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# **Living and Learning in the Shadow of the Shopocalypse: Reverend Billy's Anti-consumption Pedagogy-of-the-Unknown as Critical Adult Education**

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**Abstract:** I explore the social movement learning operating within one site of critical public pedagogy and, specifically, examine how the anti-consumption activist group *Reverend Billy and the Church of Stop Shopping* fosters participatory cultural production, enacts a poetic community politics, and encourages transitional spaces of learning through a pedagogy-of-the-unknown.

## **Purpose of the Study**

There is an increasing interest among critical adult educators in understanding social movements that operate within civil society (Foley, 1999); these social movements are “sites of learning, meaning making and resistance” (Hill, 2002, p. 182). But despite increasing interest in the topic, Foley (1999) argues that “much remains to be discovered about the characteristics, determinants, dynamics and effects of *learning* in popular movements and struggles” (p. 140).

One emerging social movement that has received little attention among adult education researchers focuses on resisting consumerism and consumption. Kozinets and Handelman (2004) argue that this movement has as its goal “not only the changing of principles, practices, and policies but also a fundamental change to the ideology and culture of consumerism” (p. 692). This consumer social movement questions taken-for-granted assumption that consuming is natural and good and aims to disrupt the naturalization of consumer culture. While a few adult educators are beginning to address the learning involved in consumption and its resistance, adult educators need to continue to focus on these issues, given the increasing role consumption plays in structuring every aspect of our lives (Bocock, 1993). Here, I focus on one group that is part of this growing anti-consumption social movement—*Reverend Billy and the Church of Stop Shopping*. I focused specifically on how “public pedagogy” (Giroux, 2000) operates as critical adult education within the context of this group’s anti-consumption cultural resistance activism.

## **Theoretical Framework**

I frame the work of anti-consumption social movement educators as “critical public pedagogy,” following critical curriculum theorists Giroux (2000) and Ellsworth (2005) who focus on everyday life and popular culture as sites of learning. “Public pedagogy” refers to the educational force of popular culture; popular culture teaches audiences and participants through the ways it represents people and issues and the kinds of discourses it creates and disseminates. Educators who examine critical public pedagogy draw from a Gramscian cultural studies framework, which examines the politics of culture and the possibilities it holds for resistance (Bennett, 1998). Ellsworth’s (2005) most recent perspectives on public pedagogy are especially helpful in exploring Reverend Billy as critical adult education. Ellsworth (2005) urges educators to pay more attention to informal sites of learning such as public art installations and museums—what she calls “anomalous places of learning”; and to focus on what she calls their “pedagogical hinges”—the aspects that make them so powerful as sites of learning (p. 5). I borrow from Ellsworth a way of thinking of education within informal spaces as an ongoing, active, creative process. To Ellsworth, “public pedagogy” works best when it creates transitional spaces—that is,

when it helps us connect our inner realities to people, objects, and places outside of ourselves.

### **Methodology**

I used a qualitative case study design (Yin, 1994), a type of inquiry focused on bounded systems and drawing from multiple sources of data. Like Ellsworth (2005), I used secondary data of scholars in other disciplines who have studied Reverend Billy and from the activists who work with and document their activism with Reverend Billy—as “raw material” (p. 13). Using netnographic methods (Kozinets, 1998), I also drew upon material from Reverend Billy’s website, including blogs, mp3s of “sermons,” and Reverend Billy’s public performance scripts. In addition, I gathered other written material produced by Reverend Billy, including his book of memoirs, and interviews with Reverend Billy conducted by various journalists and researchers. Finally, I gathered data from two recent documentaries about Reverend Billy (Post, 2002; Sharpe, 2001). Analysis of data included critical media analysis (Altheide, 1996), qualitative thematic analysis, and the constant comparative technique (Straus & Corbin, 1990).

### **Findings and Discussion**

Bill Talen, whose stage character is “Reverend Billy,” is a political theater artist who adopts the persona of a Southern evangelical preacher. Reverend Billy stages “retail interventions” and performances in public spaces and retail stores, along with the Stop Shopping Gospel Choir. He also writes “intervention manuals” such as the “Starbucks Invasion Kit” that activists can use in their own public theater jams. He stages “comic theatrical service[s]” (Lane, 2002, p. 60), structured as comic church services, with “readings from the saints (or the devils), public confessions, collective exorcisms, the honoring of new saints, donations to the cause, a lively choir, and a rousing sermon” (Lane, 2002, p. 61). During these services he performs a call-and-response style of preaching as the audience responds with “Hallelujahs!” and “Amen!”

As a form of pedagogy, Reverend Billy’s work centers on political and civic learning, and is focused on the kind of informal learning that Schugurensky (2006) calls “learning required to act effectively in processes of participatory democracy” (p. 163). My analysis revealed that the educational power of Reverend Billy’s work lies in its ability to foster creative production and create a community poetical politics. Analysis further located Reverend Billy’s pedagogical hinge in the ways in which he creates “détournement” in audience members through engaging in what I call his “pedagogy of the unknown.” This pedagogy of the unknown opens up the “transitional spaces” (Ellsworth, 2005) so necessary for critical learning to take place.

#### *Fostering Creative Production and Reclaiming Agency*

Ellsworth (2005) argues that the question of pedagogy is “how to use what has already been thought as a provocation and *a call to invention*” (p. 165, emphasis mine). Powerful pedagogies thus engage learners as creators of knowledge and culture. One aspect of Reverend Billy’s power as critical adult education, then, lies in his ability to foster participatory cultural production. In our current condition of hypercapitalism grounded in consumption, “the idea that ‘one should be ‘the entertainer of myself’ is a defiant one” (Duncombe, 1997, p. 105); yet it is this very ideal that Reverend Billy promotes. Reverend Billy appropriates, reuses and recreates cultural products and entertainment. In doing so he encourages audience members to become active creators and resisters rather than passive consumers. As he enacts cultural resistance, then, Reverend Billy opens up “free space” where he encourages audience members to “experiment with new ways of seeing and being” and where they can “develop tools and resources for resistance” (Duncombe, 2002, p. 5). During his “revivals,” Reverend Billy invites audience

members to participate: sing along, confess their sins, or dance as the choir sings. Through his website, audience members can discuss issues such as consumption, consumerism, and strategies for creating more awareness among ordinary consumers. Reverend Billy's website hosts scripts of performance pieces that audience members can appropriate, borrow, change, and enact in local contexts. Reverend Billy thus turns typically passive activities into active ones in which citizens create culture rather than simply consume it.

One way Reverend Billy engages in cultural production is through altering and giving new, resistant meanings to well-known popular cultural symbols. Reverend Billy plays with the symbols created and distributed by corporations such as Disney, Starbucks, and Victoria's Secret. For instance, during his "shopping interventions" at Disney retail stores, Reverend Billy and members of his church often carry large wooden crosses with large stuffed animals in the shape of Mickey and Minnie Mouse "crucified" on them. During a recent interview, he explains:

The Disney Company is the high church of retail. And that's why we put Mickey Mouse on the cross. We're taking two great organized religions [Christianity and what he calls the "Church of Consumerism"] and grinding them together and trying to confuse people so they can think in a new way . . . I want the symbols and their meanings to fly away.

(Reverend Billy, as interviewed in Post & Palacios, 2002)

Reverend Billy causes these symbols to take on new meanings as they are incorporated into unexpected counter-hegemonic cultural scripts. Mickey Mouse morphs from the Disney-sanctioned symbol of everlasting childhood into the leader of a child-labor-sweat-soaked empire.

### *Creating a [Poetic] Community Politics*

To Ellsworth (2005), an important part of "democratic civic pedagogy" is how it puts us in new relationships "with our selves and with others" (p. 96). Ellsworth believes powerful pedagogy must "create places in which to think about 'we'" (p. 95, emphasis mine). That is, a powerful aspect of Reverend Billy's pedagogy is the ways in which it helps create *community*. Drawing upon St. Clair's (1998) discussion, I view community as *relationship*, meaning that communities are formed and maintained as individuals form relationships with each other. As St. Clair (1998) argues, community is not the result of interaction, it is "the very stuff of personal interaction" (p. 8). Community relationships are also sites of cultural production and reproduction. The act of collaborative cultural production—*creating culture together*—and the act of *sharing that culture* with others helps Reverend Billy and members of his Church to create community. Indeed, Duncombe (2002) argues that through this sharing and creating process culture thus "becomes a focal point around which to build a community" (p. 6). For instance, Church member Jason Grote (2002) recalls the sense of collectivity that occurred among Church members during recent interventions in the Disney store:

I have noticed that there is a collective upswell of emotion that seems to occur at demonstrations, or at least at the good ones. I think it would be dangerous if I were to feel it more often: a mix of inspiration, sentimentality, camaraderie, self-righteousness, righteous anger, abject fear, and what I think Che Guevara must have been talking about when he said that the true revolutionary was guided by great feelings of love: a deep, abiding compassion for everything and everyone. (p. 359)

Kalb (2001), in an article on Reverend Billy, also describes how social movement activism creates a sense of community among audience members:

Flooding the halls he performs in with an astonishing torrent of righteous words about the spell of consumer narcosis, he ends up offering hundreds of hard-core artsy skeptics

(often in their twenties) their first chance ever to shout “Hallelujah!” and engage in Pentecostal call-and-response. In so doing, they find themselves possessed of a precious community that is not accessed via flickering screens, as well as a delightful channel for various inchoate angers that he has done them the service of naming. (p. 164)

Thus, Reverend Billy offers audiences members ways of relating to each other that they may have never experienced before.

The community Reverend Billy creates is not just any kind of community, however – it is a community drawn together with a sense of *political* purpose and a community engaging in what Brookfield (2005) calls “political learning” (p. 31). The cultural resistance that occurs as an educational strategy within Reverend Billy’s movement by its very nature addresses power and seeks change—it is “culture that is used, consciously or unconsciously, effectively or not, to resist and/or change the dominant political, economic and/or social structure” (Duncombe, 2002, p. 5). Reverend Billy’s work, then, is political resistance, as it plays with and challenges dominant ways of creating, viewing, and enacting culture. The creation of community is, in fact, necessary for the enactment of Reverend Billy’s politics. Brookfield (2005), following Gramsci, argues that critical consciousness, or *political learning*, cannot form in an individual without that individual becoming part of a collective. Critical consciousness thus forms in groups—*communities*—as people learn about their common situations and the need for collective political action. Reverend Billy focuses his activism against “the noxious effects of consumerism, transnational capital, and the privatization of public space and culture” (Lane, 2002, p. 60). Reverend Billy’s work also “advances certain spiritual notions of community development social activism” (Lane, 2002, p. 79). Reverend Billy states, in fact, “We’re trying to find the thing called neighborhood, called *community* . . . we’re looking for it on the sidewalks out here, trying to reawaken it in the heart of commodification” (Talen, 2003, p. 18, emphasis mine).

Reverend Billy, however, creates political community through a very different kind of political engagement than traditional party politics or traditional social movement activism. This new paradigm of political activism involves the creative appropriation, creation, and enactment of culture, along with large doses of humor and creativity—this approach works by creating a *political poetics*. In an interview, Reverend Billy explains:

Opposing that dominating presence [hegemonic society] was always done by someone who was willing to poke their head out, to do something in public, and sometimes they were grand heroes. And sometimes they were clowns and fools. And I’m of the latter tradition [laughs] . . . I’m using strategies like entertainment, comedy, music, and then of course working with small groups of people inside transnational chain stores inside the private property of the enemy, of the great retail juggernaut – that also is much more fun – it’s charged and less predictable than a demonstration that has its didactic language and a set of terms that are very old. (Reverend Billy, as interviewed in Post & Palacios, 2006)

Reverend Billy thus provides audience members an entrée into political resistance, as his work simultaneously enacts political resistance (Duncombe, 2002). Part of his effectiveness as critical public pedagogy, then, is his ability to help participants to engage in communal politics.

### *Détournement and a Pedagogy of the Unknown*

Ellsworth (2005) describes a “pedagogical hinge” as that aspect of pedagogy that makes it most powerful and effective. I posit that Reverend Billy’s pedagogical hinge lies in moments of “détournement,” which work to open transitional spaces of learning. Through the use of “détournement,”—a “turning around” or a “perspective-jarring turnabout in your everyday life” (Lasn, 1999, p. xvii)—Reverend Billy attempts to open transitional spaces and thus to connect

learners with each other and to connect individual lives to social issues. Transitional spaces are spaces of play and creativity; transitional spaces help us bridge the boundaries between the self and the other. When we are in those spaces, “we are entertaining strangeness and playing in difference. We are crossing that important internal boundary that is the line between the person we have been but no longer are and the person we will become” (Ellsworth, 2005, p. 62). The learning moment within transitional spaces is similar to Jarvis’ (2006) notion of disjunction.

One way Reverend Billy leads audience members to this transitional space is through what I call his “pedagogy of the unknown.” An important part of this pedagogy involves avoiding certainty and encouraging exploration. Through this pedagogy, Reverend Billy attempts to pull learners out of what he calls the “consumerist script” – where responses are dictated by the “psychic architecture” of consumer culture. Reverend Billy argues that consumerist culture “is saturated with constructions, advertisements, sales jobs, and Pavlovian drill masters.” Reverend Billy challenges audience members to reject that scripted life—to “raise your arm the wrong way, shout in the wrong direction, wear the wrong costume, manage the boycott of a particular sweatshop product” (as interviewed in Post & Palacios, 2002). Instead of accepting a scripted life, he encourages audiences to embrace the exhilarating, terrifying, embarrassing “unknown.” He explains, “When you lift your hand from the product and back away from it, a bright, unclaimed space opens up. Consumers think it is a vacuum. It is really only the unknown—full of suppressed ocean life, glitterati from Bosch, DNA twists, and childhood quotes that if remembered would burn down the Disney Store” (Talen, 2003, p. xii). Reverend Billy acknowledges that moving into the “unknown” is difficult, as it requires consumers to shake their reliance on others to provide the answers and the entertainment and the “script” of life. But moving into the unknown, from Reverend Billy’s perspective, is the only way to create lasting change in individuals. He states, “When I’m preaching [in a retail space], people kinda go – [pauses, looks around with a confused expression on his face]. Their consciousness floats out away from their faces. They are no longer in possession of themselves and that’s good – that means something real might be changing in them” (Reverend Billy, as interviewed in Post & Palacios, 2006). Reverend Billy seems to have learned the pedagogical force of not dictating “the final correct answer” (Ellsworth, 2005, p. 76). Instead, he leaves spaces open to be digested, (re)created, and acted upon by audience members themselves. The unknown thus works to open transitional spaces, in the way that it “opens up the space and time between an experience and our habitual response to it. . . It introduces a stutter, a hesitation” (Ellsworth, 2005, p. 64).

### **Implications for Adult Education Theory and Practice**

Foley (1999) argues that while “social movements have been discussed in general terms, there has been almost no extended analysis of specific social movements or instances of social action” (p. 134). My research provides insight into how one group within the anti-consumption social movement is enacting critical adult education. Reverend Billy’s social activism is a site of pedagogy that highlights people working collectively for social change. As a critical adult educator, Reverend Billy focuses on an active, productive pedagogy, where learners are enacting resistance rather than passively theorizing it. I posit that critical adult educators need to look to social movements as activism-as-curriculum that are actively producing new, resistant pedagogies. I believe critical adult educators could learn a great deal about the potential of critical public pedagogy from Reverend Billy’s enactment of anti-consumption activism. I encourage other critical adult educators to continue to explore the potential of Reverend Billy and to locate other sites of consumer resistance within civic spaces.

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