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# **Guerrilla Girls and Raging Grannies: Critical, Informal, and Performative Pedagogy**

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**Abstract:** This paper offers two important historical examples, The Guerrilla Girls and The Raging Grannies, as ways to explore, experience, and better understand the value of embodied learning through culture jamming and critical performative pedagogy.

**Keywords:** culture jamming, women's activism, performative pedagogy, critical pedagogy

## **Introduction**

There are many widely known historical narratives regarding women's activism and informal critical public pedagogy that have repeatedly appeared in adult education course syllabi, conference papers, and publications. For example, the Bryn Mawr Summer School for Women (Heller, 1986), the story of Ida. B. Wells (Bogues, 2003), and the Jane Addams Hull House (Addams & Hurt, 1990) all are important icons in the study of adult informal learning, gender, race and class. We discuss in this paper two historical examples of groups of women activists whose activities can be defined and understood through a lens of critical performative pedagogy and culture jamming. The selected examples are the Guerrilla Girls and the Raging Grannies.

## **Theoretical Frameworks: Culture Jamming as/and Critical Performative Pedagogy**

Culture jamming is a form of critical performative pedagogy that has been defined as an "activity aimed at countering the continuous, recombinant barrage of capitalist laden messages fed through the mass media" (Handelman, 1999, p. 399). Culture jamming uses tactics such as creating counter-advertisements ("subvertisements"), place-jamming (wherein public spaces are reclaimed), billboard liberation, activist theater, and other forms of critical public spectacle to counter-act the numbing spectacle created by the mass media (Lasn, 1999). Culture jamming involves turning mass-produced, "normalized," widely accepted popular culture messages on their head—in the hopes of creating moments of reflection, juxtaposition, or re-examination. While some authors have critiqued culture jamming for as being ineffective as a means of countering the neoliberal politics of the mass media and, in fact, for being complicit in those politics (Haiven, 2007), and while we definitely recognize some of the negative aspects of culture jamming (see Sandlin & Milam, 2008 for a discussion of how culture jamming can act to "shut down" conversations), we also see culture jamming as holding potential to counteract hegemonic culture. Following Ellsworth (2005), Duncombe (2002), and Sandlin and Milam (2008), we believe that the experiences of creating, enacting, and analyzing culture jamming as performance art can bring about new experiences for learners. As a form of critical public pedagogy, culture jamming as a pedagogical force can go beyond what we can create in more traditional classroom or educative settings. We build upon a Gramscian cultural studies framework that defines culture as a performative public space where struggle occurs on a day-to-day basis between people from dominant and subordinate groups (Sandlin, 2007; Sandlin & Milam, 2008). In addition to examining film, television, music, story, or other forms of cultural media, a Gramscian cultural studies perspective theorizes that people, as participants in creating and consuming culture, are

capable and actively engaged in producing and reproducing cultural and political ideas or meanings. Culture jamming rests upon the idea that when hegemonic cultural messages are (re)created and (re)presented to audiences in a fresh or “turned around” way, participants and audience members can experience what Ellsworth (2005) calls “pedagogical hinges,” which are moments where something “clicks” in differently than its normal state or traditionally accepted meaning. Popular examples of culture jamming include *Adbusters* (which creates “counter” advertisements, hosts “Buy Nothing Day,” and publishes *Adbusters* magazine), and Reverend Billy, a New York City-based performance artist and anti-consumption activist (Lane, 2002; Sandlin & Callahan, 2009; Sandlin & Milam, 2008). Following Sandlin and Milam (2008), we theorize culture jamming as having an ability to (1) open “transitional” spaces for jammers and audience members through creativity and culture production, (2) create a sense of community, (3) engage with learners corporeally (that is, in an embodied way), and (4) offer entrée into and enact collective political participation (Sandlin & Milam, 2008).

This paper is also located within the broad methodology of critical performance ethnography/pedagogy (Denzin, 2003). Critical performance ethnography/pedagogy resides as a part of a long history of performance ethnography, which uses theater and public performance to highlight cultural politics in order to create in both the performer and spectator a reflective awareness that has the potential to generate positive social change (Alexander, 2005). To accomplish this, action is a crucial element. Critical performance pedagogy includes an “active body doing; the active mind knowing, and an active civic responsibility that collectivizes and promotes democracy and human rights” (Alexander, 2005, p. 426). Denzin (2003) explains that critical performance ethnographies involve researchers enacting stories of oppression and resistance, though which they seek to eventually engage members of a community (the community can be transitory/temporary or more fixed) to become co-performers in a “drama of social resistance and social critique” (p. 196). This paper and accompanying presentation enact this performative pedagogy on two levels: we, the authors/performers will tell the stories of two groups of activists working for positive social change, who in turn tell stories that focus on labor rights abuses; environmental, social, and cultural consequences of over-consumption; and of cultural consumption. These activists emphasize holistic, embodied ways of reflecting and re-defining cultural constructs. Through critical ethnographic performances, voice is given, politics are enacted, and people are moved to action. Denzin (2003) further suggests that these types of performances, called “political theater,” help shape subjects, audiences, and performers. He argues that these “performances interrogate and evaluate specific social, educational, economic, and political processes. This form of praxis can shape a cultural politics of change. It can help to create a progressive and involved citizenship. The performance becomes the vehicle for moving persons, subjects, performers, and audience members into new, critical, political spaces” (Denzin, 2003, p. 198).

An important part of critical performance ethnography/pedagogy involves not simply enacting the performance, but understanding how the performers and audience members emotionally, intellectually, and politically experience their learning (Alexander, 2005). This type of pedagogy incorporates “engaged discourse” (Alexander, 2005, p. 430). Ellsworth (2005) examines what she calls “anomalous places of learning,” that she believes hold great pedagogical force, in that they provoke us to “think or imagine in new ways” (p.5). These provocative sites of learning include public events, parks, and public artistic performances—spaces not always traditionally considered to be pedagogical. We see performative activist work, including the work of culture jamming, as constituting these kinds of “anomalous place[s] of learning.” As a form of critical performance pedagogy, culture jamming has the potential to open new spaces for

audience members and presenter/performers alike, in a loosely scripted, critical community learning experience. Our paper is by necessity transmitted via a written proceeding. The presentation will be situated within the broad methodology of critical performance ethnography/pedagogy (Denzin, 2003). Generally, it uses theater and public performance to highlight cultural politics in order to create in both performer and spectator a reflective awareness that has the potential to generate positive social change (Alexander, 2005). Performance art is a serious, educative challenge to audience members to become more reflectively aware of the subject of the performance (Groh, 1981).

### **Culture Jamming in Action: The Guerrilla Girls and the Raging Grannies**

The Guerrilla Girls (Demo, 2000) established themselves as an activist group dedicated to opening and improving access for women in arts communities. Their establishment was at a critical time during the 1960s when art activism and the second wave women's movement were at a peak. They coincided with other performative women's groups at the time including WITCH, Women's International Terrorist Conspiracy from Hell, a group that dressed as crones (witches) to protest women's subordination. The Guerrilla Girls literally take an "I dare you" approach to activism—they use public information and settings that are accepted as normal, and "perform" or shape those spaces differently in order to create awareness and an impetus for social change. Their name, the Guerrilla Girls, is based upon the political reclamation of the word "girls," combined with wearing Guerrilla/Gorilla masks that obscure the individual identity of the activist. Surprise and timing are key elements to their work.

Based on an analysis of their website, writings, and videos of their performances, the Guerrilla Girls employ three core strategies as a part of their embodied public pedagogy: *mimicry*, *re-visioning of history*, and *strategic juxtaposition* (Demo, 2000). For example, one popular Guerrilla Girls action involves a group of women wearing Guerrilla/Gorilla masks collectively making an entrance and storming public art galleries and showings. After entering the venue, the women plaster the walls and other spaces with billboard-type posters containing hard-hitting statistics about the abysmal situation for women in the art world. Another popular action involves taking existing advertisements or posters for featured exhibits and superimposing feminist statements such as:

#### *The Advantages of Being a Woman Artist*

Working without pressure of success

Seeing your ideas live on in the work of others

Getting your picture in art magazines by wearing gorilla suits

Only 5% of the featured artists in this exhibit are women, but 85% of the nude art subjects are women. (Demo, 2000, p. 142)

The Guerrilla Girls also perform popular culture by turning on its head the objectification of women and dressing in hyper-feminine or objectified manners (fishnet stockings, cleavage), and juxtaposing that image with the Guerrilla/Gorilla masks. One media poster distributed by the Guerrilla Girls strategically re-visions Clarence Thomas hearing testimony and his assertion that a person's sex life is private and not government business. The poster states, "Supreme Court Justice supports the right to privacy for gays and lesbians" (Demo, 2000, p. 147). Their in-your-face approach; juxtaposition of policies and practices, statistics, and facts ("I dare you to explain these facts away"); clever, interruptive use of popular culture; relentless commitment to

anonymity; and use of mimicry, have a place in the adult education world and our understanding of how people come to accept, challenge and change what is in our midst (Roy, 2004).

The Raging Grannies (Kutz-Flamenbaum, 2007; Roy, 2004) were founded in Victoria, British Columbia, in 1986 or 1987 and are activist groups (known as “gaggles”) who use strategies of street or public performance, satire, theater, humor, and song to share their messages for social change and peaceful protest. While they were founded in Canada, groups now exist in the United States, Israel, Japan, Greece, and the United Kingdom. Their mission is to encourage mid-life and older women to express their social justice aims through laughter, performance, and self-examination. While the Raging Grannies are inherently political and focused on issues of environmentalism, war, poverty, and diversity, they are also considered to be non-partisan. They often attend public events—hearings, town meetings, and protests—as invited or as surprise guests, turning public events into sites of cultural examination and learning. One of their core guiding principles is the notion that being a “granny” does not mean having diminished capacity or participation in community life; instead, it means embracing that role and using it to build capacity and positive social change. Part of a traditional granny song, reproduced below, expresses their notion of aging and wisdom:

Here’s to older women  
All the things they do  
Nurturing, supporting, caring  
Their lives through  
Wisdom comes with aging  
Every grey hair won  
Years unfold and still we feel  
We’ve just begun. (Narushima, 2001, p. 31)

In contrast, the grannies juxtapose societal stereotypes of women and aging and build them into their social protest performances. For instance, groups of grannies dress in bonnets and long old-fashioned dresses, intentionally cultivating a look of little old-fashioned ladies. They publicly “stage” tea parties with tea, cookies, and genteel “womanly” settings at war protests, encouraging speakers and audience members to partake in sipping tea and to be strategically playful while simultaneously engaging in hard-hitting skits or dialogues regarding globalization and armed conflict/war. Part of their message is that “nice people protest too” and you, too, as community members can engage in discussions of what we accept as normal community life, as well as collectively shape those lives. Overall, the strategies they use include strategic humor, absurdity, creative self-expression, cultivating lifelong learning and participatory orientations, and culture jamming. The culture jamming takes place in the form of public displays of song, skits, and other types of performance to express and encourage expression of dialogue surrounding sensitive political issues. The ethos of the group is to create a supportive atmosphere, where women are able to develop “being brave in public” and challenge cultural understandings of what is and is not acceptable for our communities.

### **Discussion**

What does it all mean? Have you ever happened upon, observed, or participated in a performative social change event? How do we integrate our understandings of informal adult learning, embodied, holistic learning, and concepts of social movement framing, strategy, and change?

In a 2003 essay on feminist coalition politics, Shauna Butterwick explored the notion of making space for participatory theatre, and learning to navigate the emotional, logical, and experiential dimensions of coalition building through public speaking, listening, participation, and performance. Her essay tackles difficult issues that are embedded in the subject of culture jamming theories and get to the heart of the notion of creating transitional space. Through re-creating experiences (performing) we renegotiate and redefine what is taken for granted as normal, challenge, and reform the meaning we take from the everyday. Being playful is a way to allow for disagreement and healthy conflict, which is something that often is not thought of as “nice” and is particularly challenging for women’s groups founded on core values such as cooperation, collaboration, mutual support, and solidarity. This type of event happens in public spaces, and there is the added dimension of our cultural understandings of “what happens in public”—from the individual level of public persona to the prescribed behaviors and discussion topics that are considered acceptable in art galleries, museums, libraries, town halls, etc. Changing the script, so to speak, temporarily disrupts our shared understandings, and gives us the opportunity to allow our emotions, bodies, and minds to experience new ideas and form a sense of community. These moments constitute the “pedagogical hinge.” Some adult educators argue that, indeed, learning cannot occur without these disruptions. Jarvis (2006), for example, argues that feeling “off-balance” is necessary for learning to occur. These moments of disjuncture create experiences that start our processes of learning; disjuncture occurs “whenever harmony between us and our world has been broken . . . when the flow of time is interrupted and we are not able to do what we would do in an unthinking manner—the external world has changed or we have changed internally. Immediately we feel unease, we are no longer in harmony” (p. 180).

Performance is a serious, educative event in addition to being fun. Critical performative pedagogy is more than just an entertainment-based medium (Groh, 1981). It is not fully scripted; it is contextual and allows for the performance to be shaped by both participants and observers. It is aimed at disrupting habits—habits of thought, behavior, and reflection. When audience members are presented with something “normal” from everyday life that is reframed in political terms, they are confronted with an opportunity to step back and also to step forward. Butterwick (2003) writes of her own struggle with realizing how difficult it is to create a space that challenges the self while allowing room for the other—and yet honors solidarity without squashing difference. As critical educators, we must continue to take up this challenge.

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