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Pierre Walter
University of British Columbia, Canada

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Catalysts for Collective Conscientization in Environmental Adult Education: Mr. Floatie, Tree Squatting and Save-our-Surfers

Pierre Walter
University of British Columbia, Canada

Abstract: This study examines how cultural codes in environmental adult education can be used to "frame" collective identity, develop counter-hegemonic ideologies, and catalyze "educative-activism" within social movements. Three diverse examples are discussed, spanning movements in urban Victoria, BC, the redwoods of northern California and the coral reefs and beaches of Hawai'i.

In several decades of scholarship and activism on adult learning in New Social Movements (the women's, peace, civil rights, anti-racism, GLBT rights, anti-globalization, indigenous rights, environmental and other "identity" movements), one of the central concerns has been, and remains today, the role of social movements in facilitating both individual and collective learning (Hall & Turay 2006). Social movements are recognized as powerful sites of "cognitive praxis" (Holford 1995) and "collective learning" (Kilgore 1999); they are catalysts for personal transformation and wider social change (Welton 1993). In contrast to the economic determinism of class struggle in "old" labor, workers' party and trade union movements, New Social Movements (NSM) are seen as "political" and "cultural" movements, where the construction of collective, oppositional identities—that is, symbolic actions in civil society—challenge dominant state and corporate ideological hegemony.

In environmental adult education, as in other social movement contexts, the process of "educative-activism" and *concientización* (conscientization) is critically important (Clover 2002). *Concientización* is Freire's notion of "reading the world" to understand the underlying political, economic and social structures of oppression and their relation to environmental issues, and to take action to change these. Educative-activism works to revive and legitimize people's local, often invisible environmental knowledge, and to create alternative, indigenous "epistemic communities" challenging dominant knowledge systems (Hall, nd). Humor, music and art are central to much of the "cultural learning" which takes place within NSM, including the environmental movement (Clover & Stalker 2005). The arts and other forms of symbolic action not only help to create new knowledge and collective identities—to develop "counter-hegemonic" ideologies within counter-publics, but also catalyze action for collective change.

This paper analyzes three cases of creative protest in the environmental movement, each illustrating the power of cultural symbols to transform and radicalize popular understandings of environmental issues, to develop local knowledge, and provoke social change. The study is based on newspaper accounts, websites, secondary publications, and on-line archival materials at the University of Hawai'i (in the third case).

Mr. Floatie

The first case is that of Mr. Floatie (aka James Skwarok), a man dressed as a giant piece of human excrement, who for the past three years has called attention to the dumping of untreated sewage into the ocean waters of Victoria, British Columbia. This proud provincial capital of over 200,000 people has traditionally fashioned itself as a tourist-friendly city of flowers and afternoon tea: a quiet home to retirees and other Canadians fleeing the country's

colder climes. More recently, thanks in part to the efforts of Mr. Floatie, Victoria has also become famous for its poop. It is the last major city in North America to release raw sewage directly into a waterway—the Juan de Fuca Strait. At present, an average of 129 million gallons of untreated sewage is released into the ocean each day through two underwater outfall pipes, positioned under two points of parkland jutting a kilometer out into the Strait.

Since 2004, the efforts of Mr. Floatie and a related NGO, People Opposed to Outfall Pollution (POOP), have helped to galvanize public support in favor of sewage treatment, an issue largely "side-stepped" by an intransient Victoria government. Mr. Floatie has appeared at numerous public meetings, he ran for mayor in 2005, and he has helped to organize such events as the First Annual Victoria Toilet Regatta (POOP 2006). Using a combination of humor, disgust and public shaming of politicians, Mr. Floatie and POOP are widely credited with bringing public outrage to bear on the sewage issue. POOP's mission ("The Porcelain Throne Speech") is in part "to have FUN educating the public about the problems of dumping raw sewage into the Juan de Fuca Straight" (Ibid.). Mr. Floatie himself is a 6-foot brown velour poop, sporting a bow-tie, whimsical sailor cap and falsetto voice. Satirical puns and potty humor cheerfully emanate from Mr. Floatie, making good copy for journalists and community activists alike.

Much in the same way as the Raging Grannies (another creative protest group with origins in Victoria, Canada), for instance, have used satirical and humorous song to promote "cultural learning" within social movements, so has Mr. Floatie given the problem of sewage a recognizable public face, drawing on the catalytic power of humor. This is further illustrated in a few samples from interviews with Mr. Floatie: the idea of donning a giant poop costume "just floated to the surface in a conversation with friends;" he was "bummed out" at what was happening; wanted to see "some movement on the issue;" and, after losing his bid for mayor, "asked people not to dump him" (Mason 2006). Likewise, various members of the public have noted that Mr. Floatie "scared the crap out of people," but if successful in his cleanup efforts, was an "endangered feces;" that "some communities have a town fool; Victoria has a town stool;" and that "Mr. Floatie wants tourists to hold it" (Hawthorn 2005).

As these bad puns have been shared both formally (through the press), and informally (in conversation, websites and email), they have acted widely to expand interest in the environmental issue of sewage pollution. Mr. Floatie's run for mayor; for example, generated stories that ran in more than 50 newspapers in North America. The 1st annual Victoria Toilet Regatta was held in July 2005 in the harbor of the seat of government and drew 400 spectators to watch 9 contestants paddling boats such as "Montezuma's Revenge," "Gas Bag" and "Floattete" (POOP 2006). Mr. Floatie has also been used as humorous hook into more serious examinations of sewage; for example, articles on treatment status and options in Victoria and in Canada at large. Working less visibly, the Victoria Sewage Alliance, a coalition of environmental and labor NGOs long involved in the sewage issue, has supplied supporting social, economic, political and technological knowledge, education and activism to the sewage debate as well.

The outcome of Mr. Floatie's environmental activism, together with that of supporting NGOs, the media and public, was a 2006 Provincial ordered requiring Victoria to have a detailed plan and fixed schedule for sewage treatment implementation established by June of 2007. Most observers believe the city will in fact have sewage treatment in place by the 2010 Olympics, allowing it to avoid the potential embarrassment of its sewage-sullied image being broadcast to the world. While there is much public debate over what exactly sewage treatment will comprise, movement on the issue is no longer in doubt. Recently, as Mr. Floatie reflected on this success,

he indicated that he believed it was well worth the effort: “if raising a stink made a difference, that’s great. I can tell you it’s been a real gas” (in Mason 2006, p. 2).

Julia Butterfly Hill

The second case, that of Julia Butterfly Hill, an independent environmental activist “tree squatter,” who in 1997-99 spent 738 days living in a 1000-year old redwood (named Luna) 180 feet off the ground, demonstrates the power not of humor, but of courage, conviction and persistence in symbolic action. In her principled stand against the logging of old growth forest in the redwoods of northern California, Julia Hill helped to catalyze public and NGO support against old growth clear-cutting by the Pacific Lumber Company, to educate others about the value of such forests and the effectiveness of symbolic protest in social movements, and ultimately to preserve a tract of redwood forest, including Luna, the tree.

Child of an itinerant, trailer-traveling preacher working the U.S. East Coast, in 1994, at the age of 22, Julia Hill suffered a near fatal automobile accident, and after a year of slow recovery, traveled to California on a journey of self-discovery (COL 2006). It was there that she encountered the majesty and beauty of the redwoods, their painful destruction by logging companies, and the grassroots environmental movement which had grown up to try to save them. After attending a fundraiser in northern California, she volunteered as a rotating Earth First! tree sitter for a week, and ended up extending her stay for two years (Hill 2000).

On her 6 by 4 foot perch, Julia Hill was visited regularly by groups of supporters singing, dancing and celebrating under her tree, and twice a week by a crew who hauled up food, stove fuel and cell phone batteries, and hauled away her waste (Martin 1999). The longer she stayed in the tree, the more support for her grew. Lakota Sioux and AIM activist Leonard Peltier, for example, presented her (in abstentia) with a “defender of the woods” award at a local rally in her honor; musicians Joan Baez and Bonnie Raitt climbed up into Luna to talk and sing songs with her. In short time, she also became connected to the outside world by an impressive array of communications technology: she had a radiophone powered by solar panels connected to two motorcycle batteries, an emergency cell phone, a pager, a hand-powered radio, a digital camera, a video camera, and walkie-talkies (Hill 2000). During her stay, she conducted over 1,000 phone interviews from the tree, had a website, made appearances on radio and TV talk shows, and served as a treetop broadcaster for a cable TV show (Hill 2000). Yet for much of the time, she was alone, often assaulted one way or another, and survived only on her wits, expansive spirit and faith in the protection of at least one “ancient tree.” Early on, she survived: (a) an attack from a giant logging helicopter attempting to blow her out of the tree, (b) the cutting of trees around her, (c) rotating shifts of security guards hired to camp below the tree who blew horns and opened floodlights at night; (d) verbal harassment; (e) attempts to cut off ground supplies; and (f) being choked with smoke from nearby napalm-fired clearcuts (Ibid.). Neither was nature always kind to her: perched high in the redwood, she suffered fierce winter winds, cold rains and howling snowstorms, as well as the constant threat of falling.

After spending two winters in the tree, having become a media star and international spokesperson for the environmental movement in the process, on December 18, 1999, Julia Butterfly Hill at long last secured an agreement with the CEO of Pacific Lumber to permanently protect Luna the Redwood and a 200 ft. buffer zone around it from logging. She then climbed down from her tree. Today, Julia Hill continues the struggle on behalf of the environment and other causes. In 1999, she established Circle of Life, an NGO which takes as its mission “education, inspiration and connection to live in a way that honors the diversity and

interdependence of all life, …to build a movement of social and environmental change" (COL 2006). She has written two books, has been the subject of several documentaries, and has inspired others to tree squat (including Joan Baez). She now receives over 500 speaking offers a year, and preaches a message of love of life and the human connection to all living things. But she also popularizes an astute, critical understanding of the educational, political, economic and legal dimensions of forest destruction, conservation and environmentalism, much of which she gained in serious study and conversation during the time she spent up in Luna (Hill 2000).

Like Mr. Floatie, Julia Butterfly Hill has clearly been a catalyst for peaceful "educative-activism," and has offered an alternative "reading of the world." In particular, she has helped to construct a powerful "counter-frame" against the dominant understanding of old growth trees as simple economic commodities to be logged, and of diverse forest ecosystems as simple crops to be harvested. She has this to say, for example, about the idea of "managing" our forests:

> *One of the things that was really funny for me after spending some time living in an ancient redwood was listening to all the corporate heads and government officials and even the larger organizations talk about the various ways we need to "manage" our forests. And here I am living in this tree that's over a thousand years old and one day I just started laughing to myself: I think the forests have been managing themselves for a very long time (laughs). I think our challenge is how do we learn to manage ourselves within nature's system. (Hill 2005)*

Save Our Surf

Along with Julia Butterfly Hill and Mr. Floatie, the third case, that of lifelong surfer, activist and Hawai'ian resident John Kelly and the NGO, Save Our Surf (SOS), demonstrates the wide resonance of protest symbols. It also shows the power of building coalitions from the environmental movement with allied interests. Founded in response to U.S. Army Corps of Engineer plans to develop the beaches of Waikiki, SOS fought in the 1960s and 70s to protect coral reefs and coastal water zones from development projects—tourist resorts, parking lots, freeways, airport and military construction (UHM 2006). In this, SOS tapped into a vein of solidarity with the Hawai'ian "surfing community"—some 30,000-100,000 people strong—and allied itself with the native Hawai'ian land rights and sovereignty movement (Kelly 1996).

Although the world of surfing has today become a $7 billion global industry, largely controlled by corporations and professional surfers, in the 1960s and 70s it was still firmly rooted in a counter-culture identity, with strong connections to environmental activism (Flint 1999). In Hawai'i, surfing is said to have originated with Hawai'ian Royalty as "he'e nalu" or wave-sliding, and first popularized in the 1910s by athlete and Hawai'ian royalty Duke Khahanamoku (SurfArt 2006). This history, and sharing of common ground (and surf) made the alliance of SOS with native Hawai'ians easier. By the 1960s, in much of the world, surfing was part of a white, middle class male Hippy movement, embracing soulful brotherhood and communion with nature, and rejecting mainstream norms of work and domesticity. Yet, in Hawai'i, SOS surfers also comprised a mobile environmental movement within the Hawai'ian Sovereignty Movement, lending political force to a variety of native Hawai'ian land and ocean tenure disputes.

The principles SOS used in its efforts were "EDUCATE, ORGANIZE and CONFRONT! ....the basic strategy rests on three simple concepts: respect the intelligence of people, get the facts to them, and develop an appropriate action program" (Kelly 1996, p.90). SOS was in essence a loosely structured NGO which came to life only as needed: it was "organizationally amorphous, able to mobilize forces from the community for confrontations with the establishment and to melt back into the community when issues resolve or stalemate.." (Kelly

1994, p. 3). Adopting a kind of grassroots “guerilla” activism, SOS had no membership, no by-laws, no central office or budget, and operated mainly by issuing calls to action (an “SOS”). Its methods were to "gather facts, prepare broadside handbills, edit crisis newspapers and tangle with ..planners and businessmen [sic] in public hearings" (Udall 1974, p. 1). SOS also helped to develop non-profit printshops, and, importantly, a library of documents, reports and photographs used to inform the public about dubious covert development plans. In 1974, for example, leaked reports from a Kauai resort development detailed political payoffs in the project, and SOS led a media exposure which eventually resulted in the closure of the project and the downfall of the mayor (Kelly 1994). Other SOS successes included stopping a Kuhio beach widening project and reef dredging around eastern O'ahu, creating Sand Island Park, and struggling against the evictions of tenants, farmers and fishers (UHM 2006). All in all, SOS is credited with winning 34 major environmental victories in Hawai’i during the 1960s and 70s (Kelly 1996).

Conclusion

As these three cases make clear, creative, symbolic actions can effectively serve as a catalyst for conscientization and educative-activism in the environmental movement. As Mr. Floatie’s success teaches us, satirical humor is a powerful tool in environmental adult education. Roy (2000) puts it this way, “humour is appreciated by allies but feared by opponents” (p. 7); moreover, “unexpected avenues of expression [like a large costumed poop] disturb complacency (p. 14).” In some ways, Mr. Floatie can also be seen as a Freirian “code” or generative theme in problem-posing education (Barndt 1998): he is an outrageous yet humorous symbol which provokes us not only to laugh, but also to think more deeply about the issue of sewage. Most obvious is the question of why the government keeps dumping raw sewage into the ocean. Further, why do they keep trying to maintain that this dumping is not a problem? Who produces and controls knowledge about the severity of pollution, and sewage treatment options? Who benefits, who loses, what choices are there and what can we do to change things? And so on.

Likewise, the symbolic action of Julia Butterfly Hill both led to her own personal education and transformation into an environmental activist, and gave inspiration and knowledge to a wider collective environmental movement. Luna (the tree) became a symbol of hope, resistance and victory for the environmental movement; like Mr. Floatie, Luna was a cultural code generating awareness, education and action around a public problem. Julia Hill (the woman) was also a cultural code; she became a genuine “American hero,” darling to the press and popular imagination. She was raised in poverty in a trailer home; experienced a traumatic car crash and epiphany; overcame great adversity with passion, persistence, and strength; and against all odds, never gave up her faith. In a truly American cultural feat, she broke the record for the longest tree squat. Because this personal narrative had strong resonance in the American popular imagination, it allowed people to listen to a second, more critical message about the destruction of old growth forests, the greed of timber companies and the collusion of government.

SOS similarly helps us to understand the power of symbols to create “counter-publics” and counter-hegemonic ideologies. Positioned by mainstream society as hedonistic “long-haired lay-abouts,” surfers in SOS created an alternative identity as a community of mobile, informed, quick-striking and effective “outsider” grassroots activists. Symbolically, they were able to contrast a deep public appreciation of Hawai'i's beautiful, pristine beaches and reefs with corrupt and rapacious development, again “counter-framing” an ideological debate in the public imagination. In short, SOS, Mr. Floatie and Julia Butterfly Hill were all important catalysts for collective conscientization in environmental adult education; they were powerful expressions of individual and collective thinking, learning, identity, and action for social change.

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