarian practice, humanizing dissent places the responsibilities of deliberative democracy “squarely on the many who are ruled by the political elites” (Ivie, 2009, p. 454). In this sense, the citizenry is not only responsible to act, but to do so in a way that resists the toxicity of vilification. According to Ivie (2007), humanizing dissent is dedicated to “contesting language that demonizes rather than participating in rituals of reciprocal recrimination, by fostering the humanizing language of political friendship, by endorsing a positive for-peace perspective, and by apprehending the adversary’s perspective” (p. 219). Critical insights can be drawn from juxtaposing Ivie’s framework with Burke’s (1984a) perspective by incongruity—a communicative style he characterized as “‘verbal atom cracking’” (p. 308). Perspective by incongruity occurs when “a word belongs by custom to a certain category—and by rational planning you wrench it loose and metaphorically apply it to a different category” (p. 308). Synthesizing humanizing dissent and perspective by incongruity provides a new vantage point for analyzing the discursive possibilities of dissent.

On September 21, 2004, just over three years after the 9/11 terrorist attacks, Green Day released their seventh studio album, *American Idiot*. The album was arranged as a rock opera, a genre which *Entertainment Weekly’s* David Browne (2004) characterized as “songs with multiple sections, lyrical darts aimed at the Man, and [a] story that periodically makes no sense” (p. 105). Describing the album specifically, Browne characterized *American Idiot* as the tale of “two characters (the television-glazed Jesus of Suburbia and the more nihilistic St. Jimmy) as both struggle through a war-torn world and an ‘information age of hysteria’” (p. 105). John Pareles (2004) of *The New York Times* similarly described the album as “nothing less than a rock opera about a ‘Jesus of Suburbia’ adrift in an America that’s brainwashed by mass media, debased by materialism and facing Armageddon” (p. 2.31). Indeed, *American Idiot*, particularly the song “Jesus of Suburbia,” employed symbolic inversions and incongruent imagery to contest the status quo of mainstream America. For Green Day, the album marked a critical turn in their songwriting, an evolution front-man, Billie Joe Armstrong, articulated as a more direct engagement with politics, which, starting in 2004, “really started coming across in the music a lot more” (Maher, Gurvitz, Griffiths, Grey, and Carter, 2010). The political content Armstrong referenced, signaled a self-conscious dissent from the establishment, especially Bush Administration policies.

In this essay, I examine Green Day’s incongruently titled song, “Jesus of Suburbia.” The song sharply critiques the Bush Administration’s application of religious rhetoric to political matters. An unabashedly political anthem, “Jesus of Suburbia” artistically challenges the attitudes and practices of American life—from elected officials down to average Americans, but does so without degradation. Rather than demonizing through ad hominem, the song dissents from the dominant discourse by inverting ideological myths and symbols. In effect, “Jesus of Suburbia” circumvents the vilification cycle of modern political discourse, and, instead provides an artistic critical commentary.

My analysis is divided into four sections. First, I examine the ideological conditions which preceded the release of *American Idiot*. Second, I consider the respective theoretical

insights of humanizing dissent and perspectives by incongruity; ultimately, I propose the approaches be fused into a singular rhetorical construct: dissent by incongruity. Third, I analyze the way "Jesus of Suburbia" employed dissent by incongruity to critique imperialistic policies. Finally, I contend Green Day's use of dissent by incongruity reorients the direction of dissent discourse.

The Bush Administration, Civil Religion, and *American Idiot*

America has been viewed as a sacred land since its discovery. Even in its earliest days, convictions about America were so strong that many Europeans truly believed it was "a promised land where everyone lived happily ever after" (Olehra, 2010, p. 26). Time has served to only further cement the myth of America as a chosen nation. America's complex web of religion, mythology, and national pride, served to establish what Bellah (1967) dubbed a civil religion. Bellah observed that even in the earliest years of the republic, American life was permeated by a civil religion, or, "a collection of beliefs, symbols and rituals with respect to sacred things and institutionalized in a collectivity" (p. 8). Redefining Bellah's concept of civil religion, Hart and Pauley (2005) suggested a contractual framework called civic piety; in their understanding, "[c]ivic piety in the U.S. emerges not so much from blind, momentary passion but from a knowing, pragmatic understanding of what is required when God and country interact" (p. 45). From time-to-time, however, that contract has been amended. Most recently, the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001 altered the contract in such a way that political policy became inundated by religiosity. Such an intersection of faith and politics is emblematic of a providential belief system. According to Glazier (2011), providential believers "see the intervention of the divine in daily and global affairs"(p.7). Historically, American providentially has served both constructive and destructive purposes. As Hughes (2004) pointed out, divine providence has been valuable when rooted in feelings of responsibility "to other human beings... but, the myth of Chosen Nation easily becomes a badge of privilege and power, justifying oppression and exploitation of those not included in the circle of the chosen" (p. 41). In contemporary American politics, providential beliefs have manifested less as a feeling of responsibility, and more as a warrant for invasive foreign policy actions.

The Post-9/11 American Civil Religion

From 2001-2008, providential themes of manifest destiny permeated the Bush Administration's rhetoric. Taken collectively, the Administration's mixture of religiously charged rhetoric, national zeal, and political policy, consummated an era of theocratic government which served to further highlight the religious myths of the American civil religion. In the wake of 9/11, religious rhetoric was frequently utilized to shape legislative and military actions, most notably the U.S. occupation of Iraq and Afghanistan. On September 20, 2001, nine

days after the 9/11 terrorist attacks, President George W. Bush (2001b) delivered the following remarks to a joint session of Congress:

I will not forget this wound to our country or those who inflicted it. I will not yield; I will not rest; I will not relent in waging this struggle for freedom and security for the American people. The course of this conflict is not known, yet its outcome is certain. Freedom and fear, justice and cruelty, have always been at war, and we know that God is not neutral between them. (para. 25)

Bush's depiction of the U.S. as the virtuous defender of freedom and justice, utilized religious language to implicate that God supported the U.S. in its righteous conquest. His rhetorical approach oozes with what Jewett and Lawrence (2004) have characterized as "zealous nationalism"—a worldview that "seeks to redeem the world by destroying enemies" (p. 8). In contrast to the zealous nationalist perspective, Jewett and Lawrence identified "prophetic realism"—an outlook that "seeks to redeem the world for coexistence by impartial justice that claims no favored status for individual nations" (p. 8). Although both attitudes are intricately woven into the American ideology, Jewett and Lawrence concluded:

prophetic realism alone should guide an effective response to terrorism and lead us to resolve zealous nationalist conflict through submission to international law; and that the crusades inspired by zealous nationalism are inherently destructive, not only of the American prospect but of the world itself. (p. 9)

Thus, the Bush Administration's foreign policy approach was not only destructive to America, but to the entire world it swore to defend.

While the nation endured a climate of heightened anxiety, the Administration made fierce pushes to escalate defense legislation. One such bill was the brazenly titled *Uniting and Strengthening America by Providing Appropriate Tools Required to Intercept and Obstruct Terrorism Act of 2001*, otherwise known as the USA Patriot Act—a policy Bush signed into law on October 26, 2001. The Patriot Act, which greatly expanded law enforcement agencies' latitude to search an individual's communications and personal records, was viewed by many as a massive violation of Constitutional rights. As Cohen (2002) noted, "Civil libertarians, newspaper editorial boards and others warned that the new legislation gave government worrisome new powers to pry into peoples' private lives" (p. B9). The name of the bill alone created an oversimplified dichotomy—either you are "pro-defense legislation" or you are "anti-America"—which vigorously reinforced the hegemony of the American civil religion. In this way, defense legislation, the Patriot Act in particular, became a sacred object in the landscape of American life. As much is apparent in President Bush's (2001) remarks from the day the act was signed into law: "This legislation is essential not only to pursuing and punishing terrorists, but also preventing more atrocities in the hands of the evil ones" (as cited in Lehrer). Bush's (2002) tone in the following passage is even more indicative of how the Patriot Act, and other national security measures, became nearly sacrosanct:

Given the goals of rogue states and terrorists, the United States can no longer solely rely on a reactive posture as we have in the past. The inability to deter a potential attacker, the

immediacy of today's threats, and the magnitude of potential harm that could be caused by our adversaries' choice of weapons, do not permit that option. We cannot let our enemies strike first. (para. 8)

The overall tone of Bush's discourse is emblematic of the Administration's preferred defense strategy: preemptive aggression.

The Bush Doctrine finally drew to a culmination when U.S. military forces bombarded Baghdad, Iraq on March 20, 2003 (CNN, 2003). President Bush (2003a) justified the actions with the contention that it was a U.S. responsibility "to disarm Iraq, to free its people, and to defend the world from grave danger." What ensued was a full-scale occupation of the country, an exhaustive search for weapons of mass destruction, and a zealous quest to capture Iraqi dictator Saddam Hussein. The bullets and bloodshed did not finally cease until August 31, 2010.

Introducing the American Idiot

The punk-rock trio Green Day splashed onto the American music scene in 1987. Consisting of Billie Joe Armstrong (vocals/guitar), Mike Dirnt (bass), and Tre Cool (drums), Green Day first achieved mainstream success with their 1994 release, *Dookie*. Groom (2007) described *Dookie* as an album that "blasted a hole in the moody grunge" that had enveloped the music world during the early 90s. Following the release of *Dookie*, Green Day's music became synonymous with "punk-pop ... sarcasm, self-deprecation, humor, and pop-guitar hooks" (Groom). Their next three albums—*Insomniac* (1995), *Nimrod* (1997), and *Warning* (2000)—followed in much the same style, and enjoyed moderate success, but not nearly the acclaim of *Dookie*. But their seventh studio album, *American Idiot*, would redefine Green Day's songwriting and become an instant classic in the process.

American Idiot was overwhelmingly successful; the album enjoyed five hit singles—"American Idiot," "Boulevard of Broken Dreams," "Holiday," "Wake Me up When September Ends," and "Jesus of Suburbia."—and extensive critical acclaim (Browne, 2004; Pareles, 2004; Sheffield, 2004). Resulting from that success, *American Idiot* was adapted for the Broadway stage under the artistic direction of Michael Mayer, and premiered at the Berkeley Repertory Theatre on September 4, 2009 (Itzkoff, 2009). Theater critic for *The New York Times*, Charles Isherwood (2009), offered this interpretation of the show: "Mournful as it is about the prospects of 21st-century Americans, the show possesses a stimulating energy and a vision of wasted youth that holds us in its grip" (p. C1). Moreover, he noted:

This distrust of (and disgust with) the way language is manipulated today is signaled when we hear the voice of George W. Bush as the curtain slowly rises: "Either you are with us or you are with the terrorists." It doesn't take long to figure out which side the boys in "American Idiot" are on: nobody's, maybe not even their own. (p. C1)

Although the show was originally scheduled for only a few performances, it was so well received that it remained on Broadway until April 24, 2011, and even won a Grammy that year for "Best Musical Show Album." *American Idiot*, both the album and the musical, mark a rare

achievement in contemporary music and entertainment. Very seldom does an overtly political work enjoy the level of mainstream success as *American Idiot*.

While discussing the policies of the Bush era during a 2010 interview on *Real Time with Bill Maher*, Armstrong remarked, “When George Bush was creating this war and his war on terror, I thought there would be a lot more anarchy that was going to happen” (Maher et al., 2010). Armstrong’s statement sheds light on Green Day’s political approach to *American Idiot*.

In the same interview with Maher, when asked about the religious principles of contemporary America, Armstrong responded, “I think that’s something ingrained into us, it’s been beaten into us as a society that we fear God” (Maher et al.). Armstrong’s tone, particularly his juxtaposition of Bush policies and fear politics, insists the notion of *American Idiot* as a rhetorical response. More pointedly, *American Idiot* can be interpreted as a repudiation of the Bush Administration’s religious-based fear politics.

Dissent by Incongruity

According to *Webster’s Dictionary* (2011), dissent is defined as: “to differ in sentiment or opinion, especially from the majority.” In essence, to dissent, is to openly diverge from the establishment or mainstream society. As a discursive practice—barring times of political protest, national crisis, or war—dissent often goes unexercised, and, thus overlooked. Even when there is great demand for dissent, the fear of becoming a persecuted minority dissuades many people from rallying against the dominant discourse. However, as Thoreau (1983) pointed out, “A minority is powerless while it conforms to the majority; it is not even a minority then; but it is irresistible when it clogs by its whole weight” (p. 399). Although there are inherent dangers to dissent, it is vital to protecting the principles of democracy. Without concerted, demonstrable acts of dissent, minority viewpoints are rendered mute and incapable of inducing social change. Thus, critical engagement is fundamental to the effective practice of dissent. In this spirit, Achter (2010) contended, if we are to uphold the values of free speech, we must “interrogate dominant class strategies in order to evaluate how public discourse ‘renews and recreates the social order’” (p. 47). The critical engagement of dissent is an instrumental stimulus to penetrating the ironclad barriers of ideological apparatuses.

Though essential to the maintenance of democracy, not all forms of dissent are constructive; with the wrong mindset or approach dissent is susceptible to malice, and in some instances, dissidents actually reinscribe the very hegemonies they confront. History has proven that public controversies typically model the Burkean (1969b) paradigm of compensatory identification and division: discourse simultaneously unites and divides, valorizing one constituency, while condemning another. For this reason, dissent must be conducted thoughtfully and dissidents must construct a framework that resists perpetuating the conditions they aim to counteract.

To remedy this cycle of denigrating discourse, Ivie (2009) promoted a mode of dissent in which dissidents “critique society in a humanizing instead of demonizing idiom” (p. 455). His

approach champions the idea that regressive policies and actions can only be transcended by way of a progressive vision. In other words, for societal changes to occur, changes must first occur at the discursive level. A vital tenet to this practice is the notion that “[o]nly the vernacular voices of a dissenting demos speaking in a humanizing idiom about those who have been designated enemies of the state offer some possibility of escaping the regression from lively politics to deadly passivity” (p. 458). Indeed, without the observance of civil dialogue, competing constituencies devolve from agonistic rivals to antagonistic nemeses. If rhetorics of dissent are to produce revolutionary change, their practitioners must avoid the pitfalls of scapegoating, and instead reject oppressive structures through ethically responsible rhetorical invention. For, although the Burkean paradigm of “identification” and “division” may accurately characterize conflict as an unavoidable byproduct of the human condition, in the same token, each individual is accountable for their discursive response to such conflict.

In Ivie’s (2009) assessment, the fundamental challenge of humanizing “dissent is to develop a quotidian art of tactics that enable nonconforming speech to avoid being captured and contained within the ruling paradigms of governing regimes” (p. 457). As a rhetorical practice, however, humanizing dissent fails to satisfy that challenge in two ways. First, though philosophically admirable, humanizing dissent relies upon eschewing ideology. But as McGee (1980) argued, ideology is maintained through “ideographs,” or rhetorical vocabularies that “constitute excuses for specific beliefs and behaviors” (p. 16). Ivie’s insistence that humanizing dissent should avoid being captured by the dominant discourse creates challenges for dissolving the linkages between rhetoric and ideology. According to Parry-Giles (1995), rhetoric operates “first, to construct and define issues for the ‘public’s’ attention, and second, to respond to those issues as they have been constructed and defined” (pp. 183-184). Thus, instead of avoiding ideology, effective programs of dissent must, rather, actively challenge ideology. Second, Ivie’s demand for a conventional program which simultaneously resists the power structure and garners mass approval, overlooks the basic principle that dissidents, by definition, work in opposition to the conventions of mainstream society. Chomsky (2008) similarly addressed this matter, only in more pragmatic terms: “Resisters...must select the issues they confront and the means they employ in such a way as to attract as much popular support as possible for their efforts” (pp. 70-71). Though seemingly identical to Ivie’s perspective, Chomsky’s approach does not advocate that dissidents inconspicuously assimilate their strategies into everyday activity. Chomsky’s approach, rather, encourages dissidents to seek out the controversies and platforms which provide the most exposure to mainstream society. Dissent need not adhere to conventional society, it must only confront it.

The First Amendment right to free speech, namely the freedom to openly deliberate public policy, is an essential pillar of American democracy. Within the arena of deliberative dialogue, public arguments are typically evaluated on logical grounds. As such, arguers are expected to “move from reasons to conclusions using what logicians call ‘inference’ or a system of logical rules and processes that enables them to move from one idea to another” (Dimock & Dimock, 2009, p. 10). In short, if arguments do not make logical sense they are usually rejected.

As an alternative to this perspective, however, Burke (1984b) identified a rhetorical mode called perspective by incongruity. Contrary to typical discursive standards, perspective by incongruity upsets the logical associations of language “by taking a word usually applied to one setting and transferring its use to another setting” (p. 90). Though at first glance the statement or argument may appear illogical, and thus nonsensical, beneath the surface its incongruities give life to new meanings. Whedbee (2001) asserted perspective by incongruity constitutes “a violation of our common sense assumptions about what properly ought to go with what, and [subsequently] reveals hitherto unsuspected linkages and relationships which our customary vocabulary has ignored” (p. 48). Moreover, in “violating our expectations and introducing ambiguity into our vocabulary, perspective by incongruity serves as an ‘opening wedge’ that fractures our sense of how the world does and ought to function” (p. 48). To this end, perspective by incongruity performs two primary functions. First, it demonstrates how language creates symbolic relationships, simultaneously, pointing out how violating those relationships creates dissonance. Second, it illustrates how rigid systems of understanding are, in actuality, wholly a product of language, and thus, subject to interpretation. Whedbee’s assertions support Burke’s (1969a) contention that “it is in the areas of ambiguity that transformation take place” (p. xix). As a rhetorical device, perspective by incongruity creates opportunities to engage symbol systems and transform ideological constructs.

Though it is possible for a perspective by incongruity to occur naturally, Burke (1973) identified what he called a planned incongruity, or “a rational prodding or coaching of language so as to see around the corner of everyday usage” (p. 400). Planned incongruities mark strategic attempts to achieve rhetorical inversion. According to Burke (1984b), “every linkage,” regardless of a symbol system’s rigidity, is “open to destruction by the perspectives of a planned incongruity” (p. 91). Consequently, perspective by incongruity has limitless rhetorical potential in the hands of dissidents; however, its practice comes with constraints. One such obstacle is its sheer intellectual complexity. Though tropologically linked to metaphor, in many ways perspective by incongruity closely resembles the convolutedness of irony in that its usage can result in “unresolved symbolic tension” (Olson & Olson, 2004, p. 27). If applied to the wrong context, perspective by incongruity can create confusion in an audience and, thus, fail rhetorically.

Though humanizing dissent and perspective by incongruity each possess considerable theoretical value, as rhetorical practices, they lack critical substance. Fusing the two strategies together, however, produces a vehicle well-suited for the rhetorical demands of contemporary American culture. This synthesis could aptly be termed: dissent by incongruity. Guided by the ethical principles of humanizing dissent, but animated through the inversion and redirection of perspective by incongruity, dissent by incongruity can be harnessed to critique ideological beliefs and conditions while still avoiding the pitfalls of vilifying discourses. But as with any rhetorical situation, rhetors must consider “in any given case the available means of persuasion” (Aristotle, 2001, p. 181). As such, dissent by incongruity is not appropriate in every context; however, there are certain venues where it can flourish. As Ivie (2007) contended, there exist

limitless possibilities for humanizing dissent in “poetry, art, literature, theatre, cinema, and music” (p. 93). Burke (1973) similarly asserted that “even the most practical of revolutions will generally be found to have manifested itself first in the ‘aesthetic’ sphere” (p. 234). In this way, the creative arts present an ideal genre for confronting mainstream society through dissent by incongruity.

The remainder of this essay applies the concept “dissent by incongruity” as a way of analytically framing Green Day’s song “Jesus of Suburbia.” In the song, Green Day inverts resonant American symbols and myths, most conspicuously traditional views of Jesus, to artistically render an alternative vision of America. With its ironic treatment of ideological constructs, the song functions as a robust dissent discourse. Simultaneously, “Jesus of Suburbia” upholds ethical standards by circumventing the trappings of rhetorical demonizing. The song’s incongruent imagery compels listeners to re-conceptualize the consequences of American exceptionalism.

“Jesus of Suburbia”

“Jesus of Suburbia” emerged from *American Idiot* as a consummate example of dissent by incongruity. A nine-minute-and-eight-second ballad, the song consists of five distinct movements: I) “Jesus of Suburbia,” II) “City of the Damned,” III) “I Don’t Care,” IV) “Dearly Beloved,” and V) “Tales of another Broken Home.” Resistant to mainstream society, “Jesus of Suburbia” presents an alternative sketch of America—an America that defies the Bush Administration’s jingoistic rhetoric. In grand departure from President Bush’s (2003b) description of America as a land of benevolent people who “exercise power without conquest, and sacrifice for the liberty of strangers” (para. 43), Green Day (2004b) asserts America is “a land of make believe” where “[e]veryone is so full of shit.” While neither view is wholly accurate, I am not concerned with testing the validity of such claims; rather, I seek to analyze how Green Day harnessed dissent by incongruity to contest the Administration’s use of religious rhetoric.

Aside from “Jesus of Suburbia,” other songs on *American Idiot* also utilize dissent by incongruity. Indeed, instances of dissent by incongruity are salient in the song “Holiday.” Green Day’s (2004a) lyrics in the following verse are indicative of such:

Hear the dogs howling out of key
To a hymn called “Faith and Misery”
And bleed, the company lost the war today

The lyrics obliquely address the political landscape which followed the 9/11 terrorist attacks. The imagery, however, provides an incongruous perspective for understanding the circumstances. First, there is the reference to “the dogs howling out of key”—a clear allusion to politicians. The portrayal rejects the reverence which elected officials are typically regarded. Second, Green Day associates those politicians with a fictional hymn entitled “Faith and Misery.” The ironic pairing of the words “faith” and “misery” undermines the conventional associations of those concepts,

and suggests a blurring of two supposedly distinct realms: religion and politics. Finally, the vignette is completed when Green Day offers the incongruent image of a “company” losing a “war.” In merely a verse, Green Day propels their audience toward a critical space where dominant conceptions are preferably challenged. Such techniques are emblematic of their stylistic approach to “Jesus of Suburbia.”

Its song title alone positions “Jesus of Suburbia” as an ironic discourse. Without hearing a single guitar riff, or lyrical verse, the disparate coupling of “Jesus” and “Suburbia” primes the audience for incongruous arguments. Since the very notion of a “Jesus of Suburbia” violates traditional views of Jesus as a divine figure, comingling Jesus’s divinity with the secularity of “Suburbia” functions to merge the sacred and the profane. In this way, though roundabout, Green Day imposes on their audience the very phenomenon which they critique: the amalgamation of religion and politics. Green Day’s (2004b) employment of this tactic is evident from the song’s opening verse:

I’m the son of rage and love
 The Jesus of Suburbia
 The Bible of none of the above
 On a steady diet of
 Soda pop and Ritalin

Contrasting sacred symbols, such as “Jesus” and “The Bible,” with materialistic symbols such as “soda pop” and “Ritalin,” frames Jesus of Suburbia as somewhat of an antihero. Although Jesus of Suburbia functions as the protagonist of the rock opera (Browne, 2004; Moss, 2004; Pareles, 2004), he also embodies the downfalls of American exceptionalism. This counter-narrative defies traditional perspectives of Jesus and transitively defies conceptions of America as a sacred land. Though many Americans view the country’s foreign policy program to be magnanimous, by contesting the religious discourse which has justified U.S. military actions, Green Day suggests the possibility that America may actually be culpable for wrongdoings.

By and large, “Jesus of Suburbia” employs dissent by incongruity to expose the contradictions which permeate the American civil religion. Specifically, the song critiques the Bush Administration’s injection of religious themes into the political sphere—a domain which is supposedly governed by the separation of church and state. Accordingly, “Jesus of Suburbia” critiques this paradox by embodying the very conditions it contests, as demonstrated in the chorus of Part I:

And there’s nothing wrong with me
 This is how I’m supposed to be
 In a land of make believe
 That don’t believe in me

One is unavoidably drawn to the ironic tension which surrounds “a land of make believe” that refuses to acknowledge a Jesus of Suburbia. Green Day’s rhetorical juxtaposition compels its audience to consider the pliability of definitions. In other words, Green Day points to the biases of self-reflexivity—the fallaciousness which pervades a discursive situation where one party is

empowered to manipulate definitional tenets, while the other is forced to respond to ever-changing operational definitions. Though Jesus of Suburbia may not actually be real, the matter of existence is not the issue at hand, hypocrisy is. In essence, Green Day's verse questions the definitions which the Bush Administration applied to foreign policy actions. Such a move undermines the religious-laden discourse which established the War on Terror.

In the second movement of the song, "City of the Damned," the tone drastically changes. Green Day moves away from broad ideological commentary and hones in on the scenic contradictions which a Jesus of Suburbia might actually observe in this alternate America. The following passage typifies Green Day's (2004b) approach:

At the center of the earth
 In the parking lot
 Of the 7-11 where I was taught
 The motto was just a lie
 It says home is where your heart is
 But what a shame
 'Cause everyone's heart
 Doesn't beat the same
 It's beating out of time

The verse applies dissent through a barrage of incongruous imagery. One such resonant incongruity is Green Day's portrayal of the "center of the earth" as a "parking lot"; in many ways, such a depiction violates contemporary expectations of "place." Especially since the 9/11 tragedies, Americans have been conditioned to respond to "the rhetoricity of places" (Endres & Cook, 2011, p. 257). Donofrio (2010) described this rhetorical phenomenon as "place-making," an instance where a "newly made 'place' functions as a rhetorical symbol invested with mnemonic value and the capacity to inform identity construction" (p. 152). In this way, Green Day inverts the concept of place-making through a simple syllogism: America is the center of the earth; the center of the earth is a parking lot; therefore, America is a parking lot. This enthymematic argument constitutes a sharp criticism of the American exceptionalist attitude, an attitude which Ivie and Giner (2008) characterized as feelings of "national autonomy and superiority" (p. 360). As a result of such sentiments, Americans regularly "imagine themselves as a morally elevated people set apart from the rest of the world and living in a land of opportunity that is the envy and aspiration of humankind" (p. 361). Working from this premise, by stripping America down to nothing more than a parking lot, Green Day contests the valorized notion that America is engaged in a perpetual "heroic mission to conquer evil and advance civilization" (p. 361). Rather, by reframing the connotations of America as the center of the earth, the verse reveals the narcissistic attitudes which surround such a view. Thus, American exceptionalism is rendered a decidedly toxic worldview.

Perhaps the most striking incongruity from the aforementioned verse, though, is Green Day's (2004b) contention that "7-11"—the popular convenience store chain—not only functions as a site of education, but that the motto of its education was "just a lie." There are two elements

to this statement which demand closer analysis. First, to synonymize 7-11 as a site of education, greatly challenges conventional expectations and induces rhetorical interpretation. As Wilson (2010) pointed out, the rhetorical constraint of conventionality, otherwise known as decorum, is both “a determinative aspect of being human and a consistent willingness to challenge propriety for the sake of intellectual growth or personal pleasure” (p. 699). On the surface, Green Day’s description of education may appear uninformed and indecorous, however, since decorum is governed by “flexible standards of evaluation” (Hariman, 1992, p. 155), from the context of dissent, the incongruity possesses rhetorical potency. For, such a clear violation of mainstream decorum challenges preconceptions and provides the opportunity to invent new meaning. The resulting discord signals the existence of layered textual meanings and reaffirms the audience to view the text through an ironic lens. Though this signaling does not safeguard against misinterpretation, it at least orients the audience to read the text “with an air of cool detachment” (Terrill, 2003, p. 216).

Second, Green Day’s contention that the education’s “motto was just a lie,” comments on the penchants of mass consciousness. From this position, the lyrics incongruously contest nationalism, especially zealous nationalism, by illustrating its inherent contradictions. Whereas the advent of modern nationalism ushered in the “transformation of an older ‘patriotic consciousness’ into something of a tremendous new force of lasting importance” (Newman, as cited in Abbott, 2010, p. 107), Green Day (2004b) contests the Bush Administration’s distinctly zealous nationalism through a simple contradiction:

They say home is where the heart is
 But what a shame
 ’Cause everyone’s heart doesn’t beat the same
 It’s beating out of time

Although the lyrics may appear cliché, or cutesy, beneath their simplicity, there exists a keen understanding of rhetoric’s constitutive function. As McGee (1975) asserted, “the people,” or constituencies, “are more process than phenomenon” (p. 242)—they exist through rhetoric until the rhetoric used to conjure them loses force. Green Day’s anti-nationalist arguments, when bracketed by the premise that “the motto was just a lie,” invokes fundamental American mottos, such as The Declaration’s “unalienable Rights.” This conjuring of essential American principles functions to indict the Bush Administration’s protection of such rights. Moreover, Green Day’s duplicitous statement that a “heart” is “beating out of time,” further textures the scene. On the one hand, “beating out of time,” especially when juxtaposed with the statement that “everyone’s heart doesn’t beat the same,” may imply the diversity of beliefs which America was founded upon. The very same phrase, however, might be interpreted to convey a pressing urgency—a critical situation that, if left unchecked, might result in catastrophe. Overall, the verse’s undertones cast doubts about America’s future position under the direction of the Bush Administration’s policies.

Green Day’s (2004b) concerns about the direction of America’s foreign policy approach are further articulated in the following prophetic incongruity:

I read the graffiti in the bathroom stall
 Like the holy scriptures of a shopping mall
 And so it seemed to confess
 It didn't say much but it only confirmed that
 The center of the earth is the end of the world
 And I could really care less

The statement, in many ways, crafts the prophetic argument that America faces imminent calamity. According to Darsey (2007), prophetic discourse is “both of the audience and extreme to the audience” (as cited in Terrill, p. 34). By infusing the scene with competing images such as “the holy scriptures” and the “shopping mall,” Green Day simultaneously relates to, and challenges their audience. Ultimately, their conclusion that “the center of the earth is the end of the world,” implicates that the Bush Administration’s uniquely religious exceptionalism will result in the nation’s downfall and destruction. This line of argument contests the Administration’s audaciously named policies, such as “Operation Iraqi Freedom” and “USA PATRIOT Act,” and identifies them as integral accessories to impending hardships America might face.

With the stage set for future disaster, Green Day finally collapses their incongruous depictions and poses their audience with a moment of decisive judgment. Particularly in the final movement of “Jesus of Suburbia”—“Tales of Another Broken Home”—Green Day’s (2004b) lyrics become less descriptive and more prescriptive:

To live and not to breathe is to die in tragedy
 To run, to run away, to fight what you believe
 And I leave behind this hurricane of fucking lies
 I lost my faith to this, this town that don't exist
 So I run, I run away to the lights of masochists
 And I leave behind this hurricane of fucking lies
 And I walk this line a million-and-one fucking times
 But not this time

Green Day manufactures for their audience what rhetoricians refer to as “kairos,” or an opportune moment to act. According to Crosby (2009), “kairos denotes the unique and contextualized moments of import that take place within a given day or period of time; it characterizes what happens in moments of propriety or occasional fitness” (p. 262). As such, Green Day propels their audience into a sphere of “krisis,” or rhetorical judgment. As citizen-critics and agents of change, listeners are forced to assert their social position. In essence, will they “die in tragedy” or “fight what they believe”? With this album, and this song specifically, Green Day presents a critical question: To dissent, or not to dissent? By inverting dominant societal themes and metaphors, Green Day calls into question how these themes and metaphors have been appropriated, and argues for an ideological renovation. Reflecting upon their incongruous ballad, Billie Joe Armstrong (2005) contended that there is a lot of “emotion at stake” in a song like “Jesus of Suburbia,” and ultimately, that is what the song’s performance is

all about: exercising “the emotional baggage” (as cited in Bayer) that people carry around every day. In this regard, “Jesus of Suburbia” is subtly situated at the intersection of the personal and the political—its employment of dissent by incongruity, contests conventional ideological boundaries and subverts the mechanisms which construct those boundaries.

Conclusion

Much like the myths and metaphors which have fortified the American civil religion, dissent is deeply engrained in the American spirit. In many ways, dissent has initiated great American achievements: the fight for colonial independence, the struggle to abolish slavery, and the civil rights quest for equality. By in large, however, dissent continues to be viewed negatively, and remains immensely neglected by communication scholars. This lack of critical attention has led to dissent’s manipulation and malpractice in several instances. In the tragic wake of Malcolm X’s assassination, Martin Luther King Jr. (n.d.) poignantly asserted, “The assassination of Malcolm X was an unfortunate tragedy. And it reveals that there are still numerous people in our nation who have degenerated to the point of expressing dissent through murder, and we haven’t learned to disagree without being violently disagreeable” (as cited in Papers). Of course, the wisdom of King’s statement was tragically confirmed merely three years later when he suffered the same fate as his controversial contemporary. Sadly, not enough has changed since King’s astute observation—violence still pervades our words and actions.

By fusing Ivie’s (2007) humanizing dissent with Burke’s (1984a) perspective by incongruity, I have attempted to show how Green Day’s (2004) song “Jesus of Suburbia” productively harnessed what I have termed dissent by incongruity. Green Day’s use of dissent by incongruity functioned to contest the Bush Administration’s zealous nationalist rhetoric, particularly American exceptionalism. While vigorously critical of Bush Administration tendencies, “Jesus of Suburbia” circumvents the downfalls of demonizing discourse, and in so doing, exemplifies a peaceful alternative to the divisive vortex of vilification. In essence, Green Day’s use of dissent by incongruity critiques through ideological inversion, and thus avoids particular engagement with any specific agents. This resistance of ad hominem arguments not only upholds the tenets of ethical argumentation but also strengthens “our faith as citizens in [the] processes” (Dimock, 2008, p. 2) of democracy.

In sum, Green Day’s use of dissent by incongruity performs two critical functions. First, their inversion of ideological constructs serves to contest the propriety of dominant conceptions. Second, their demonstration of consciously ethical invention extends the acceptable boundaries of dissent. In our rapidly expanding technological landscape, dissent can now be performed via nearly limitless channels and platforms. Subsequently, now, more than ever before, dissidents may confidently assert their position without fear of violent repercussions. Though several complexities to this phenomenon demand critical attention, this increased freedom of expression especially requires thorough examination. For, although the advent of technology creates the potential for a dramatic proliferation of dissent discourse, it also creates the potential for an

unheralded increase of unethical dissent. However, if Green Day's use of dissent by incongruity demonstrates anything, it is that ethically conscious dissent not only maintains high moral standards, but is also capable of garnering widespread support for minority viewpoints. Moving forward, those are the standards dissidents must strive for.

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